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Hamlet and our Problems: Reimagining and Recharging Teachers in the Era of Common Core

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Charlie Soriano was something else. My 12th grade English teacher got so excited teaching *Hamlet* and Aristotelian tragedy that once he wrote the corresponding Greek terms (hamartia, peripeteia, anagnorisis, as I recall) on the board — in Greek!

Mr. Soriano was the one who gave me a bootleg, Xeroxed copy of E.M.W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* and suggested I apply it to my own theories on the play. Mr. Soriano was the one who made me see myself as more than some college-bound senior hoping to land a decent job, with decent pay.

Decent just didn't feel satisfying after his class.

We view teachers as many things: as instructors, caretakers, task masters, coaches, and disciplinarians. But rarely — almost never — do we view them the way I saw Mr. Soriano: as intellectuals.

As we endeavor to improve the quality of education, this strikes me as a clear problem — and perhaps also an opportunity.

Schools across the nation are in the process of interpreting the Common Core State Standards: a set of expectations that whisper the need for a more intellectually rigorous kind of teaching. And in shifting the way we think about teaching, we have the chance to shift the way we think about teachers.

Surely, a nation of teachers whose instruction satisfies the Common Core must also be one that immerses teachers in this same type of learning. A learning community that fails to nurture the intellects of those who serve as its pillars becomes stagnant and divorces teachers from the fundamental value of being lifelong students. Worse yet, it models an adult life jarringly out of concert with the drumbeat of college preparation we sound each day.

If learning is so great, after all, shouldn't our students see us doing it all the time? Shouldn't we be encouraged to be hungry for new ideas the way we tell our children to be?

I was reminded of this a few months ago, when 14 other educators and I sat at a table with James Shapiro, a Shakespearean scholar who, like Charlie Soriano before him, completely blew up my understanding of *Hamlet* as a text. We were participating in a Master Class run by The Academy for Teachers, a new nonprofit set on reconnecting teachers with the love of learning that made them want to be educators in the first place. Boy, did it succeed.*

I'd taught *Hamlet* for years. I'd discussed it with master teachers. But I'd never been given the time and opportunity to discuss the play with a scholar who wrote books about it. Did you know that the tone you infer in *Hamlet's* last soliloquy can change your entire interpretation of the play? Have you ever compared the different folios to see how Shakespeare codes doubt into the very language of his play?

I didn't just leave that Master Class wanting to teach Hamlet again. I left it wanting to teach Hamlet again immediately, since I was now bursting with new ideas to bring back to my class.

Most of all, I left feeling recognized and respected as a public intellectual, which is the sort of experience we need to create for our children's teachers. If we want educators to go deep with the texts they teach, we need to offer them better training with the subject matter they love instructing.

At the third presidential debate this year, Bob Schieffer, perhaps hoping to strike a note of harmony, ended by offering that despite our differences, "we all love teachers."

I often wonder what would happen if we made good on that love, inviting people to the profession with the promise of supporting them as lifelong learners: not just with regard to their teaching practice but by nurturing their intellectual curiosity. If we did, we'd recruit even stronger teachers who would stay in the profession far longer.

We'd have brigades of Charlie Sorianos, ready to march toward and beyond the aspirations of the Common Core, fueled by a passion for the subject they love to teach.

As Charlie might say, it'd be a moment of revelation — of anagnorisis. Even an indecisive guy like Hamlet could see the value in that.

**Full disclosure: I was so blown away by this workshop that I joined the group's advisory board.*

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