



Relating to Romeo: Connecting Students and Curricula

“What situations could stress out Romeo and Juliet?” asks 9th-grade English teacher Amy Corvino. Hands shoot up, and the students are off and running. “Juliet’s fighting with her parents.”

“Her father says he’ll disown her if she doesn’t marry Paris.”

“Their families are enemies.”

“They get married.”

“Romeo is being banished.”

“Juliet’s nurse has betrayed her.”

“They’re living in chaos.”

“Death of a family member—her cousin Tybalt.”

“Mercutio dies; he was Romeo’s best friend.”

Fighting with one’s parents, marriage, the deaths of a family member and a friend—all are items that score high points on the Recent Life Changes Questionnaire for Teens, a survey of stress factors (Miller & Rahe, 1997) recently adapted for use with adolescents (Beland & Douglass, 2006). The students had completed the questionnaire for themselves the previous day, learning how cumulative stress can affect their physical and emotional health as well as their judgment. Now they are applying the questionnaire to the protagonists of one of Shakespeare’s seminal works, and it is clear that on some level, the students can relate to Romeo’s and Juliet’s lives.

Confident her students had completed the assigned reading—the first three acts of the play—Corvino moves on to the focus of the day’s discussion: comparing and contrasting students’ written answers to two questions: What makes you happy? and What gives you deep satisfaction? Looking at their lists side-by-side, the students quickly pick out clear commonalities in their answers.

PREVIEW

A freshman English class emphasized social and emotional learning to increase student interest and engagement.

Students created a list of classroom norms to ensure that the class was a safe place to share their thoughts and feelings.

Students related their own experiences to the experiences in the literature they read in class.

Kathy Beland
kbeland@school-connect.net

Beland is the executive director of School-Connect in Bethesda, MD.



Students create classroom norms to ensure that the class is a safe place for everyone to share their thoughts and feelings.

Things that make them happy are fleeting pleasurable experiences, such as hanging out with friends or seeing a good movie, and those that provide deep satisfaction often involve hard work or transformative experiences, such as reaching a sought-after goal or developing a deeper understanding of someone or something.

What about Romeo? Is he continually chasing pleasurable experiences (and new highs) by carousing with his friends and falling in and out of love (first Rosalie, then Juliet) or does he operate on a deeper level? Is Romeo on a hedonic treadmill with love? What evidence can they find in the verses for their viewpoints? The students have no problem digesting a new psychological term, and again they're off and running. The boys, especially, are weighing in, something their teacher rarely saw during the first semester or when she taught the play previously.

Searching for a New Approach

Things hadn't always been this easy. In August 2004, Corvino found out that her freshman English classes would meet daily for a two-period block because of a districtwide effort to improve student scores on an upcoming, must-pass writing exam. Fortunately, she liked challenges. Although only in her third year of teaching, she already was chair of 9th-grade English at a large, diverse high school in Greenbelt, MD, and had overseen the selection of new English textbooks the previous spring. She also liked students who were challenging, choosing to teach those who had previously earned mostly Cs and Ds in their classes.

At first, Corvino thought about all she and her students could accomplish by doubling their time together. But by November, she was worried. Students often came to class unpre-

pared, forcing her to use precious instruction time reviewing assigned reading so they could participate in discussions and follow-up activities—and her students didn't like to write. The other 9th-grade English teachers were having similar difficulties using the daily block effectively and looked to Corvino for ideas and support.

Meanwhile Maya Yamada, another teacher in the school, was experiencing success with a new social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum in a health class for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Her students had become much more engaged in class and were completing their homework. One student who hadn't spoken or signed in class showed up one day wearing glasses. Were the glasses new? No, he signed. He had always had the glasses, but now he wanted to see in class.

SEL is the process by which people develop the skills to recognize and manage emotions, form positive relationships, solve problems that arise, motivate themselves to accomplish a goal, make responsible decisions, and avoid risky behavior. SEL seemed like a natural fit for a health class, but how would it work in English? Corvino was willing to explore the possibilities.

Creating the Links

The Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) at the University of Illinois at Chicago identifies five SEL competency areas—social awareness, self-awareness, self-management, relationship building, and responsible decision making—that are key to young people's success in school, the workplace, and life in general (CASEL, 2003). After reviewing a pilot curriculum that was based on the competencies and developed by School-Connect, Corvino began to see how she could tie SEL to the study of literature and also meet the state's core learning goals for English.

Social awareness dovetailed nicely with one of Corvino's favorite novellas, *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, which told the story of a Hispanic girl growing up in South Side Chicago. Skills related to social awareness—perspective taking, empathy, appreciating diversity—were the very ones the book's protagonist, as well as many of Corvino's students,

struggled with daily. By linking appropriate experiences and prior knowledge, Corvino thought, students might be better able to understand the book's themes and the author's intent.

Self-awareness and self-management, which include skills in identifying and managing emotions, goal setting, and coping with change and uncertainty, provided a good platform for exploring *Romeo and Juliet*. The competencies could also serve to increase students' skills in comparing and contrasting, predicting, and finding evidence in the text. She could easily use many of the short stories in the new English textbook to address the remaining competency areas—relationship building and responsible decision making—and make the literature more relevant and interesting to students.

Adding On and Thinking Differently

Implementing SEL is not only about integrating the competencies with academic content, it also has to do with the way class

is conducted and how students relate to one another. Corvino's first order of business was to create a classroom environment where students felt emotionally safe to speak up, especially about the sensitive issues that were raised in the literature. *The House on Mango Street* was full of many hot points: labels and stereotypes, sexual intimidation, and the difficulty of empathizing with people who are different.

The opening session addressed both content and process. Using a Koosh ball to identify a speaker, students took turns defining *emotional intelligence* and its importance in life. They purposely said how they were “adding on” to one another's ideas or if and how they were “thinking differently” and suggesting a new idea. This process helped them listen to what each person had to say,

and it made it safe to disagree. Rather than talking directly to the teacher in a question-and-answer format, students were encouraged to speak to one another in a classroomwide conversation.

Next they used a think-pair-share technique to reminisce about a classroom from the past that they had especially liked and why. What was the environment like? How did they feel in class? This led to a group discussion about student and



Self-awareness and self-management, which include skills in identifying and managing emotions, goal setting, and coping with change and uncertainty, provided a good platform for exploring Romeo and Juliet.

teacher behavior that helps or hinders class functioning. Once again, students used the “adding on” and “thinking differently” language. When students had a picture of how they wanted class to be, they created classroom guidelines in small groups and later merged and purged their lists until they had a set of “norms” to which everyone could commit and adhere.

Providing opportunities for student voice and choice increases students’ motivation to learn in addition to improving classroom climate. Students actively build their understanding, rather than passively receive information, and teachers facilitate learning, rather than impart knowledge. Student autonomy was evident in the publishing party the class held at the end of the unit on *The House on Mango Street*. In small and large groups, students read aloud from novellas they wrote about themselves, their families, the community in which they live, their important life experiences, and their hopes for the future.

Contrary to Corvino’s early concerns that SEL might be another usurpation of time spent on academics, she found that her classes actually moved more quickly. Because students were coming to class better prepared and participating more in discussions, it was much clearer when they grasped material and were ready to proceed further and less time was lost on addressing off-task student behavior.

A Critical Juncture

As school administrators know, grade 9 is a watershed year for students. In transitioning from middle level school to high school, adolescents encounter a more populated and impersonal environment, increased academic rigor, and fewer emotional supports. For the first time, their grades and discipline record will have a direct impact on their post-high school options.

Many entering freshmen are ill prepared for these challenges and fail to earn the credits they need to pass into the next grade level, thus swelling the ranks of grade 9. Many of the students who repeat freshmen year eventually drop out. Low grades also render many students ineligible to participate in school clubs and interscholastic sports—the very activities that might help them connect to school.



Many high schools are addressing the special needs of 9th-grade students by implementing semester-long freshman seminars.

Engaging students in learning and helping them connect to teachers and peers are key at this juncture. Learning itself is considered a social process. Students learn best in collaboration, rather than in isolation. Research that correlates school-connectedness—a sense of belonging in school—with academic motivation and achievement underscores the social foundation of learning (Resnick, et al., 1997). As much as learning is social in nature, it is also an affective process in that it draws on the emotions and internal resources of the individual. To perform well, students need to feel motivated to seek challenges, persevere in the face of obstacles, manage anxiety, and find interest and joy in discovery and achievement. According to Deci (1995), when students repeatedly

display these attributes, it is more likely they will become self-directed, lifelong learners.

Jumpstarting Social and Emotional Learning

Integrating SEL with academic courses is not the only route to take. Many high schools are addressing the special needs of 9th-grade students by implementing semester-long freshman seminars. These seminars provide an opportunity to jumpstart SEL and set the tone for students’ high school experience. In seminars, students can explore their strengths and attitudes about learning, set personal and academic goals, and practice skills—both personal (e.g., identifying and managing emotions, addressing self-defeating thought patterns) and interpersonal (e.g., communicating effectively, resolving conflict)—that can affect their success in school. For these reasons, freshman seminars have become a key component in smaller learning communities in high schools across the United States.

Yamada essentially adopted this implementation model with her health course. When she began the SEL pilot, she intended to intersperse the lessons with health content. Her students were so interested in SEL, however, that she ended up devoting the first semester to it and then reinforced the concepts and skills in health content areas the second semester. Her efforts paid off, not only for her students but also for herself. In December 2005, Yamada was recognized for excellence in teaching by the National Board for Professional Teaching

Standards, partly on the basis of live observation and a videotape of her facilitating SEL with her students.

Instituting a Broad Approach

SEL is not only important to freshman transition, English, and health but also can enhance academic course work in other disciplines and classroom environments at any grade level. In addition, it can help students extract more meaning from community service by helping them reflect on their experiences, prepare for college, and improve opportunities for current and future employment. There is ample evidence that personal and interpersonal skills are just as important as education in the workplace and in today's global economy. The groundbreaking SCANS report from the U.S. Department of Labor identified the ability to communicate effectively, work in teams, solve problems creatively, and adapt to changing conditions as more important than content knowledge and technical expertise in one's field (The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991).

High schools can consider the following steps when instituting a broad approach to SEL: educate staff members

on the fundamentals of SEL; review and adopt relevant SEL materials; work within and across departments to identify ways to integrate SEL into course work; and review the school's approach to discipline to enhance SEL. By relating students' lives to their subject matter, teachers and schools can engage students in learning and, ultimately, improve the trajectory of their lives. **PL**

References

- Beland, K., & Douglass, J. (2006). *School-Connect: Optimizing the high school experience*. Bethesda, MD: School-Connect.
- Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning. (2003). *Introduction to SEL: SEL competencies*. Retrieved from www.casel.org/about_sel/SELskills.php
- Deci, E. L. (1995). *Why we do what we do: Understanding self-motivation*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Miller, M. A., & Rahe, H. (1997). Life changes scaling for the 1990s. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 43, 279–292.
- Resnick, M. D., Bearman, P.S., Blum, R. W., Bauman, K. E., Harris, K. M., Jones, J., et al. (1997). Protecting adolescents from harm. Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 278(10), 823–32.
- The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (1991). *What work requires of schools: A SCANS report for America 2000*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.

ADVERTISEMENT