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How to Think Like Shakespeare

By Scott L. Newstok | AUGUST 29, 2016

Illustration by Mathew McFarren

Class of 2020, welcome to college. Right about now, your future professors are probably sitting in a faculty meeting, rolling their eyes at their dean's recitation of the annual Beloit College Mindset List, which catalogs the cultural touchstones of your lives.

But to me, the most momentous event in your intellectual formation was the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, which ushered in our disastrous fixation on testing. Your generation is the first to have gone through primary and secondary school knowing no alternative to a national regimen of assessment. And your professors are only now beginning to realize how this unrelenting assessment has stunted your imaginations.

In response to the well-intentioned yet myopic focus on literacy and numeracy, your course offerings in art, drama, music, history, world languages, and the sciences were all too often set aside "to create more time for reading and math instruction." Even worse, one of the unintended consequences of high-stakes testing is that it narrowed not only what you were taught but how you were taught. The joy of reading was too often reduced to extracting content without context, the joy of mathematics to arbitrary exercises, without the love of pattern-making that generates conjecture in the first place.

You've been cheated of your birthright: a complete education. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr. (at your age of 18), a "complete education" gives "not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate."

But now your education is in your own hands. And my advice is: Don't let yourself be cheated anymore, and do not cheat yourself. Take advantage of the autonomy and opportunities that college permits by approaching it in the spirit of the 16th century. You'll become capable of a level of precision, inventiveness, and empathy worthy to be called Shakespearean.

Building a bridge to the 16th century must seem like a perverse prescription for today's ills. I'm the first to admit that English Renaissance pedagogy was rigid and rightly mocked for its domineering pedants. Few of you would be eager to wake up before 6 a.m. to say mandatory prayers, or to be lashed for tardiness, much less translate Latin for hours on end every day of the week. Could there be a system more antithetical to our own contemporary ideals of student-centered, present-focused, and career-oriented education?

Yet this system somehow managed to nurture world-shifting thinkers, including those who launched the Scientific Revolution. This education fostered some of the very habits of mind endorsed by both the National Education Association and the Partnership for 21st Century Learning: critical thinking; clear communication; collaboration; and creativity. (To these "4Cs," I would add "curiosity.") Given that your

own education has fallen far short of those laudable goals, I urge you to reconsider Shakespeare's intellectual formation: that is, not what he purportedly thought — about law or love or leadership — but how he thought. An apparently rigid educational system could, paradoxically, induce liberated thinking.

So how can you think like Shakespeare?

His mind was shaped by rhetoric, a term that you probably associate with empty promises — things politicians say but don't really mean. But in the Renaissance, rhetoric was nothing less than the fabric of thought itself. Because thinking and speaking well form the basis of existence in a community, rhetoric prepares you for every occasion that requires words. That's why Tudor students devoted countless hours to examining vivid models, figuring out ways to turn a phrase, exercising elaborate verbal patterning.

Antonio Gramsci described education in this way: "One has to inculcate certain habits of diligence, precision, poise (even physical poise), ability to concentrate on specific subjects, which cannot be acquired without the mechanical repetition of disciplined and methodical acts." You take it for granted that Olympic athletes and professional musicians must practice relentlessly to perfect their craft. Why should you expect the craft of thought to require anything less disciplined? Fierce attention to clear and precise writing is the essential tool for you to foster independent judgment. That is rhetoric.

Renaissance rhetoric achieved precision through a practice that might surprise you: imitation. Like "rhetoric," "imitation" sounds pejorative today: a fake, a knockoff, a mere copy. But Renaissance thinkers — aptly, looking back to the Roman Seneca, who himself looked back to the Greeks — compared the process of imitation to a bee's gathering nectar from many flowers and then transforming it into honey. As Michel de Montaigne put it:

"The bees steal from this flower and that, but afterward turn their pilferings into honey, which is their own. … So the pupil will transform and fuse together the passages that he borrows from others, to make of them something entirely his own; that is to say, his own judgment. His education, his labor, and his study have no other aim but to form this."

The honey metaphor corrects our naïve notion that being creative entails making something from nothing. Instead, you become a creator by wrestling with the legacy of your authoritative predecessors, standing on the shoulders of giants. In the words of the saxophone genius John Coltrane: "You've got to look back at the old things and see them in a new light." Listen to Coltrane fuse experimental jazz, South Asian melodic modes, and the Elizabethan ballad "Greensleeves," and you'll hear how engaging with the past generates rather than limits.

The most fascinating concept that Shakespeare's period revived from classical rhetoric was *inventio,* which gives us both the word "invention" and the word "inventory." Cartoon images of inventors usually involve a light bulb flashing above the head of a solitary genius. But nothing can come of nothing. And when rhetoricians spoke of *inventio,* they meant the first step in constructing an argument: an inventory of your mind's treasury of knowledge — your database of reading, which you can accumulate only through slow, deliberate study.

People on today's left and right are misguided on this point, making them strange bedfellows. Progressive educators have long been hostile to what they scorn as a "banking concept" of education, in which teachers deposit knowledge in passive students. Neoliberal reformers — the ones who have been assessing you for the past dozen years — act as if cognitive "skills" can somehow be taught in the abstract, independent of content. And some politicians seem eager to get rid of teachers altogether and just have you watch a video. You, having been born when Google was founded, probably take it for granted that you can always look something up online.

But knowledge matters. Cumulatively, it provides the scaffolding for your further

inquiry. In the most extreme example, if you knew no words in a language, having a dictionary wouldn't help you in the least, since every definition would simply list more words you didn't know. Likewise, without an inventory of knowledge, it's frustratingly difficult for you to accumulate, much less create, more knowledge. As the Italian novelist Elena Ferrante said, "There is no work … that is not the fruit of tradition."

Tradition derives from the Latin *traditio* — that which is handed down to you for safekeeping. I think part of our innate skepticism of tradition derives from our good democratic impulses: We don't want someone else telling us what to do; we want to decide for ourselves. In other words, you rightly reject a thoughtless adherence to tradition, just as you rightly reject (I hope) the thoughtlessness that accompanies authoritarianism. However, as the political philosopher Hannah Arendt insisted, education "by its very nature … cannot forgo either authority or tradition, and yet must proceed in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition." Educational authority is not the same thing as political authoritarianism.

You simply cannot transform tradition (a creative ideal) without first knowing it (a conserving ideal). Making an inventory must precede making an invention. Just imagine how startling it must have been for Shakespeare, the child of a small-town glove maker, the first time he encountered Seneca's blood-drenched tragedies, or Lucretius' treatise on the nature of the material world, or Ovid's exquisite tales of shape-shifting. Shakespeare's education furnished him with an inventory of words, concepts, names, and plots that he would reinvent throughout his career. Immersion in distant, difficult texts enlarges your mind and your world, providing for a lifetime of further inquiry. Devote the time in college to develop your growing inventory.

You've repeatedly heard the buzz phrase "critical thinking" during your orientation; who could be against such an obvious good? Yet we might do better to revive instead the phrase "negative capability": what the poet John Keats called Shakespeare's disposition to be "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts." In the

Renaissance, the rhetorical tradition encouraged such "play of the mind" through the practice of disputation. Students had to argue from multiple perspectives rather than dogmatically insist upon one biased position.

Once you are familiar with Shakespeare's training in disputation, you can easily see how it would lead to the verbal give-and-take that constitutes the heart of drama. As Zadie Smith marvels: "Shakespeare sees always both sides of a thing. … In his plays he is woman, man, black, white, believer, heretic, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Muslim. … He understood what fierce, singular certainty creates — and what it destroys. In response, he made himself … speak truth plurally." Now that's the kind of critical thinking you should aspire to: speaking truth plurally.

All well and good, you say, but my parents are worried about what I'm going to do after I graduate. There, too, Shakespeare can be a model.

When he was born, there wasn't yet a professional theater in London. In other words, his education had prepared him for a job that didn't even exist. You should be encouraged to learn that this has been true for every generation: Four of today's largest companies did not exist when I was born, 43 years ago. One of them, Apple, was co-founded by someone who said that the most important topic he ever studied was not engineering but calligraphy.

In short, the best way for you to prepare for the unforeseen future is to learn how to think intensively and imaginatively. Abraham Flexner, a legendary reformer of American medical education, was adamant about the "usefulness of useless knowledge." According to Flexner, "the really great discoveries" have "been made by men and women who were driven not by the desire to be useful but merely the desire to satisfy their curiosity." To cultivate such curiosity, you should think of yourself as apprenticing to the craft of thought. As the intellectual historian Mary Carruthers puts it: "people do not 'have' ideas, they 'make' them."

As with rhetoric, imitation, and inventory, you might not think very highly of apprenticeship these days. But it was crucial for skilled labor in Renaissance Europe. It required an exacting, collaborative environment, with guidance from people who knew more than you did. When Shakespeare arrived on the London theater scene, he entered a kind of artistic studio, or workshop, or laboratory, in which he was apprenticing himself to experienced playwrights. Note that *playwright* is not spelled w-r-i-t-e; it's spelled w-r-i-g-h-t: a maker — like a wheelwright, who crafts wheels, or a shipwright, who crafts ships. A playwright crafts plays.

After collaborating with other dramatists, Shakespeare soon graduated to crafting his own plays, yet still collaborating with the members of his company, in which he owned a share. That is, he received revenue from every ticket purchased. As Bart Van Es has shown, Shakespeare wrote with specific actors in mind, making the most of the talents of his team, with an eye toward long-term continuity. And profit! At the age of 33, he could already afford to buy the second-biggest house in prosperous Stratford. He soon acquired another home, purchased more than 100 acres of land, and retired before the age of 50. Who says rhyme doesn't pay?

Part of what made Shakespeare collaborate so well with others was his radical sense of empathy; he probably would have called it fellowship. Researchers "have found evidence that literary fiction improves a reader's capacity to understand what others are thinking and feeling." Shakespeare developed his empathy through his schoolboy exercises of "double translation," when he was impersonating the voices of others, as explored in Lynn Enterline's work on character making (*ethopoeia*).

A letter I recently received from a former student renewed my appreciation for the indirect ways in which empathy can be developed. Christopher Grubb, who double-majored in chemistry and music at Rhodes College, is now enrolled in Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons. He recalled the opening quatrain of Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, which he had memorized for my seminar. An aging speaker compares his declining life to a tree shedding its leaves:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold,

When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang

Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,

Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

It would be hard to think of something more irrelevant to a medical student interviewing a patient than some ambiguous 400-year old poem. Talk about useless knowledge! Or is it? Remarkably, Shakespeare enacts a double empathy here — that is to say, the speaker imagines the addressee imagining the speaker: "That time of year thou mayst in me behold." Reading this poem as an undergraduate, for an elective course, contributed in some small but genuine way to Chris's capacity for empathy.

As Chris observed, medical schools are introducing liberal-arts approaches into their curricula, but he wonders whether this is "too little, too late. If a person has spent an entire academic life striving for scientific advancement, how can we expect that person to become, suddenly, expert at conversations about end-of-life care or existential pain?"

He's far from the first to lament the creeping preprofessionalism in our schools — in fact, Shakespeare's contemporary Francis Bacon complained that among the many "colleges in Europe, I find strange that they are all dedicated to professions, and none left free to arts and sciences at large." Our word "college" derives from the Latin legal term *collegium*. It means a group of people with a common purpose, a body of colleagues, a fellowship, a guild.

Class of 2020: welcome to college, your workshop for thought. You have the "gift of the interval": an enviable chance to undertake a serious, sustained intellectual apprenticeship. You will prove your craft every time you choose to open a book; every

time you choose to settle down to write without distraction; every time you choose to listen, to consider, and to contribute to a difficult yet open conversation. Do not cheat yourselves.

While the Latin curriculum has long since vanished, you can still bring precision to your words, invention to your work, and empathy to your world.

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