

Ancient Grudge to New Love: A Remix of *Romeo and Juliet*

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Abstract: Jansky discuss how he remixed his *Romeo and Juliet* unit to best capture the multimodal composing that was already happening in his classroom, a shift resulting in a student-centered approach leading to free-styling, collaboration, and the creation of music videos telling the story of Shakespeare's tragic lovers.

Prologue

The creation of this unit, along with the project that I write about, was part of a sequence of pedagogical and curriculum decisions analyzed in an upcoming issue of the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* (Boggs, Stewart, & Jansky). In this research, Boggs (Florida State University) and Stewart (Virginia Tech) and I analyzed a series of lessons and projects created because of and through conversations that occurred over several months. Through an economic heuristic, Boggs and Stewart analyzed these conversations, through which curriculum decisions were made, alongside my reflection about the outcomes of the lessons and projects. This article discusses the *Romeo and Juliet* unit of that research, out of which students created a number of multimodal compositions. Here, I describe the project's creation and seek to inspire educators to look to students' interests as a resource when making curriculum decisions.

In the next five Acts, I will walk you through a narrative of decisions, research, and project development that is strictly my account. When this particular project was thought of and developed, I did not have the forethought that I would want to write about it and, as such, I did not obtain the necessary permissions to incorporate student interviews and student projects. I am no longer connected to the school in which this project was developed, and as such gaining permission prior to the publication of this article was not possible. This account is as close to accurate as time and memory allow,

and the references are present to provide a way to connect this project to an academic conversation.

Act I: Remixing a Unit

A remix by definition is altering an original of piece of media or text by adding, rearranging, or removing pieces of the original to create a new piece of media or text. The music industry is full of examples of how the remix works (Banks, 2011), and the remix has been referenced and used in the field of Composition in both pedagogy and product (Palmeri, 2014). In this article, I will discuss how remixing *Romeo and Juliet* from a teacher-centered pedagogical approach to a student-centered approach broke through the stale, mundane lessons from previous years and created a new love and appreciation for the unit.

I had a problem developing a curriculum that gave students authentic encounters with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. As an experienced ninth-grade English teacher, I spent each year dreading the quarter in which I taught *Romeo and Juliet* because I rarely knew how best to use the text to teach important literacy skills. Trying to make this text interesting and relevant seemed difficult, so creating an authentic encounter through which students could practice and grow literacy skills seemed impossible. Over the years I tweaked lessons and approaches, one year focusing on the Tupac and Biggie Smalls rivalry that ended in both of their deaths, and in another finding real-life stories of lovers whose actions closely resembled the tragic path of Shakespeare's teens. One year I purchased several novels adapted from *Romeo and Juliet* that students read and compared to a cinematic adaptation of the play. Along with these different approaches, my students created paper bag character presentations, planned a wedding, and compared and contrasted plots, and all the while I was not seeing the authentic engagement out of this text that I had always hoped to see. While these approaches gained some initial traction, it was hard to maintain students' interest over nine consecutive weeks reading, talking about, and working on assignments surrounding *Romeo and Juliet*.

In the sequence of units, this one occurred during the last quarter of the school year, During this particular year, I had made strides incorporating multimodal compositions into lessons, and many of my students were surprisingly exploring multimodal composing on their own outside of school. Knowing how far they had come from composing traditional alphabetic texts to multimodal texts, I did not want to tread down the same *Romeo and Juliet* path that I had year after year. My decision was to remix the unit.

As mentioned previously, for me, there was always a sense of tension present on the brink of teaching the *Romeo and Juliet* unit. I never knew how best to approach the text because, when teaching multiple classes and more than a hundred students, I had seen some students love and some hate what we did, and there was very little middle ground on which students stood. Usually, I would choose certain standards, mostly three to five, on which to focus and create lessons that rotated through them. A typical day would be spent reading a section of the play, discussing, and working on a particular skill or standard. Using this approach, it would take about seven weeks to read the entire play and cover each of the selected standards several times.

In remixing this unit, I began by showing a music video that told Ovid's story of Pyramus and Thisbe (DerMoment1609, 2009), Shakespeare's inspiration for writing *Romeo and Juliet*, which then prompted a conversation about what made the video good. This particular clip is a remix: DerMoment1609 took a song from the movie *Were the World Mine*, which means it was created for a commercial product, but DerMoment1609 created an alternative use for it.

My original plan after watching the video was to dive right into reading Ovid's text as an introduction to *Romeo and Juliet*, but questions and discussion continued among the students. Furthermore, a few students were intrigued with the video and became interested in making and editing their own. Our conversations revolved around the creative way the lyrics were part of the video, the catchy song itself, and the way the video was made. It was during these conversations with several classes that an idea began to percolate. While I spent a lot of time planning the reading portion, I spent little

time developing a final project, so watching the Pyramus and Thisbe music video prompted a discussion about what the final project should be—a music video with the Pyramus and Thisbe music video as the mentor text.

Act II: Not a Standard Approach

Another consideration in remixing the unit was not to read the play in its entirety but instead to focus on key sections investigating how and why Romeo and Juliet ended up dead. According to the Common Core State Standard for English Language Arts (2010), grades 9-10, students must “Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme (RL.3). In order to meet this standard, I would typically require students to create a graphic organizer for each of the main characters and trace how their personalities were exposed through interactions with other characters. One example would be what students learn about Benvolio after the opening scene in which members of both households fight in a public space. Usually this graphic organizer became part of a larger essay critically analyzing how a particular character developed over the course of the play. Instead of reading the whole play and pointing out particular interactions that may help us understand a character, we read only those particular sections. Students were not left guessing as to what they should notice, but were prompted to think about what is learned about the characters in the brief section and how it impacts what was already known about that character. They still had a graphic organizer to complete, but more time was actually spent understanding the character development over the length of the play. The parts of the play not read were watched so students could understand the context in which the characters developed.

Reading the play in pieces and choosing which to use and for which standards opened up time for students to discuss what they were learning. We did not have to rush to finish each act in order to maintain our schedule and, as such, students were more interested in the plot twists that Shakespeare wrote into this play.

Act II: Multimodal Composing and Student Interests

One part of teaching English Language Arts that I personally do not enjoy is writing by formula, that is, teaching students a standard approach to composition using templates. While thinking about how my students would be writing in the future, I rarely observed a standard boxed essay on the list of composition needs. When looking at the CCSS, we must see the essay writing standards as more of a thinking process than a prescriptive process. Teaching how to think and organize ideas is a better approach to teaching composition because it crosses multiple disciplines. In remixing composition, students need the ability to work in multiple modes of composing, such as working with sounds, video clips, music, photographs, and other sensory modes to communicate a message. Palmeri's (2012) research points to ways in which pedagogical approaches to composing multimodal texts and using the existing technological interests of students to compose lead to connecting interests with the stated goal of the CCSS—to develop skills and abilities that translate to the future. Multimodal composition is a means to teach students skills that directly translate to the ways they will compose both outside of a classroom and in college and careers (Selfe and Selfe, 2008).

Act III: A Narrative Argument

As mentioned, my students were developing as multimodal composers, so going back to the writing tasks that I used with previous *Romeo and Juliet* units was not ideal. My students had already created comic book style compositions, webpages, social media posts, and oral reports, so having them write a structured alphabetic text did not continue to move them forward as composers. Because this unit is the last of the school year, I wanted a capstone project that would allow students to further explore composing in the modes in which they were most interested. Several students were already making Vines, remixing video, and creating original content for a YouTube channel, and they had inspired me to begin doing the same. Having taught using video clips and other multimedia, I was aware of how video and music connected with my students.

Composing video texts is very much in line with the CCSS, and requiring students to analyze character development through a music video actually connects several standards into the assignment. Hicks (2013) argues that all three text types suggested by the CCSS--argument, informational, narrative--can be “represented in digital videos” (p. 109). In this particular project, the students composed narrative arguments, but originally we discussed creating only a narrative video.

The music video project changed forms several times. Originally, each class would make one music video that told the overall narrative of the play. After discussing ideas with each class, it became apparent that there were multiple ideas that could not be resolved by creating only one video. In fact, it would be difficult to fully analyze Romeo and Juliet’s character development over the course of the play in only one song. In a previous year, students could create a playlist of songs that showed the development of a particular character over the course of the play. Because of the need to make multiple videos, each class elected to create a playlist of original songs fully exploring both Romeo and Juliet’s character development and the ways their interactions moved the plot. Thus, the organization of songs would become the narrative of the play, and the individual songs would describe character development. So, each class wrote five songs--“Prologue,” “Romeo’s Song,” “Juliet’s Song,” “Wedding Song,” and “Tragic Ending”--that argued about how Romeo and Juliet’s development propelled the overall narrative.

Act IV: Remixing Popular Music

I provided very few directions to students in developing their particular songs, but one requirement had to be met: at least 50% of their lyrics had to be from the play. The lyric requirement was created because the mentor music video took its lyrics directly from Shakespeare’s play *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*, and because we did not read the play in its entirety, I wanted the students to dig into the play on their own.

As groups formed and students chose their particular part of the playlist, conversations among the groups centered on what song they wanted to use as the base for their remix. Groups often collaborated to make sure their songs connected, music of various genres

filled the air of the classroom, and the students pored over the text of the play as they wrote. In process, each group developed a strategy for creating its music video:

1. some storyboarded ideas and then wrote a song that fit into the video idea
2. others wrote the song and then storyboarded the video idea based on the song
3. one group planned a live action shoot
4. others planned to take clips from open Internet sources
5. several groups created slides in either PowerPoint or Google Slides that were saved as .pdf files and inserted into a video editing program.

The song recording seemed the most challenging venture, but our school offers an elective course in digital music. As such, one computer lab houses software and audio recording equipment. In the classes that I taught, four students either took the digital music course or were taking it during this project, and I relied on them to record the songs for each group. I also enlisted a fellow teacher whose hobby was creating digital music to help complete the twenty recordings.

One concern that I had going into the singing portion of the project was the willingness of students to sing publicly. I approached this problem with a two-part strategy: I sang in my own music video, and we sang karaoke as a class. For the karaoke class I created a playlist of popular songs from which each class chose five that fulfilled one of the themes (Prologue, Romeo's Song, Juliet's Song, Wedding Song, and Tragic Ending) and that could have been written about Romeo and Juliet. I believe that both of these activities broke the ice and created a safe space in which students would sing more comfortably.

As far as the video editing, several students were comfortable using advanced software, but other used WeVideo, a free app on the Google Chrome browser that has the necessary video editing features for this project. Furthermore, WeVideo was a logical choice because it was available outside of class.

If there is one downside to an ambitious project like this, it's that it must be graded. I've often struggled with creating the right rubrics to measure the intended outcome of a project. For this group project, I negotiated the rubric with my classes, which ended up closely resembling the conversation about the *Pyramus and Thisbe* music video from the beginning of the unit, with the addition of "Teamwork."

Act V: A Not So Tragic Ending

In addition to the multimodal digital composing that this assignment called for, my students re-read sections of the play in order to look for lines to use in their songs (RL.1; RL.2), analyzed characters' development and motivations (RL.3), collaborated in groups (SL.1), synthesized multiple digital sources when they learned how to make and edit videos (SL.4; SL.5; W.6; W.7), and adapted their writing to fit the genre of music they selected (SL.6). While many more standards were covered during the assignment, the Speaking/Listening and Writing standards stood out yet were not considered during the planning of this assignment. While there is a great deal of research about project-based learning, this unit and assignment were about how collaboration between my students and I caused me to rethink and address many practices that I brought to my profession. As I am now removed from the daily rigors of planning and implementation lesson and unit plans, I see how this one unit I used to dread became a highlight of my K12 teaching career. I often watch the videos that my students produced with the same parental joy as when I look at my own kids. While I know that I contributed to the final products, each one became far greater than my mind could fathom during the early stages.

Postlude

While this story was about remixing *Romeo and Juliet*, this approach can be done with almost any text. With the push for using technology ever increasing, and much technology being readily available for free, it's not as difficult to make digital stories, songs, or videos as it may seem. One factor that pushed me to thinking about making music videos is how my students approached using technology in previous assignments.

I learned that I do not have to be technologically savvy because many students already are and can teach their peers and teacher. One main goal in writing this narrative is to encourage teachers who create assignments like this to post to a blog, create a YouTube channel, or write about it as a reference for others.

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