

FIRST PERSON

How 'Hamilton' Encapsulates My Goals as a Teacher

By Siobhan Gearty

November 29, 2016

In the past year, pop culture has been ablaze with stories about the hit Broadway musical "Hamilton" by actor and playwright Lin Manuel Miranda. The play follows the storied life of one of our nation's founding fathers, Alexander Hamilton. Its progressive casting, powerful story, and brilliant addition of rap to the musical format have thrust the play into the spotlight. In the coming year, "Hamilton" will begin its national tour in cities across the United States, bringing the show's amazing—dare I say life-changing?—energy to a much broader audience.

Earlier this month, during a performance in New York City, the cast of "Hamilton" **directly addressed attendee Vice President-elect Mike Pence** in the audience. Actor Brandon Dixon spoke on behalf of the cast, crew, and production team, saying, "We, sir—we—are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights."

Though Pence told Fox News that he was "not offended" by the message, the event **prompted President-elect Donald Trump to demand an apology**, according to CNN. Many Trump supporters called for a boycott of the musical and its author—but **the play broke Broadway box office records** for most money earned in a single week.

Trump's response is troubling on many levels, not least because the theater has always been a vehicle for freedom of expression and a voice of alternate views. As a teacher, I believe that it is my job to teach students to disagree through dialogue and debate, and that it is OK to voice your opinion so long as you are engaged in a meaningful conversation.

As Dixon so aptly put it in **a tweet to Trump** following the evening, "[C]onversation is not harassment sir. And I appreciate @mike_pence for stopping to listen."

Though I originally became obsessed with the play as a theater geek (my commute has become a daily one-woman show), the incident with Pence further deepened my love, evolving into a reminder of all of the reasons why I began teaching in the first place. Here are the four staples of my pedagogy, reaffirmed through "Hamilton":

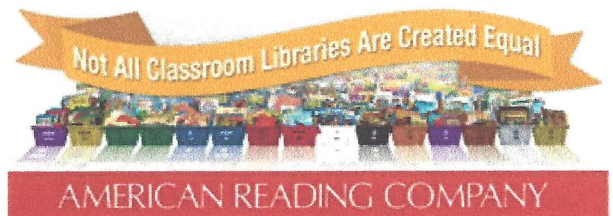
1. The importance of grit: *"The \$10 founding father without a father / Got a lot farther by working a lot harder / By being a lot smarter / By being a self-starter"*

Alexander Hamilton's rise from poverty to a position of power is brought about by his own determination to work hard and seize any opportunity that comes his way. It is a lesson that I am constantly trying to teach my students. I would love for them to leave my classroom with the firm belief that America is a nation built upon the idea of social mobility. As a teacher in a Title I school, my students routinely experience poverty, trauma, and violence. The idea that your childhood and family do not determine your future has become a constant mantra in my classroom.

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2. The power of words: *"I wrote my way out of hell / I wrote my way to revolution / I was louder than the crack in the bell"*

The play highlights the unbelievable power of language—both for its creation of beautiful ideas and for the destruction and pain words can cause. Hamilton defends the fledgling federal government with his profound essays, but also uses the power of words to enrage his opponents, make enemies, and foolishly hurt his family. Every teacher tries to teach her students this same lesson: We go to school and learn because learning is power. Words, and what you can express with them, can be a mighty force—for good or evil.

3. The relevance of history: *"If we try to fight in every revolution in the world, we never stop / Where do we draw the line?"*

The play covers topics such as regulation of Wall Street, America's role in foreign affairs, gun violence, racial equality, gender equality, and what to do if voters don't like the candidate who is running for office. Sound familiar? As a teacher, I am constantly asked, "What is the point of studying history?" The point is that historical debates and decisions helped shaped the policies and attitudes that we have today. An oft-repeated phrase in my classroom is, "Engaged learners are constantly asking questions about the world around them." Teaching students to ask, "How did we get here?" and "Who wrote this narrative?" puts them on pathways to the truth.

4. The acknowledgement of human error: *"I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects / Not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors"*

One of the play's most inspiring messages is the acknowledgement that the founding fathers were not perfect—they were human. Hamilton repeatedly questions the early government's decision to allow slavery and to deny women a voice in government. George Washington's life as a plantation owner is incongruous with his ideas about liberty. Hamilton's pride causes him to hurt those he loves. So, can either man be considered a hero? As an English teacher, I always try to push students to feel comfortable in the gray areas; to understand that not every question is going to have a yes or no answer; and that it is OK to grapple with a difficult topic. It is also OK as a student to fail in the pursuit of your goal—every human does.

Sometimes, while singing tunelessly in my car, I cannot help but feel that "Hamilton" has tapped into my best intentions as a teacher. The play is the embodiment of the performance I strive to give every day in front of my audience of 12-year-olds. It is me (and every great teacher I have ever had) on my best day, when I know I have phrased an idea in just the right way, with just the right energy to communicate an important human ideal. Moments like these, when my classroom becomes the set of "Hamilton," make it all worth it.

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