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IU Kokomo professor connects students to Shakespeare

KOKOMO, Ind. — You might not expect to read a comic book in a college class.

But if you take Joe Keener’s “Conversations with Shakespeare” at Indiana University Kokomo, you might read manga, or Japanese comic books —based on one of Shakespeare’s plays.

Keener, assistant professor of English, includes modern movies and books as well as manga, alongside classic Shakespeare plays, to help students find a connection with them.

“The students don’t expect to read manga, they don’t expect to watch ‘Scotland, Pa.,” he said. “By upsetting the text a little, you get their attention. Giving students something unexpected is important. It makes the students think about the text, rather than just slogging through it because it’s required.”

It also removes the negativity sometimes associated with Shakespeare, because it is “required reading,” he said.

“I find material that is more current, to help students connect to it,” he said. “It makes it fun and worth reading. It is appealing to students, without losing the intellectual rigor. We get past it being valuable because everyone says it’s valuable.”

Keener connected with Shakespeare as an undergraduate, and continued to study his works as he earned his master’s degree and Ph.D. His office, in the Main Building, reflects his love of the English playwright, filled with various editions of his plays, along with Shakespeare bobbleheads and action figures.

“Once you become known as a Shakespeare fan you get a lot of these things,” he said.

Students in his “Conversations” class not only read the classic *King Lear*, but they also read Christopher Moore’s 2009 novel “Fool,” which tells the same story from the fool’s point of view. Or they’ll read *Macbeth*, and then watch the movie *Scotland, Pa.*, a 2001 movie that sets the play in a fast food restaurant in Pennsylvania.

“You get a nice back and forth, and students can make more connections,” Keener said. “It leads to some interesting conversations, such as ‘Is this still Shakespeare,’” and ‘How much of Shakespeare’s text has to be included for it to be Shakespeare?’”

Keener has used this technique successfully before, in a class covering English literature before 1600. He aligns older texts, like *Beowulf*, with the 1970s novel *Grendel*, or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*.

“This is literature that is especially hard for students to connect with, but juxtaposing texts can make them come alive for the students,” he said.

This does not mean he is watering down the curriculum, he said, or that it is an easy class.

“You have to find a balance to maintain intellectual rigor,” he said. “Some colleges teach only classics, while others have classes on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. You have to reach a balance between adding modern books and maintaining that rigor.”

During the semester, students also research to find other media that has a connection to one of Shakespeare’s plays, and writes a final paper establishing that connection. This moves students further towards being their own teachers, which is Keener’s goal.

“It has to be something unexpected, they can’t use the obvious,” he said. “Hopefully by the end, students are a little closer to teaching themselves. If I can make one student come out thinking differently than before, that, to me, is an achievement, and really is why I wanted to teach college. It’s exciting to me to see them get it, and go beyond getting it.”

Indiana University Kokomo serves north central Indiana.

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