

Further reading

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Teaching Shakespeare

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AIM

With specific reference to Shakespeare, to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the methods used in teaching pre-20th century literature.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR THIS CASE STUDY

- ★ Plot and character provide the way to understanding Shakespeare. Once students know who is doing what to whom, they can make sense of the plays.
- ★ Pleasure in the text helps students to read more effectively. The licence to speculate – and to be wrong – is an important aspect of reading.
- ★ Students make sense of the plays collaboratively.
- ★ Making connections with other texts and other experiences helps to make a Shakespearean text accessible.
- ★ Shakespeare plays on video bring performance into the classroom, which breaks down the old opposition between studying and seeing Shakespeare.
- ★ Performance helps students to make sense of the plays and, hence, of the language.
- ★ Tasks which help students to identify with characters give them the chance to show what they have understood and how they have responded to a complex text. They can provide more reliable evidence of students' performance than traditional literary critical essays.

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What do students expect of Shakespeare?

Students are generally keen to read texts that they regard as difficult, particularly texts that are part of elite culture. They are anxious about the language demands of such texts, particularly Shakespeare. Such anxiety can act as a block on students' ability to read them. Teachers make use of a wide range of introductory strategies to help students to overcome these anxieties.

Students start with a surprising amount of knowledge of the plays, particularly of the most frequently studied ones, such as *Romeo and Juliet*. In part, this knowledge has its origins in the culture of the school – the received wisdom derived from earlier cohorts of students – but it is also the product of the use of folk-tale motifs in Shakespeare, such as the casket test in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Ways into the text

It is not always best to start at the beginning. Starting from a key moment – a crucial speech or scene – can be an effective way of highlighting the most important themes or relationships in the play. Plot and character provide the way to understanding

Shakespeare. Once students know who is doing what to whom, they can make sense of the plays. To see language as the bedrock on which an understanding of the plays can be constructed is to create a barrier to understanding them.

Information technology can help students to share and make explicit the knowledge

they already possess, both in the content of a text and about the language used. Software such as DevTray can be used to give all students access to complex texts.

Pleasure in the text helps students to read more effectively. A program such as DevTray gives students the licence to speculate – and to be wrong – which is an important aspect of reading.

“Once students know who is doing what to whom, they can make sense of the plays.”

Making sense of Shakespeare

Students make sense of the plays collaboratively. Reading Shakespeare is a collaborative enterprise, not merely in the sense that students take roles, but in that interpretations of the play arise out of the class thinking together about it.

Making connections with other texts and other experiences is not a denial of the specificity of a Shakespearean text but a way of illuminating it and making it accessible.

Teachers can help students to make sense of the plays by deploying analogies between the world of the text and the modern world outside the classroom. The act of imaginative connection is integral to the process of reading itself. This means that the idea of separate modern versions – *West Side Story* alongside *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance – may be redundant.

“Teachers can help students to make sense of the plays by deploying analogies between the world of the text and the modern world outside the classroom.”

Performance in the classroom

The text is not the play but an important element of it. Shakespearean texts, in particular, are unstable, provisional and contested. The meaning of the plays is contingent on performance. Plays on video bring performance into the classroom, which breaks down the old opposition between studying and seeing Shakespeare.

Performance helps students to make sense of the plays, and hence of the language. The term “performance” can encompass a range of approaches and activities:

- ★ *videos and films;*
- ★ *shared reading;*
- ★ *improvisations;*
- ★ *“hot-seating”;*
- ★ *other forms of role play.*

Different videotaped performances of the same play can make questions of interpretation accessible to all students, whereas access to a single realisation may lead students to accept a single interpretation as the authorised version of that play.

Students' responses

Teachers set a mixture of formal literary critical essays and other, more empathetic activities. Empathetic tasks, when students talk and write from the point of view of characters in the plays:

- ★ *give students the opportunity to respond in sophisticated ways, revealing subtle and sustained interpretations of the plays;*
- ★ *focus students' attention on the text in a purposeful way, while allowing them to draw on their own experiences in understanding and responding to the text;*
- ★ *should not be regarded as an easy option, but as an opportunity for all students to engage with the ideas, characters and actions of a play;*
- ★ *may provide the most accurate indication of a student's reading of and response to a complex literary text.*

Research focus and method

This study is concerned with the experience of reading one part of the canon of English literature – Shakespeare.

It focuses on students' and teachers' perceptions of this experience in one school, an 11-16 mixed comprehensive in the London Borough of Hackney.

The conclusions are based on data gathered through:

- ★ *interviews with five specialist English teachers;*
- ★ *the researcher's account of work with a GCSE group on The Merchant of Venice;*
- ★ *surveys of and interviews with school students;*
- ★ *observation of lessons.*

This research was published in greater detail in the journal *Changing English: Studies in Reading and Culture*. The first section of this appeared in March 1997 under the title, “Sir Oracle: *The Merchant of Venice* in the Classroom.”

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