Shakespeare in the Classroom: to be or not to be?

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Abstract This paper explores the arguments surrounding Shakespeare's place in the classroom amid recent changes to the National Curriculum. First, it will explore arguments suggesting that the works of William Shakespeare are not relevant to the lives of young people today: as a result, the compulsory study of Shakespeare in schools risks alienating students, many of whom come from different ethnic backgrounds. Once acknowledging these arguments, however, the paper will propose that the themes and ideas that run through Shakespeare's works are universal, surpassing barriers such as race and class. In this way, the plays are as relevant today as on the day they were written. The paper will argue that rather than Shakespeare being irrelevant, it is outdated teaching practices that limit the benefits of Shakespeare. Finally, the paper will explore a range of creative approaches to the teaching and learning of Shakespeare which possess the potential to significantly increase student engagement.

Keywords: Education; English Literature; Professional Development; Shakespeare; Teaching and Learning

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INTRODUCTION

As part of recent changes to the National Curriculum, the Department for Education has placed an increased emphasis on students reading and engaging with the works of William Shakespeare. As opposed to studying "one or two sections of the play, reinforced by showing a video" (Thomas, 2016, p.42), students are now expected to read entire works by Shakespeare. Furthermore, Key Stage 3 students are now obliged to study two plays as opposed to one (Department for Education, 2014, p.15). The changes follow claims that "pupils can leave school without studying anything more than bite-sized extracts of Shakespeare's most famous plays such as *Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*" (Paton, 2013). However, there are growing concerns that rather than increasing student engagement with Shakespeare, the educational reforms will alienate pupils. As theatre director Mark Powell states, "Our schools are full of Shakespeare, but often in completely the wrong places. Old uncle Bill has become the relative that we invite to family gatherings out of habit, not because we actually want to" (2014). For the last few decades, there have been growing concerns that the vast majority of pupils struggle to engage with the playwright, and it is feared that this problem will only increase amid the changes to the curriculum. An online petition that called for the Department for Education to "reconsider the changes to English Literature GCSE" has received over 65,000 signatures (Stevens, 2014), showing that many share these concerns. This essay explores the issues surrounding Shakespeare's place on the National Curriculum. First, it will explore the debate of whether Shakespeare is relevant to the lives of young people today. As Blocksidge states, "If Shakespeare has nothing valuable to offer the pupil, then his place in the curriculum is suspect" (2005, p.8). If Shakespeare is deemed relevant to the curriculum, however, the focus then shifts to why so

few students are able to engage with his works. It will propose that this is due to uninspiring and outdated pedagogical approaches that see teachers lecturing at desk-bound students. A more active approach to teaching and learning, however, possesses the potential to completely transform the traditional classroom, increasing student engagement immensely.

SHAKESPEARE IN THE CLASSROOM: REDUNDANT OR RELEVANT?

The works of Shakespeare are often accepted as essential to one's intellectual and even moral development: "by studying 'great literature', … pupils not only imbibe morality, they develop a new engagement with life" (Ward and Connolly, 2008, p.298). Nevertheless, whilst it can be difficult "to question the taken-for-granted status of Shakespeare in the English curriculum, and further, in the Western literary canon" (Balinska-Ourdeva et al., 2013, p.334), there has been a noticeable shift in attitudes towards Shakespeare's place on the National Curriculum in the last few decades. In recent years, a host of practitioners and educational researchers have used the forum of blogging to passionately argue that Shakespeare's language is outdated and that he is no longer relevant to the lives of today's young (see Pett 2015; Bhageria, 2015; Shaffer, 2014). These ideas are reflected in a survey assessing students' attitudes to Shakespeare, carried out by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in partnership with the Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR). The results of the survey showed that 80% of students "felt that Shakespeare's plays had no relevance to their lives" (Lighthill, 2011, p.37). Lighthill argues that these figures highlight how "most students engage reluctantly with Shakespeare's plays, and that this attitude has changed little over the last two decades" (ibid.). Considering this, one might question why Shakespeare is still deemed as 'essential' reading.

According to postcolonial discourse, the answer to this question lies in the fact that the works of Shakespeare have been used as a tool of power and influence since the height of the British Empire and continue today to symbolise Britain's ideological superiority (Balinska-Ourdeva et al., 2013, p.334). During the era of colonialism, "Shakespeare was regarded as the greatest achievement of his race and culture, a badge of English superiority" (Kapadia, 1997, p.2). Hence, "Through literature and particularly through Shakespeare, Britain constructed and promoted herself as a culturally and morally superior nation whose colonization … was a benign, civilizing enterprise" (ibid.). The works of Shakespeare, based on English morals and values, became a civilising tool, saving the natives from their 'barbaric', backwards cultures. Whilst we have, of course, moved a long way from this narrative, keeping the study of Shakespeare compulsory nevertheless positions the playwright at the top of the literary hierarchy, reinforcing the notion that Western civilisation is superior to other cultures. Teacher Dana Dusbiber, who makes the place for completely scrapping the study of Shakespeare, reiterates this idea: as we give Shakespeare priority on the syllabus, "we (perhaps unwittingly) promote the notion that other cultural perspectives are less important" (2015). Dusbiber teaches at Luther Burbank High School, the largest inner-city school in Sacramento, California. A significant majority of her students are non-white; she thus argues that the works of one white man are irrelevant to the lives of her students, many who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, she is concerned that "so many of my colleagues teach a canon that some white people decided upon so long ago and do it without question" (ibid.). One should bear in mind that Dusbiber's article is an opinion-piece that is based solely on her own experiences in the classroom. Her comments thus relate to a different education system in a different social climate. However, her article has received a significant response globally, affirming that many share her concerns. In addition, her comments can be applied to schools in England that have a majority of ethnic minority students. A recent report has shown that 27.9% of

secondary school pupils are of minority ethnic origins; this figure has been rising year on year (Department of Education, 2016, p.8). As Lighthill states, "in today's multi-ethnic, multilingual Britain, students have little enthusiasm for colonialist icons of British social and cultural history" (2011, p.38).

Coles takes this argument one step further, suggesting that the study of Shakespeare does not only alienate students from ethnic minority backgrounds, but risks making all but the most privileged students feel inadequate and inferior (2013, p. 63). The compulsory study of Shakespeare "in the National Curriculum [has been] promoted as both a democratising and a unifying move" (Coles, 2013, p. 50), giving students from all backgrounds the opportunity to access Britain's wealth of culture and tradition. However, according to Coles, this 'ideology' is deeply flawed: "If policymakers continue to adhere to a view of culture which presents it more as a body of elite knowledge rather than as social practice, then students who do not come from backgrounds where Shakespeare forms part of their cultural capital, are unlikely to find it the liberating experience it is claimed to be" (2013, p. 63). As part of Coles' study, she interviewed Emma, a low-achieving student who, when asked what she thought of Shakespeare, replied that "I think you have to be intelligent to understand what he's saying, coz I think he's confusing" (2013, p.58). To quote Coles, "the final part of [Emma's] statement perhaps indicates that she excludes herself from the elite group able to understand Shakespeare" (ibid.). Hence, rather than 'unifying' students, the compulsory study of Shakespeare reinforces traditional societal boundaries which dictate that one must be of a certain class or breed to be considered intelligent and cultured. Few would disagree that this principle is both outdated and narrow-minded. However, by increasing the focus on the works of Shakespeare and traditional British texts, and by removing modern American texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Of Mice and Men* from the GCSE syllabus, the government have "narrowed the curriculum and [taken] choice away from teachers" (Stevens, 2014). With all the other demands of the education sector, "it will be hard for any teacher to teach more than these set texts and we simply don't believe these choices are the right ones for all students" (ibid.). A more flexible curriculum would allow for students from a range of backgrounds and with differing interests to equally succeed. Moreover, with reports that white-working class boys are falling further behind than any other ethnic group (*Sutton Trust,* 2016), it can be reasoned that they in particular have little to gain from studying the plays of Shakespeare. Many of these boys struggle with reading and writing: rather than feeling dispirited by attempting to read a four-hundred-year-old play, perhaps what they need is the chance to develop relevant and transferable skills that will aid them in seeking apprenticeships and jobs?

Whilst these are valid arguments regarding the relevance of Shakespeare in schools, the issues raised have been refuted by various scholars, not least by Rex Gibson. He argues that the ideas and themes that run through Shakespeare's works – including emotions of "love, hate, awe, tenderness, anger, despair, jealousy, contempt, fear, courage, wonder" - are universal to all, irrespective of boundaries such as class or ethnicity (Gibson, 1998, p.3). Whilst "Shakespeare's times were very different from our own, […] human emotions are common to all ages" (ibid.). Falling foolishly in love at the drop of a heartbeat, becoming consumed by a fear of what lies ahead, feeling isolated and detached from loved ones: these experiences are synonymous with adolescence. In this way, the works of Shakespeare possess the potential to unite students from a range of backgrounds, making them aware of all that they have in common. Thus, from the soliloquys in which Hamlet contemplates the nature of his existence to Lady Macbeth's tumultuous descent into madness, Shakespeare's preoccupation with the complexities of the human mind make his plays ever-intriguing and ever-compelling.

Moreover, what distinguishes Shakespeare from other playwrights and authors is the fact that his plays are full of ambiguities and uncertainties, lending an endless supply of readings and interpretations. *Henry V,* a history which narrates the events of the Battle of Agincourt in the Hundred

Years' War, has roused heated-debate across the centuries. Many read the play as a pro-war epic, containing some of "Shakespeare's most rousing, patriotic speeches" and depicting the "well-supported rule of a unified, ordered realm" (Woodcock, 2008, p.1). Laurence Olivier's 1944 adaptation, released towards the end of the second world war, celebrates the honour and glory of fighting for one's country. Others, however, argue that the play presents a more complex view of warfare: "Henry V is haunted by problems merely deferred, not resolved; in the long view, its hero's success looks transitory, even futile" (Maus, 2008, p.1471). In fact, a 2003 Royal National Theatre production of the play became a pertinent political commentary on the controversial invasion of Iraq. Through the ages, the play has functioned as a social commentary on the nature of warfare. Hence, Shakespeare's plays are full of complexities and ambiguities that allow for differing interpretations, making them as relevant today as they were on the day they were written. In fact, the works of Shakespeare offer students the chance to discuss, debate and explore fundamental issues in a way that few other literary texts can do.

Whilst some argue that Shakespeare is not relevant to the lives of young people today, Gibson argues that "successful Shakespeare teaching is learner-centred": the ambiguous nature of the plays gives every student the opportunity to "create his or her own meaning" (1998, p.9). He adds:

> Each student brings his or her own culture to every lesson. That rich variety of culture is a resource that Shakespeare lessons can celebrate and employ rather than dismiss. [*Macbeth*] has been set in the worlds of medieval Japanese Samurai, Chicago gangsters, a German Walpurgisnacht with Spiderwomen witches, a Hare Krishna-type religious cult, and the leather-clad world of a rock and roll musical. (Gibson, 1998, p.9)

Due to the universal themes that run through the plays, Shakespeare does not have to limit or alienate students from diverse backgrounds. Rather, reading his works can give students an opportunity to explore their cultures, and themselves, in new and meaningful ways. British rapper and poet Akala, for instance, trains young people "to develop their love of Shakespeare's language by developing their love of their own street language", using Shakespeare as a lens to explore contemporary black British culture (AHRC Press, 2013). As part of an interview with *The Economist*, Akala argues that "It's not about lowering the quality… it's about demystifying Shakespeare. It's about getting people to hear the words and feel the words, and then you can analyse the words later" (2015). In this way, the works of Shakespeare are able to transcend societal boundaries like few other texts, offering all students, irrespective of circumstance, a pathway into literature. Furthermore, Mary Powell teaches in a school in California where "over 70 percent of the students […] are Latino and on a free and reduced lunch program" (2010, p.6). As is "often the case with high poverty students, several of them are struggling readers and writers" (Powell, 2010, p.6). However, after adopting a more 'active' approach in the classroom, her students have thoroughly enjoyed reading Shakespeare. Whilst it must be acknowledged that her essay relates to an education system in a different social climate, her case-study shows that when "managed by a committed, confident and supported teacher," (Irish, 2011, p.15) students from a myriad of backgrounds can engage with and benefit from reading the works of Shakespeare. In fact, one can directly compare Powell's case study to that of Dusbiber's; both teach in Californian schools with a significant non-white demographic yet both have had very different experiences of teaching Shakespeare. It follows, then, that the question is not whether Shakespeare is still relevant for young people but how his works can be effectively taught in the classroom for maximum student engagement.

PEDCAGOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE TEACHING OF SHAKESPEARE

The plays of Shakespeare clearly possess the potential to captivate and absorb students. Nevertheless, a significant majority of young people still fail to engage with his works. According to Blocksidge, the root of this contradiction lies with the fact that outdated teaching practices are still being employed in the classroom. These traditional approaches to teaching Shakespeare involve classes "sitting behind desks, following the text…" (Blocksidge, 2005, p.7), as passages are read out by selected students. However, this approach is deeply flawed, as Kaplan suggests: "Most reading aloud by students in classrooms results in the [speaker] struggling to say the words – clearly, slowly, and loudly – with little attention paid to what they are saying – especially, if the person is reading the work for the very first time" (2007, p.7). Often, the speaker struggles through the unfamiliar language, so focussed on their pronunciation that they are unaware of what the words actually mean. Meanwhile, the rest of the class, whose only responsibility is to follow along, quickly lose focus. Dame Judi Dench, renowned for her work with the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre Company, comments on how her experiences of studying *The Merchant of Venice* at school almost put her off Shakespeare for life. As part of an interview for a documentary, she describes how students were required to read six lines each of the play, "regardless of who was saying them": "It made it a complete nonsense… It ruined the play for me, completely ruined the play" (Furness, 2014). It is troubling that this vision of a mid-twentieth-century classroom is still commonplace today: indeed, it is hardly surprising that so many students are unable to connect with Shakespeare on a meaningful level.

Moreover, if a student is brave enough to put up their hand and admit that they "don't get it", the teacher - pressurised by need to cover a whole play in a specific amount of time - is forced to quickly summarise the events of the scene before moving on to the next. Soon, the class become completely reliant on the teacher as 'translators', as the principle meaning makers (Warner, 1997, p.147). By the time the class has finished reading through the play and are required to move on to analysing Shakespeare's language in depth, many are still trying to get their heads around the intricate plots. The well-meaning teacher might deem their students incapable of forming their own opinions and will instead tell students why a certain phrase is significant or why a particular motif has been repeated. To quote Powell:

> Teachers are supposed to have all the answers, but dramatic literature is a playground of opinions: why does Juliet say this? Why would Macbeth do that? The real answer is that we don't know, but teachers are not encouraged to say just that: "I don't know." Their own suppositions are often reported back in essays as facts. (2014)

Reynolds claims that "Generations of students who find themselves intimidated or bored by Shakespeare should blame their teachers for… well, *teaching it*" (2012, p.164; emphasis in original). She suggests that rigid interpretations of Shakespeare's works should not be taught to students for them to learn by heart. Instead, teachers should trust both themselves and their students by "[creating] the conditions under which genuine personal response can flourish" (Soltysek, 2016, p.51). Shakespeare's plays, the narratives, the characters should be actively experienced through the acts of roleplay and discussion. Whilst this approach can be a daunting choice for teachers to make in a world increasingly dominated by high stakes testing, allowing "Shakespeare to connect and react with what is inside [students]" (Irish, 2011, p.15) is of incontestable benefit to their analytical and critical thinking skills, as well as their creativity.

According to Jean Piaget, children learn through interacting with their environment, through "making meaning of their experiences" (Aubrey and Riley, 2016, p.36). One might question, therefore, how effective it is for students to experience the world of Shakespeare from their desks. Spencer argues

that Shakespeare should instead be approached as a script, a "blueprint for performance" (Spencer, 2016, p.59). This approach will hook students, immersing them in the narratives of the plays and temporarily removing them from the space of the classroom. Moreover, students will find it much easier to create thoughtful and critical responses to the plays once they have heard them, seen them and been moved by them (Spencer, 2016, p.58). With the changes to the curriculum demanding that plays are covered in their entirety, teachers may claim that they simply do not have the time to employ a more active and creative approach to teaching Shakespeare. However, according to the National Curriculum, KS4 students should be able to "make an informed personal response [to texts], recognising that other responses to a text are possible and evaluating these" (Department for Education, 2014, p.15). Covering whole plays on an artificial level will not suffice: "true scholarship is not found in a dry surface of the plays, but in a deep conceptual and theoretical understanding and appreciation" (Spencer, 2016, p.57). Whilst time constraints might not allow each and every scene to be covered in an equal amount of depth, teachers should use their judgement to focus on the scenes that they consider most effective and engaging.

As mentioned earlier, students can struggle to navigate the storylines of the plays when reading them for the first time. Thomas, however, offers a creative solution: before the text is even introduced, the class should spend some time interacting with the storyline:

> A group of students mime the action of a story outline as read out loud by teacher, then re-mime it doublespeed as teacher re-reads it super-fast. Then improvise words of their own to match the mimed action. Then add some authentic lines from the text. They then select moments from the action as sculpted tableaux or freeze-frames to use as theatre posters. (2016, p.45)

By engaging with the storyline as a whole, students will find it easier to comment on the structure of the play as they begin to read it. For instance, if reading *Macbeth,* the teacher might ask their students why Shakespeare opens the play with the Witches. At this early point, students will consider the role that the Witches have in the events that unfold. Furthermore, Thomas' 'miming' activity can be taken a step further by encouraging students to form an emotional response to the play. If reading *Twelfth Night,* the teacher might ask students to imagine that they are Viola, lost in a strange land with no money and fearing that a family member is dead: all students will be able to relate to this fear of losing a loved one. The teacher could even use hot seating to explore Viola's character in more depth. If students feel emotional invested in the narratives of the play before they begin to engage with the text itself, their reading will be more fruitful and they will be better placed to offer their own, personal interpretations. Moreover, when students move on to reading the Shakespearean text, the play will feel more familiar and, as a result, less daunting.

When the text is approached, teachers should continue to implement an 'active' approach to studying the play. Mary Powell, whose innovative pedagogical methods were mentioned earlier, uses performance to make students more comfortable with the unfamiliar language of Shakespeare. One of her starter activities involves her giving each of her students a different line from a scene. She then asks her students to "mingle with one another, saying their lines as if they are taking part in different scenarios, which include being at a party with friends or sneaking into their house at 2am" (2010, p.7). This approach creates a 'safe space' in which the students become more confident, "experiencing Elizabethan language in their contexts" (ibid.). When the class read through and perform the scene later in the lesson, "students recognize their lines from this activity and feel a sense of ownership with the text, often exclaiming, "That's my line!" This transfer of ownership from teacher to student allows students to feel in control of their own learning" (Powell, 2010, p.7). Moreover, by "expressing the

same lines to suggest different situations," the students "learn how important subtext is" (ibid.); indeed, this is an important skill that will allow them to engage with the play at a higher level.

Instead of reading Shakespeare's text from behind desks, students should be encouraged to bring them to life through performance: after all, "Shakespeare's plays were not written to be studied in an English classroom" (Reynolds, 2012, p.163). One effective exercise is to ask small groups to perform a specific scene following different interpretations. Soltysek offers the example of Act 2, Scene 7 of *Macbeth* where, after Macbeth expresses his doubts about killing King Duncan to Lady Macbeth, the pair resolve to go ahead with the murder. One group will be given the proposition that Lady Macbeth is evil and, understanding her husband's weaknesses, bullies him into going forward with the plan (Soltysek, 2016, p.52). Another group will perform the scene following the interpretation that Macbeth is worried about being held accountable for the king's murder: "when his wife enters, he seems to back out of the scheme, knowing she will attempt to persuade him again. He manipulates her, so that in the event of him being caught, he can shift the blame to her" (ibid.). By providing the class with interpretations to follow, the teacher offers sufficient support, ensuring that students are not overwhelmed by Shakespeare's language. However, by offering multiple interpretations, the teacher reinforces the fact that there is no clear meaning and, as a result, the factor of uncertainty is introduced into the classroom, this being critical in the learning process (Johnston and Maurer, 2002). Once the groups have performed, the class can discuss which interpretation they find most effective and why, backing their points up with textual evidence. Students will have their opinions opposed by others in a secure and positive learning environment: in this way, they will encounter different perspectives. They will also be inspired to explore the text independently to support and develop their own arguments, acquiring key critical thinking skills in the process.

CONCLUSIONS

The Department for Education's changes to the National Curriculum have placed an increased emphasis on students reading the works of Shakespeare. The move has added fuel to an already heated debate on whether it is still necessary for young people to study the works of a white man that lived four centuries ago. Indeed, reports suggest that a significant majority of young students find Shakespeare irrelevant and uninspiring. Furthermore, many have argued that the changes to the curriculum will only discourage struggling students, negatively affecting their attitudes to learning and hindering their academic performance. However, this essay has argued that Shakespeare's works are both relevant and beneficial for students. The themes and emotions that run through the pages of the plays are timeless, surpassing barriers of sex, race, and class. Furthermore, the plays allow students to explore themselves in new ways, thus aiding personal growth and development (Gibson, 1998, p.4). Hence, it is not Shakespeare's place on the curriculum that is detrimental to students: rather, it is outdated pedagogical practices that see students being lectured at from afar. To quote Irish, "Shakespeare teaching in the 21st century must allow for more than reciting quotes and received opinions" (2011, p.18). The pedagogical approaches outlined in this essay allow for a more explorative, more meaningful experience in the classroom where all students are offered the opportunity to fully engage with the works of the Shakespeare. As Powell aptly states, "you don't need an expensive education to understand the words [of Shakespeare], but you do need the luxury of time, space and specialism to put his words on their feet and try them out" (2014). When taught effectively, Shakespeare is of incontestable benefit to students: his works offer young people the chance to gain essential critical thinking skills, to develop their communication skills, and to embrace their creativity.

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