

Re-posing the Question: Shakespeare in/and Education

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“Here let us breathe, and haply institute

A course of learning and ingenious studies.” *Taming of the Shrew* (1.1.8-9)

If there is one thing that every publication, study, or pedagogical resource exploring the use of Shakespeare in education shares is the posing and answering of one question: Why Shakespeare? Rex Gibson’s 1998 *Teaching Shakespeare*, likely the most influential resource for teaching Shakespeare in the last 20 years, dedicates an entire chapter to answering the question. In it, Gibson systematically explains, and outlines the relevance of Shakespeare’s stories and language in an effort to demonstrate that Shakespeare easily proves invaluable in classrooms.¹ Gibson’s text, part of the Cambridge School Shakespeare, a series he founded and to which he acted as editor, was one of the first to promote teaching Shakespeare, at all levels, through dramatic activities. Gibson approached Shakespeare as an educator and a thespian, approaching Shakespeare’s language with a mixture of “reverence and irreverence” in the certainty that if one “plays” with Shakespeare, he would easily persist in the classroom.² Or, as Elaine Harris writes of Gibson’s “energetic” approach, it released pupils and teachers “from their traditional position behind desks” by “engaging them in tasks as active learners.” Pupils could enjoy “the activity of play-acting, immersing themselves in character, grasping the dramatic possibilities of particular scenes, and experimenting with a variety of readings”³ Focusing *only* on close reading and poetic analysis had become increasingly less palatable than a physical engagement with the language that would *also* bring motivation.

In the intervening years, many educational resources for using Shakespeare followed and further developed Gibson’s ideas. Moreover, they were applied not only by teachers and schools, but by theatres and even special interest groups including, in the UK, The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, an independent UK charity that promotes itself as caring for “the world’s greatest Shakespeare heritage sites in Stratford-upon-Avon” dedicated to promoting “the enjoyment and understanding of his works, life and time all over the world.”⁴ Part of that mission includes offering online teaching resources, school visits, and residential courses. The Royal

Shakespeare Company also offers a wealth of online educational resources including the Shakespeare Learning Zone, streaming of popular “Live Lessons” that schools can register for, courses for school teachers at all levels, and higher education professional development, workshops for students, and educational visits. Moreover, they publish the highly successful RSC School Shakespeare series that includes student editions of the plays and teacher resources.⁵ The Globe, a competing theatre company, followed suit with their Globe Education Series, published in tandem with workshops for teachers and students held at The Globe, or via experts that travel to hold courses in schools and universities around the world.⁶ There are similar endeavours across the US, including Massachusetts theatre group Shakespeare & Company who holds both workshops for teachers and theatre festivals for schools,⁷ and the Folger Shakespeare Library, a research library and theatre that holds workshops, courses, and academic seminars but also publishes the Shakespeare Set Free educational series. The Folger even promotes a clearly outlined “Folger Method” on their website which builds up to nine “essential practices” that are, fundamentally, dramatic activities.⁸ Shifting Shakespeare from the school bench and into the theatre has proven not only popular, but profitable, for such groups, and they have inspired countless teachers and educators to work with Shakespeare.

More recently, James Stredder’s *The North Face of Shakespeare* (2009) offers a highly detailed, richly supported, teaching resource that builds upon this now well-established approach. His textbook provides a step-by-step approach to all areas of Shakespeare from narrative to language while underscoring the vital importance of teachers developing *their* skills in “using active and dramatic methods with students.”⁹ Despite the now established efficacy of active learning methods in teaching Shakespeare, and the popularity of educational resources from theatres, libraries, and museums, like Gibson before him, Stredder poses the same question, only he takes it one step further. He defines and defends the *process* if not the playwright whom he names a “central pillar of the classical curriculum.”¹⁰ For Stredder, educators must assume the question has been satisfactorily answered and begin, instead, with the question: “why use active methods to teach the plays?”¹¹ Editors of Shakespeare’s texts for use in the upper primary and secondary classrooms have followed suit moving away from the original, or scholarly, annotated texts that guided the reading and analysis of the language and poetry of the plays. Schools generally use simplified or modernized school editions, or adapted playscripts with some editions even including “translations” with the original and modernized versions side-by-side.

The quality and value of these texts vary greatly, yet such texts have allowed educators to address curricular requirements while overcoming the perceived difficulties of teaching Shakespeare in the original. Importantly, such texts have also allowed Shakespeare into the classrooms of *much* younger students through adaptations such as levelled readers, novelizations, and even picture books, that accommodate for all developmental and reading levels. The Arden Shakespeare, long known for their scholarly and performance editions, now also publish educational resources aimed at expanding the educational audience beyond higher education and upper secondary students alone. One of their most successful resources is Abigail Rokison's *Shakespeare for Young People: Productions, Versions, and Adaptations* (2013) which evaluates the quality of adapted texts and includes suggestions for their use in all classrooms. Yet she, too, poses the question with the very first sentence of the introduction.¹²

The Arden Shakespeare has published several of the Globe Theatre's educational resources, including Fiona Banks' highly successful *Creative Shakespeare: The Globe Education Guide to Practical Shakespeare*, first published in 2013, going through three printings in 2014 and two in 2018. Yet Banks *also* poses the question. First addressing the historical persistence of the question noting that "the case for teaching his work has been made eloquently throughout the ages" only to then astound readers with statistics from the World Shakespeare Festival which noted that a full 50% of the world's children study Shakespeare in schools.¹³ Shakespeare is widely recognizable, he is omnipresent—sought out in theatres, libraries and museums by throngs of international tourists. He has been translated into every modern language holding steady as the third most translated individual author of all time. In short, Shakespeare is international, and thereby present, and relevant, in classrooms outside of the anglophone world.

Bringing Shakespeare into the classroom through the medium in which he flourished— theatre—was a natural pedagogic response, yet the need to *still* ask "Why Shakespeare?" addresses the fundamental relevance and suitability of a playwright that cultures and societies around the world *assume* is relevant even as they question his appropriateness. Shakespeare's plays appear on stages around the world, and in every medium of popular culture across languages and skill levels, yet authors, critics, and educators still feel the need to defend their use of Shakespeare's texts, particularly for younger students, or students of English as a second language. In the ESL classroom, teachers face increasing demands on their time and resources, and perhaps no challenge is more difficult to navigate than changes to English language

curriculums. Requirements have systematically moved away from encouraging the use of literature in language teaching in preference for communicative methodologies that privilege realistic language input for its supposed value in global industry. Consequently, instead of reading fiction in the target language, textbooks and resources include “authentic” texts meant to imitate “real-life” communication. In the Norwegian educational context, in only ten years the national curriculum for the English subject has moved from mentioning Shakespeare by name to not mentioning literature at all in preference for the more prosaic term “text.”¹⁴

Whether in the ESL or native language environments, case studies and research articles presenting the use of Shakespeare in the classroom are rarely anything less than an unmitigated success. Teachers gain accolades and overwhelmingly positive reviews from students—if only because it surprises those who would never have dared to use Shakespeare. Such teachers inevitably impress others because of their “bravery” in using Shakespeare. Success with Shakespeare in the ESL classroom never fails to surprise those who think the effort and challenges outweigh the benefits, and so, keep asking “Why Shakespeare?” Many studies and research articles demonstrate the proven value of using Shakespeare in the ESL, EFL and ELL classrooms, many documenting dramatic academic results.¹⁵ For instance, Christina Porter’s “Words, Words, Words: Reading Shakespeare with English Language Learners” is intriguing in its consideration of the value of Shakespeare in improving literacy. Unsurprisingly, Porter begins her article with a dialogue between her and sceptical colleagues who ask “Why Shakespeare?” to which she answers, that ESL students should not be underestimated. Of her decision, she writes: “I wanted to attempt teaching Shakespeare to these students because so much of their time in school is spent preparing for and taking standardized tests to ‘ensure’ that they are not being left behind in their education.” As Porter notes, ESL students often encounter “dull” curriculums that are “rote, low-level, oriented around memorization of facts in isolation” leading her to conclude that “Shakespeare, unlike mundane and mechanical test prep or other ‘low-level’ curriculum would offer ESLs real and valuable experience with English.”¹⁶ Interestingly, Porter declares that her motivation for choosing Shakespeare specifically for ESL students is that “English language learners experiment with their second language every day” and thus Shakespeare “a word artist and inventor of language would be an ideal writer to use to further their exploration of English” and so she “spent a considerable amount of time having students experiment with, analyse, and define” his language.¹⁷

Mary Beth Pickett argued in a similar study that ESL students could gain fluency, as well as literacy, with Shakespeare. She begins her study with the same question, only phrased to negotiate the central element cited as the most challenging factor in using Shakespeare: “Why use complex materials that might at first seem daunting to both teachers and students alike?” Her article then offers a thorough description of the scaffolding and adaptative resources she used with ESLs at several levels. Using Shakespeare is “not only possible but beneficial,” she argues “with intermediate to advanced level L2s [...] who are learning to improve their English language communicative competence.”¹⁸ Citing a 3-year Harvard project that outlined why similar Shakespeare programs proved successful with native English speakers, Pickett argues that a “respect for complexity” was central to the pedagogy of such programs, which she believed would work just as well for her ESL students:

They were excited by the intensity of the themes and the physicality of the activities presented (stage-combat, movement, and games), yet they also appeared somewhat intimidated by the language when they first received written copies of words and shortened speeches from *Macbeth*. However, I found that this quickly changed once they became involved in the whole-body exercises and techniques [...] where students use physical movement with language to express their point of view.¹⁹

Working with the texts physically, through performance, Pickett argued, not only lessened this intimidation but encouraged “both speakers and listeners to connect to the language on a visceral level” and thereby created “a more powerful experience and deeper connection to the sounds of English than can be experienced with ordinary prose.” Moreover, the performative exercises allowed students “to speak lines in a way that does not become rote-like because they are acting out language with emotional responses that are encouraged to be spontaneous [...] that is, authentic acts of communication.”²⁰ Many studies demonstrate the benefits of working with Shakespeare with native speakers and second language learners alike, yet the scepticism persists, and they keep having to answer the question. The answers abound with some brief and dismissive, and others vacillating between lyrically defensive or rigidly pedagogic. But perhaps no answer will satisfy since the one thread that connects teachers that publish case studies, educational plans and resources defining the reasoning of their choice, and the application of

Shakespeare in classrooms, stems from personal inspiration. Simply put, teachers that love Shakespeare and his plays dedicate themselves to surmounting any obstacles they might face, which *will* include being asked, repeatedly, “Why Shakespeare?” by colleagues, administrators and students. Teaching resources follow suit by offering a wide selection of tools as the means by which teachers can follow their love of Shakespeare to motivate students, and in that process, surprise those who continue to question what is obvious to them.

Consequently, this special issue was developed with the knowledge that continuing engagement with the use of Shakespeare at all levels of education, and through a variety of didactic forms, expands our understanding of early modern texts, the processes of adaptation that inform how we negotiate those texts, and how these processes and their application influence the use of literature in teaching, and in language learning in particular. Most critically, this issue reconsiders the current context for the use of Shakespeare *and* education by addressing the many familiar obstacles that continue to appear with Shakespeare *in* education. Moreover, not just Shakespeare, but literature in general, particularly in ESL and EFL curriculums across the world. Outside of English departments, theatres, and scholarly communities, when people think of Shakespeare, they think of school. He is an author that *must* be taught as a school subject and it is perhaps likely that many people will encounter Shakespeare *only* in school. Consequently, most of the editions of Shakespeare’s plays published today, and books about Shakespeare’s life and times, are aimed at children and education rather than the scholarly- or mass market. This exemplifies the shift from reading Shakespeare for work or pleasure to considering Shakespeare primarily as an educational tool.²¹ To not consider this critical association is to miss an important, and increasingly pervasive, dimension of Shakespeare’s presence in our world. We must think of Shakespeare not only as playwright and poet, but as an educational subject of drama and poetry, and as the following articles demonstrate, as a resource for language learning.

I began a critical exploration of Shakespeare in/and Education at a roundtable I chaired at the 2016 conference of the *European Society for the Study of English* in Galway, Ireland. Initially, I invited a diverse group of researchers and educators that considered Shakespeare in Education in a variety of areas including children’s literature, theory, and classroom practice in Sweden and Norway. After the roundtable it became clear there was an interest in the topic beyond Scandinavia. I then began gathering this special issue beginning with the roundtable’s original contributors, and thereafter invited articles from the wider international community. My

goal was to include articles that consider the innovative ways educators use Shakespeare as a resource for learning language and culture, and that interrogate the ways in which Shakespeare remains a valuable resource in the second language classroom at all education, skill and age levels. The result is a special issue that considers Shakespeare from a surprising variety of inventive perspectives and interdisciplinary methodologies that capture the practical efforts of educators and researchers theoretically grounded in classroom practice, performance, and textual analysis. The articles are varied in educational contexts coming from the United States, Japan, Sweden and Norway exploring both native speaking and second language school environments, and from all skill and grade levels. Moreover, they consider Shakespeare's use in the classroom through a variety of formats and mediums from music and digital applications to adapted texts.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the articles share two critical elements: how Shakespeare is most effectively taught through active methodologies where the engagement with the language and stories is physical and interactive, and the use of adapted resources. While the use of performance methods in the classroom is now widely applied and accepted as effective, the increasing use of adapted texts draws attention to the hesitancy of using Shakespeare's original text because of the continued perception of the "difficulty" of his language. Michael Albright's article innovatively approaches modernized and contemporary "translations" of Shakespeare through Shakespeare's early celebration of the vagaries of language, *Love's Labour's Lost*, a play not only steeped in the variations of meaning but one that includes an educational institutions—the little academe—and one of the few Shakespearean schoolmasters—Holofernes. Albright rightly demonstrates that the difficulty of Shakespeare's language is only perception and to continue to avoid the original language is unnecessary if educators introduce his plays through "more active approaches to reading and built-in opportunities for performance" which "can mitigate the fear and misunderstanding elicited by textual readings." A suggestion that pervades these articles, and most of the recent publications on teaching Shakespeare.

At the intersection of literature and the dominance of technology lies the digital humanities, an increasingly vital field that explores how we engage with, and teach, the humanities –collaboratively and interactively. John Misak and Kevin LaGrandeur, from the New York Institute of Technology, introduce their thought process, and methodological, and educational plan in designing and developing an Augmented Reality computer application game that engaged students with the characters, story, and setting of *Hamlet*. Misak and LaGrandeur

wisely asked both teachers and students for input in their development of the app, and one comment connects closely to how we engage with literature, in and outside of the digital world. “What am I going to *do*?” a student asked of the developers in an earlier version of their article, a statement which roots student engagement with activity from the outset. The impulse to “do” something—to be active—with education is critical, and Misak and LaGrandeur address the student’s question with a thought-provoking game application that privileges and encourages interactivity. Much like Albright asked in his article what it means for students to “do Shakespeare” in the classroom, active approaches connect all the articles at some level, and most overtly through the performance-based teaching methodologies.

To varying extents, all the articles include some engagement with translation. Albright considers the translation of English to English adaptations and Misak and LaGrandeur consider how to translate the experience of *Hamlet* into a digital format. The remaining articles consider some form of performance-based teaching methodology, and *all* performance requires some translation and adaptation, even if only cutting Shakespeare’s original for student and classroom performances or drama activities. Kelly Duquette, John Gullede, and Mary Taylor Mann of Emory University consider the intricate connections between translation and performance in their intriguing article. Their community-based “Puck Project” offered Shakespeare performance programs to children at a summer camp not merely to introduce Shakespeare and his plays, but to “translate” Shakespeare into a program of ethics. Their goal was “to engage and cultivate skills relevant to functioning within a community, formulating and expressing ideas as a team, engaging in constructive dialogue, reading and responding to the emotions of others, and accessing and attending to emotions in oneself.” Consequently, they approached Shakespeare not as the goal, but as a tool to facilitate “ethical deliberation” through “embodied translation.” Insightful and engaging, their article demonstrates the potential for performing Shakespeare even for very young children and dismantles the premise that Shakespeare can only be used as an example of English literature and culture. The “Puck Project” experience should offer educators who might deem Shakespeare too difficult at any level a critical challenge to consider the ways that we might “translate” such perceived difficulty into effective interdisciplinary educational tools—in this case, Shakespeare is translated into a model for “lived experiences” through performance.

For Kohei Uchimaru, of Toyo University, translation is a more direct concern. His article considers Japanese EFL education which has, like other EFL curricula, shifted to privileging utilitarian and business-oriented language learning over literary studies, relegating literature to irrelevance despite any prestige it might offer. Uchimaru demonstrates the student preference for Shakespeare over rote translation or non-literary texts, noting how with *Merchant of Venice* “students not only enjoyed reading the story, but also felt that the engaging story would better facilitate their language acquisition than newspaper articles or essays.” In his article, he discusses not only his application of Royal Shakespeare Company performance, active methods and other adapted teaching resources in Japanese schools, but the deliberate and strategic translation of those methods and resources to the Japanese culture and educational context. Such methods included many levels of translation from language, to play script, to cultural translation of the play’s themes, all while remaining true to the language and narrative.

The three final articles in this special issue focus squarely on teaching Shakespeare through performance-based teaching in the Scandinavian ESL context. The first describes a surprising interdisciplinary project that approaches Shakespeare not through text or performance alone, but through the music of his poetry. Marthe Sofie Pande-Rolfsen and Anne-Lise Heide, both teacher educators in Norway, brought together students of the music and English departments in a remarkable collaborative project in which groups of students used music, instruments, and improvisation to perform scenes from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The results offered students a surprising opportunity to engage with Shakespeare’s language through non-conventional dramatic activities, and to gain appreciation for the pedagogical value of cross-disciplinary collaborative teaching in that students studying to be ESL teachers had to perform music, and students studying to be music teachers had to develop their oral English skills. Translating Shakespeare into music, theatre, and movement allowed for an underlying lesson of collaboration much like the “Puck Project” used performance to engage with empathy and cooperation.

Also teaching university level students, Kiki Lindell works with performance methodologies, but takes it one step further. Instead of adapting Shakespeare into distinct projects or learning goals, she adapted her course to Shakespeare. For twenty years she has led a course titled “Drama in Practice: Shakespeare on Stage” at Lund University in Sweden. Focusing on a single play in both textual and performative detail, the course includes the lectures and

writing assignments like a conventional Shakespeare university course, only it culminates in a full-length theatrical performance of the given play. Lindell's article offers a captivating experiential discussion of several of these performances and demonstrates. Through testimonials and examples, she demonstrates how the students' depth of understanding exceeds the play's themes as they apply to different cultures, and how the sound of poetry influences meaning through active performance. Consequently, students come away not only with a very close familiarity with Shakespeare and his language but having actively improved all four of the basic language skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Language learning, through Shakespeare, is clearly proven as not only possible but motivating, engaging, and effective.

Finally, my own contribution to this special issue brings in the experience of Norwegian Primary School teacher Ellen Marie Kvaale, who I interviewed about her successful three-year Shakespeare project at Hoberg Primary School. Her experience is startlingly similar to Lindell's, only in an EFL primary school environment. Kvaale's dedication and belief in the potential of using Shakespeare with the very youngest, and her rigorous planning, resulted in several successful student performances brought about through clever collaborative writing sessions through which Kvaale's young students worked together to translate the adapted play into scenes that they then performed and even a few publications. Comparing the two experiences exemplify, if anything, how age and skill level matter very little to the efficacy of using Shakespeare to improve language skills.

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Notes

¹ Rex Gibson. *Teaching Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

² Martin Blocksidge. "Shakespeare: Iconic or Relevant?" *Shakespeare in Education*. (London: Continuum, 2003), 14.

³ Elaine Harris, "New town Shakespeare: A comprehensive school approach at Key Stages Three and Four" in *Shakespeare in Education*. (London: Continuum, 2003), 42.

⁴ The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. "About Us." [shakespeare.org.uk](https://www.shakespeare.org.uk) <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/about-us/>

⁵ Royal Shakespeare Company. "Education." [rsc.org.uk](https://www.rsc.org.uk) <https://www.rsc.org.uk/education/> (accessed 20.12.2019)

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⁷ Shakespeare & Company. "Education." [shakespeare.org](https://www.shakespeare.org) <https://www.shakespeare.org/> (accessed 20.12.2019)

⁸ The Folger Shakespeare Library. "The Folger Method." [folger.edu](https://www.folger.edu) <https://www.folger.edu/the-folger-method> (accessed 20.12.2019)

⁹ James Stredder. *The North Face of Shakespeare: Activities for Teaching the Plays*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xi.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, xvi.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 3.

¹² Rokison, Abigail. *The Arden Shakespeare: Shakespeare for Young People: Productions, Versions, and Adaptations* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1.

¹³ Fiona Banks. *The Arden Shakespeare Creative Shakespeare: The Globe Education Guide to Practical Shakespeare*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 9-12.

¹⁴ Utdanningsdirektoratet. "Læreplan i engelsk (ENG1-01)" and "Læreplan i engelsk (ENG1-02)" [udir.no https://www.udir.no/kl06/ENG1-01/Hele/Komplett_visning](https://www.udir.no/kl06/ENG1-01/Hele/Komplett_visning) (accessed 20.12.2019). Until 2013, the Subject Curriculum for English included this statement of purpose: "Å lære om den engelsktalende verden vil gi et godt grunnlag for å forstå verden omkring oss og utviklingen av engelsk som et verdensspråk. Engelskspråklig litteratur, fra barnerim til Shakespeare, kan gi leseglede for livet og en dypere forståelse for andre og seg selv." [To learn about the English-speaking world will give a good foundation for understanding the world around us and the development of English as a global language. English language literature, from nursery rhymes to Shakespeare, can provide a lifelong joy of reading and a deeper understanding of oneself and others.] The current curriculum now

includes a core element titled: “*Møte med engelskspråklige tekster,*” or [Encounters with English Language Texts] with the only reference to literature listed as “*skjønnlitterære*” [Fiction].

¹⁵ The most substantial recent collection would be Maria Eisenmann and Christiane Lütge’s *Shakespeare in the EFL Classroom* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter 2014). Though focused on the German educational context, the articles include intriguing considerations of Shakespeare teaching resources in application at every level of EFL education. Additional relevant case studies and articles, across countries and cultures, include: Dietz (1995), Straughan (1996), Henderson (2010), Lee (2010), Irish (2011), Cheng Yi-Mei and Winston (2011), Winston (2015), Dyches (2017), Guenther (2017).

¹⁶ Elaine Porter. “Words, Words, Words: Reading Shakespeare with English Language Learners,” *English Journal* 99.1 (2009), 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁸ Mary Beth Pickett. “Teaching Shakespeare to ELLs to Develop Fluency.” *Selected Proceedings Michigan TESOL* (October 2011), 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

²¹ Robert Eaglestone. *Doing English: A Guide for Literature Students*. (London: Routledge 2002), 77