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A Synthesis of Shakespeare Teaching Methods:

Technology and Performance

Shakespeare has understandably found an unshakeable place in the modern classroom. At the same time, however, many students (and some teachers) recoil at the thought of Shakespeare education, preferring texts that are easier to read; or, if forced to read Shakespeare, they often rely solely on online synopses rather than reveling in his actual written word. How can teachers overcome this fear of the Bard? How can they help their students enjoy his plays, while also acquiring important literary and compositional skills? While a large number of teachers continue to teach Shakespeare using the traditional method, a better approach would be one that synthesizes performance-based and technology-based methods; this approach would not only increase student abilities to understand, interpret, and discuss Shakespeare, but also aid in the development of presentation and online citizenship skills.

Different approaches to teaching Shakespeare abound both in scholarly discussions and in online dialogue. One teacher created a blog specifically for listing tips of how to best teach Shakespeare plays (Sheehy). Although different teaching methods exist, many teachers still prefer to teach Shakespeare in the “traditional way.” That is, students read the play while at home, come to class, and either discuss the content, or have the teacher tell them what different passages mean. This was the experience of Kat Moulton, an English Teaching Major at Brigham Young University. She explains how she was taught *Romeo and Juliet* as a freshman in high

school: “read at home, come to class and discuss. Or in this case, mostly lectures from the teacher” (Moulton). Often, after teaching in this manner, teachers will test on broad details of the play, and students will move on to the next text. To be able to more fully engage students and connect to their lives, teachers must teach in more effective ways. Scholars, in discussing this educational dilemma, have largely gravitated towards two general approaches to teaching Shakespeare: incorporating student performance, and incorporating modern technologies. A synthesis of these two methods would be the best way to utilize the benefits of both of these approaches while adding others, engaging students, and connecting learning to their personal lives. To understand how a synthesis of these methods would work in practice, each of these approaches must be analyzed in isolation.

Performance has, for a long time, been thought of as an important teaching method for Shakespeare’s plays. The main idea behind this movement is summarized in the words of a notable critic: “the Shakespearean text is not a poem to be interrogated for its themes, its symbolism, its imagery, but a script” (Sauer 35). Without considering the theatrical elements of Shakespeare’s plays, students miss out on important literary and production aspects. For instance, many ironies in speech can be brought out only in theatrical interpretation. An example of this can be found in National Theater Live’s production of *Hamlet*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch (Friedman). In this production, Jim Norton, portraying Polonius, performs a lengthy passage quite rapidly, quickly running over words and sentences, culminating in a declaration that “I will be brief” (Shakespeare 2.2.94). This paradox in his language is advanced by his claim in the midst of the speech that “Brevity is the soul of wit” (92). If a student merely reads this passage without considering the performance aspect of the speech, the chance to understand and

analyze this paradox may be completely missed. Thus, performance is a gateway in which to find new interpretations, and therefore more meaning, within a play.

To emphasize the importance of incorporating performance into interpreting Shakespeare's plays, some teachers have allowed or even required students to perform within the classroom. There are many benefits to this kind of teaching approach. One scholar suggests that student performance is inherently collaborative, a tactic that aids learning. He claims that "student achievement . . . can be raised through interaction with other learners" (Heller 9). He also claims that creating a performance together would be a form of problem solving, a valuable skill in today's society. Remarking on another positive reason to use student performance in the classroom, Sharon Beehler claims that "reading is a cognitive activity not limited to printed texts but that is undertaken whenever we engage with stimuli" (202). Although in this passage, she is referring to film adaptations of Shakespeare, students can certainly apply the same to performances of Shakespeare. Therefore, allowing students to arrange their own Shakespeare productions not only allows for collaboration, problem solving and leadership, but also for reading and interpretation skills.

While some teachers have found success in engaging students through performance, other teachers have found success in connecting to students through incorporating technology with Shakespeare teaching. One of these ways of incorporating technology is to include filmed productions of Shakespeare within the classroom. Film can bring professional productions of Shakespeare to the student without inordinate cost and time commitments. Daniel Robertson, an English Graduate from Utah State University, relates how his first exposure to Shakespeare in high school consisted of his teacher arranging for their class to see The Actors from the London Stage's production of *As You Like It*. This production sparked his interest in Shakespeare and

helped motivate him to study English as an academic discipline. While not all classes are able to see professional productions of staged Shakespeare plays, many classes do have the resources to show filmed productions. Film can be applied well when using several different films to teach the same text, especially “when several powerful, effective interpretations of the same play exist” (Rodes 113). Using several different films would allow students to realize the extent of different interpretations, and to find their own interpretation in the midst of this multitude. However, while incorporating technology into teaching is an important skill for teachers, reliance on filmed productions alone can be damaging for students. For example, watching only one film adaptation of one Shakespeare play can have negative effects by cementing a single interpretation in the mind of the student, rather than allowing him or her to see multiple variations. In addition, if teachers utilize film but do not include analysis of the text in the activity, that time may be wasted. While film certainly has its place in the classroom, other technologies may offer additional benefits while simultaneously fulfilling the same purpose.

These other modern technologies help bridge the connection between student learning and student life outside of the classroom. Some teachers have found useful ways to integrate these kinds of modern technology. For example, Alyssa Dunn, a teacher, created a slideshow presentation on different technologies that could be used in the teaching of *Macbeth*, including incorporating podcasts, blogs, Facebook, and YouTube (Dunn). Owing to how recently many of these technologies have been developed, teaching methods for incorporating them are not yet well established. Notwithstanding, teachers have found them helpful in different ways. YouTube allows students to find productions of Shakespeare from a myriad of sources (varying in interpretation of the text, quality, and cultural adaptation). Social media sites and blogs allow for comments and discussion to be executed online, whether inside or outside of the classroom. One

critic explains how “subjecting Shakespeare to the tools of digital technology is not only useful but also natural” (Samburg 74). Students generally will already have a connection to using these kinds of technologies before they come into the classroom. Incorporating them into their learning will be natural for students and will connect them through familiar methods to possibly unfamiliar territory. It is a blending of old and new, bridging the gap between what students know and what they have yet to learn.

If both performance and technology based teaching approaches have so many benefits, why are more teachers not utilizing them? An unofficial straw poll posted on the social media website Facebook revealed that out of thirty-six polled, only twenty had participated in performing Shakespeare in any English high school class. The other sixteen, assumed to have taken four years of high school English classes, did not. Furthermore, only nine of those thirty-six participated in any kind of online discussion or produced media relating to Shakespeare. Most of these participants came from middle-class backgrounds with high access to technological and educational resources. There are likely a few reasons why teachers are not taking advantage of these approaches.

Older teachers may not utilize technology because it is “off-putting,” considering the “generational gap” (Moulton) and how quickly technological platforms change. They may not be trained in the newest social media platform or video-based website. They may fear students using class time to use social media in ways that do not contribute to learning. Teachers may not utilize performance because of the added time it takes for students to perform compared to simply reading at home. (Indeed, reading an entire play in class would take hours.) Students may feel hesitant to speak aloud or to allow themselves to be vulnerable enough to perform a scene or

even a speaking part in front of the class. Whatever the case, teachers seem hesitant to employ these kinds of methods.

A synthesis of technological and performance based teaching methods would not only overcome many of these potential drawbacks, but it would also allow for more benefits beyond what either method could reach alone. The proposed plan for implementing this idea would be as follows: first, a group of students would either choose or be assigned a scene from the Shakespeare play being read in class. The students would then produce and film their own acting of this scene, while interpreting the text to portray their characters through a certain lens. The students would post this scene on social media, and would be required to comment on other groups' posts before class. During class, the teacher would show the scenes, allowing the class to discuss elements of production and interpretation, especially between similar scenes. This proposed plan would compel students to understand and interpret the scene, develop speaking, listening, and presentation skills, and learn how to become better online citizens.

First, this proposed plan would allow—and even compel—students to interpret Shakespeare's text to be able to act as specific characters. To see how this would operate, consider a case study concerning Edmund, a complex character from *King Lear*. Edmund's motivations can be interpreted in several ways. Students, faced with the responsibility to portray Edmund in a production of a scene from *King Lear*, would have to read Edmund through one of these lenses.

One interpretation that students might take is to view Edmund as obsessed and insecure about his illegitimacy. In his soliloquy at the beginning of act one, scene two, Edmund continually repeats the words “bastard” and “base” in different forms. This can be seen most explicitly when he says, “Why brand they us / with base? With baseness? Bastardy? Base, base?”

(9-10). Three main rhetorical devices lend meaning to this repeated phrase. A student could find one or more of these within the text to enhance his interpretation of how to act as the character. The first of these rhetorical devices is polyptoton, or the repetition of a word in different forms—in this case, “Base” and “baseness.” It seems as if Edmund is looking for other words to say, changing his forms of speech, but is stuck on the idea of being “base.” He is obsessed with the idea of being a “base” person, but he cannot formulate any other words to describe it. This connects to the second device that is used here, which is alliteration, with emphasis on plosive sounds. The repeated “b” of “base, “bastardy” as well as “brand” and “brother,” found earlier, serve to reinforce the emotion of the soliloquy. Along with the polyptoton showing Edmund’s obsession, the plosives show an emotional anger, betrayal, and investment accompanying his obsession with his own illegitimacy.

This obsession with baseness, as shown through polyptoton and plosive alliteration, is further emphasized through contrast with an opposite idea. After Edmund goes on about baseness, he then repeats another phrase several times: “As to th’legitimate—fine word, ‘legitimate’— / Well, my legitimate . . . Edmund the base / Shall top th’legitimate” (18-21). This acts as a foil to the “base” repetition of the first half of the speech, showing how he is just as obsessed with the contrast between himself and Edgar as he is by his own treatment. Furthermore, not only does he recognize the contrast between himself and Edgar, but he also feels the desire to overthrow, or “top,” his brother. The student, through one or more of these rhetorical devices, would decide to portray Edmund as someone who is obsessed and insecure about his place in his family and his society, which drives his motive to overthrow his brother and his father. (Although students may or may not know the technical terms for these rhetorical devices, they would still be encouraged to find their interpretation through something that they

recognize within the text.) The students' choices in dress, behavior, and Edmund's relationships with other characters would therefore be directly influenced through their reading.

By finding and interpreting important interpretation within the text, this student, or group of students, would more fully understand and interpret the play as a whole. At the same time, other students would be free to interpret the play differently. While this student may find evidence for Edmund's insecurity and psychological distress, another student may find the opposite to be true: that Edmund is inherently confidently evil and that his motives grow out of his own selfishness rather than out of a psychological response to his own insecurities. Both students would portray their own interpretations of this scene, post their own productions of it on a social media platform, and the class would be able to watch both. The class could then discuss the character of Edmund, and if the different interpretations are justified by the text itself. This approach would not only encourage students to justify character decisions through the text, but it would also stimulate class to find if these justifications were valid.

Next, in addition to providing students with an opportunity and assignment to interpret the scene they are assigned, this proposed plan would also teach students important skills, including speaking and listening skills. The Common Core Standards for juniors and seniors in high school list the goal of students being able to "initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions," and "present information, findings, and supporting evidence . . . such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning" ("Common Core"). This kind of approach to teaching would allow students to fulfill both of these Common Core goals, helping the student to more fully participate in discussion and personal communication skills. By having online discussion about each specific scene, students would be able to collaborate their ideas about the validity of interpretations and the importance of spoken drama. By having class discussions

about scenes in relation to one another, students would learn how to better speak and listen in a personal, collaborative way.

This proposed plan would also help students to develop presentation skills. Each group of students would introduce their project in front of the class before watching it, allowing them to practice public speaking skills. Through doing this, students would “make strategic use of digital media . . . in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest,” another important part of the Common Core standards (“Common Core”) and of English education in general. This strategic use of digital media may be a transition point for shy students to develop public speaking skills without having to individually stand in front of the class. Through this synthesized approach to teaching Shakespeare scenes, students would also synthesize public speaking, presentation, and discussion skills.

In addition to the skill already mentioned, the ones usually developed in English classes, students using this method would also grow in their abilities to appropriately contribute to an online discussion. In contemporary society, cyber bullying is becoming an ever-more increasing threat. By containing student submissions to class-approved websites and by restricting anonymity, teachers would be able to closely monitor the comments made online and teach students when comments are approaching bullying or are otherwise inappropriate. This project would hopefully instill within students a desire to positively contribute to other videos, posts, and submissions online. As the students continue to life beyond high school, knowing appropriate Internet behavior will become increasingly crucial to their development and the future relationships.

There are plenty of other reasons this would be effective; among these are memorization, validation, and creativity. This proposed plan would require students to memorize lines of

Shakespeare, something that is missing in many curricula in high schools today, yet is still an important skill for students to develop. By having students post positive comments about one another's videos, students would receive validation for their efforts by sources other than the teacher, which could be very important to student self-esteem and self-worth. Peer-related validation can often mean more than teacher-related validation, especially during these teenage years. Finally, students would be able to more fully express themselves creatively through this project, another aspect that is often missing from recent official curricula. Teachers are already seeing these benefits and directing these kinds of projects in their classrooms. Some of their efforts can be seen posted on media sites.

Two good examples of class projects similar to the one described in this paper stand out on the popular video website YouTube. One of these includes a group of students who perform a scene from *Macbeth*. These students use creative license to replace any mention of "sword" with "light saber" (Lundeen). This is an obvious reference to *Star Wars*, which is a wonderful side effect. All other words of Shakespeare are kept to the script in the video. This kind of artistic expression is allowed and encouraged in the method described here. The students in this video are engaging with the text to the degree that they feel comfortable adapting it to a more familiar medium. Although the light saber sounds are distracting and repetitive, the students portray the memorized lines in an understandable way, showing that they, too, understand and have taken ownership of the scene. Similarly, in a video posted for another class, three girls perform the first scene of *Macbeth* (Santos). This scene is accompanied by music and interesting camerawork. The camera pans around the actors in the scene, letting the light glow from behind them. This is important not only to help the students interpret their own scenes, but it includes something that the class would be able to discuss while watching it. The laptop hiding behind the flowers give

away that the students did not memorize the lines, but the fact that they understand what is going on can be told through their speaking of the lines.

Both of these productions embody the ideas that have been laid out in this paper. One aspect that they both lack according to this plan (at least on the YouTube website) is online comments from other students. Adding this dimension would aid both of these projects by allowing students to preliminarily look for interpretation and production aspects to bring to class, and also give the student actors validation for their efforts in the scene. However, these productions both show the importance of students seeing Shakespeare's works as plays rather than texts, memorizing and understanding the words of the Bard, and interpreting his words through specific creative acting and production methods.

Scholars and teachers alike have promoted both performance and technology integration for years. Performance engages students by allowing them to collaborate, interpret, create, and present to the class. Technology allows students to more fully connect learning to their daily lives. Through a synthesis of these two methods, students not only receive a synthesis of these benefits, but also develop skills in speaking, listening, and discussing; grow in their abilities to be positively contributing members of the online community; and enhance self-esteem through peer-presented validating comments. These skills and abilities will aid the students in life beyond high school, while also promoting a positive experience with Shakespeare. Shakespeare education is a foundation of the modern classroom. Students deserve the best chance to enjoy his plays through a combination of the most effective and engaging teaching approaches.

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