Teaching Shakespeare to Students Who Need Extra Support

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Students of all ages and with various reading skills who are learning to read a Shakespeare play will be supported by the approaches explored during the institute, including table reads, tableaux, and performances of short scenes. Below are some further ways to support students who find it particularly difficult to decipher a Shakespeare play.

Audio Recordings

Any audio recording of a play performed by trained Shakespeare actors can be an enormous boost to a student having trouble understanding a play.

I find the Caedmon recordings particularly helpful. Here, for example, is their recording for *Macbeth*, and here is their recording of *The Tempest*. Directing students to a recording you have heard is key because students sometimes find recordings on the internet in which a single actor reads all of the parts. It is far more helpful to students when the characters are distinguished by different actors' voices.

When students feel lost trying to read a Shakespeare play on their own, I recommend that they listen to a full scene once through as they follow along in their text. As time permits, or an assignment demands, students can then reread the scene more slowly as they consult the editor's notes.

Like any performance, an audio recording presents one of many possible interpretations. Thus, when I introduce an audio recording to students, I play a few lines from it, invite students to say the lines in alternate ways, and discuss the differences in interpretation.

When pressed for time with a class of students who have difficulty reading Shakespeare aloud fluently, I sometimes alternate between having students read aloud and playing a recording as students follow along in their text.

Summaries

Knowing the basics of a play's plot and characters can be grounding for students who feel overwhelmed by the language or details of a Shakespeare play. I try to steer students away from summaries that offer interpretations of the play. Two reliable sources for summaries are:

1. The Royal Shakespeare Company ("RSC") website
   Here is the RSC's summary of King Lear, for instance. And here is their summary of *Romeo and Juliet*. I like that the RSC's summaries include direct quotations of the play's language.
2. The Folger Shakespeare Library website
   Even if you don't teach from the printed Folger editions (which include summaries), you can find a synopsis of the full play and of each scene on the Folger website. Here, for instance, is the Folger's synopsis of *King Lear*. And here is the synopsis of *King Lear* act 1, scene 1.

Children's Books

Some students find it easiest to understand the plot of a Shakespeare play as told in a children's book. Such children's books include the classic Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* but also more recent retellings such as Bernard Miles's *Favorite Tales from Shakespeare*. *Tales from Shakespeare* is available from Penguin Random House, and you can find a digital facsimile of it here.

Although such children's books may be more engaging than a summary, they also take more liberties with the text as they attempt to make the plays "age-appropriate." Once your students begin to read the play itself, you can engage them in conversations about what the children's versions include and omit.

Graphic Novels

Some students have read more comic books and graphic novels than any other kind of book, so this format can be particularly helpful to them. I particularly like Gareth Hind's graphic novel adaptations of Shakespeare plays because he uses Shakespeare's language.

The disadvantage of students' reading a graphic novel is that seeing an illustrator's vision of the play's characters and world can interfere with their envisioning the play's world for themselves. I ask students to story-board a very short scene from the play and to reflect on how their own vision of the characters compares to that of the graphic novel's author. I also show students a variety of images of the play's characters from a selection of illustrated editions.

Film Productions

When a student continues to struggle after reading a summary and listening to an audio recording, I sometimes recommend that they watch a film version. Seeing a film can make it harder for students to envision the film on their own, but seeing and hearing actors speak the play's language in a specific setting can be helpful in a way nothing else is. So that students avoid equating any one director's vision with the play itself, I show two or three versions of at least one scene and invite students to make observations about the director's choices. For instance, when teaching *A Midsummer Night's Dream* I have shown students scenes from Max Rheinhardt's 1935 film and Peter Hall's 1968 film.

Sometimes I invite students to imagine themselves a director and ask them to cast contemporary actors in their version of a film of the play. I ask them to find clues in the play that support their casting choices and to discuss how an actor's celebrity and previous roles would affect their presentation of a Shakespeare character. If audiences see Chris Rock playing *Macbeth*'s porter or *Hamlet*'s gravedigger, for instance, how much does the audience think about Chris Rock and how much about the porter or the gravedigger? What happens to the status of a character like the porter or gravedigger if played by a famous comic actor? Such discussions can help students ponder how an Elizabethan audience might have experienced a famous clown like Robert Armin.

Other Approaches and Exercises

Reading Excerpts from a Play

Guiding students' reading of a Shakespeare play can take a great deal of time. If you don't have enough time to teach an entire play, consider choosing scenes or parts of scenes to work on in detail: you can fill students in on the other parts of the play by telling them the needed background. I have found that students find reading and interpreting part of the text for themselves far more rewarding than reading the entirety of a translated edition of the play, such as a *No Fear Shakespeare* edition.

Learning A Speech by Heart

Sometimes asking students who have the most difficulty reading Shakespeare to memorize a speech—even before they begin reading the play—works magic. Learning a speech by heart can give students, especially those new to Shakespeare, the confidence to read Shakespeare's language. I sometimes begin a play by having a class of students all learn one speech.

Imagining the Play's World

Assignments that invite students to use their observations and their imaginations to extend the world of the play include:

- writing an imagined letter from one character to another
- writing an imagined diary entry for a character
- writing an imagined lost soliloquy for a character who does not speak one
- writing a short scene that does not appear in the play
- adapting and filming a short scene *(Many students know how to do this with their mobile phones.)*