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# The Classroom as Rehearsal Room: an Evidence Informed Approach to Teaching Shakespeare

Par Jacqui O'Hanlon

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## Résumé

Cet article expose certaines des conclusions que nous avons tirées à la Royal Shakespeare Company sur l'influence que la langue de Shakespeare et la pédagogie inspirée par le travail de répétitions peut avoir sur les attitudes, les aspirations et les réussites des enfants et des adolescents. Ces résultats ont été obtenus grâce au partenariat que la RSC entretient depuis longtemps avec des écoles et des théâtres régionaux à travers l'Angleterre. A l'origine, ce lien s'appelait « Learning and Performance Network », à présent il s'intitule « The Associate Schools Programme ». *Much Ado About Nothing* est utilisé comme texte de référence dans cet article pour illustrer certaines de nos méthodes de travail avec les étudiants et les enseignants.

## Mots-Clés

William Shakespeare, Beaucoup de bruit pour rien, éducation, acquisition de connaissances, désavantage, aspirations, pédagogie en salle de répétition.

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## Texte intégral

> The beauty of Shakespeare is that he makes it up to you to think and in our education system now, we need to ask our students to think more. [1]

Take a moment to think about how you were first introduced to Shakespeare. Was it through family or through school? Where did it happen; in the classroom or in a theatre? What was the experience like? Did you hate it, or did you love it? Did you immediately connect with the play? Or did your appreciation grow over time? Who or what helped you develop your relationship with Shakespeare's work? For the majority of students in England, Wales and many other countries around the world, school *is* where first encounters with Shakespeare and other great works of art and literature are guaranteed to happen. School is where we often decide whether Shakespeare (and, if we are lucky, art, music, dance or film) are

things we feel confident about engaging with and want to find out more about or things from which we feel excluded.

The Royal Shakespeare Company has a national remit; a responsibility to create deep, wide-reaching impact across the country. We are committed to working hand-in-hand with teachers, schools, universities, theatre partners, community leaders and young people to achieve this. Through all our work and partnerships, we focus on addressing the challenges of unequal access to the arts and culture in this country. Shakespeare belongs to everyone, and we know that experiencing his plays, by working with them in a classroom or rehearsal room, by performing them in a village hall, on the stage of a regional theatre or in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and coming to believe that the stories they tell are about you and your life, can be an unmatched passport to genuine inclusion and powerful change.

Over the past ten years, we have been working with schools, teachers, and students across the UK and around the world finding out why Shakespeare matters in education. We have been exploring the impact his work can have on the educational and life chances of young people. And we have been finding out what the artistic practice of the Royal Shakespeare Company can say to teachers and students in the classroom about the teaching of and learning about Shakespeare, and about what happens when rehearsal-room pedagogy becomes classroom practice.

It might be useful to first put in context what we know about the impact of the arts more generally on young people. Research from the Cultural Learning Alliance [2] tells us that students from low-income families who take part in arts activities at school are three times more likely to get a degree, twice as likely to volunteer, and 20% more likely to vote as young adults. That research also reminds us that the language development of a child by the age of five is still the greatest predictor of whether that child will escape poverty later in life.

## RSC and Shakespeare in Education

The purpose of the RSC is very simple. It is to create the finest experience of Shakespeare in performance and to share that with the widest audience in Stratford-upon-Avon, across the UK and around the world. As a company, we place a special emphasis on ensuring that children and young people have vivid, accessible, and enjoyable experiences of Shakespeare's. We work in a very diverse range of schools across the UK, with different age groups and types of students and teachers, from early years to sixth formers, and from the most reluctant learners to the most able.

Since the introduction of a National Curriculum in 1989, Shakespeare has been a compulsory part of every young person's secondary education. We estimate that in any one year up to two million young people are studying his plays. But we also know that Shakespeare is complex and challenging; working with his plays can be daunting for many young people, as well as for teachers, actors, and directors.

## Our Pedagogy: the Classroom as Rehearsal Room

The roots of our work lie in the very strong connections we make between the rehearsal rooms in which our actors and directors work and the classrooms in which we all teach. There are many parallels between actors on a typical first day of rehearsals and the students any of us meet in a classroom when we start to work on a Shakespeare text. Actors will feel anxious at the start of rehearsals; sometimes they will think they are not clever enough to play Shakespeare, or that they do not understand the language. Some of them will feel the work is no longer relevant, that it cannot speak to a contemporary audience and certainly cannot speak to their own lives and experiences. But we always see a transformation happen in actors who feel that way; they move from feeling excluded from Shakespeare's world and work to being able to hold their own with any

Shakespeare academic in a discussion about the play they are in. We thought, if it can happen to actors, it can happen with students too.

What defines a good rehearsal room? The best rehearsal rooms are places of exploration, learning and shared discovery, in which a company of actors and their director work together to bring Shakespeare's plays to life. To do that, actors need to have a deep understanding of the text. They need to get the language 'in their bodies' as it were; they need to be open to the range of interpretive possibilities and choices that the text offers them. They work very actively and playfully, connecting mind, voice, and body. Shakespeare's language is dense and complex; it is not an easy read. So, actors need to get the words off the page, to play with the text by getting up on their feet and speaking the words aloud. They will play with broken down chunks of text, try out different ways of saying it; they will work with images, using their bodies to bring language physically to life. They will work with constraints: what happens if that character cannot move? what happens if you only whisper the scene? They try out different ways of playing with the play; fundamentally it is an embodied learning experience.

What does this work look like in a classroom? Creating a company requires deliberately building a spirit of one group with a shared purpose – this is about *us* rather than *me*. We build this spirit through shared, collaborative tasks that depend on and value everyone's contributions. The ways in which we work encourage young people to discuss, speculate and question: there is rarely one right answer. This process requires and develops critical thinking.

## Making the World of the Play

We explore the whole world of the play: we tackle the language, characters, and motivation, setting, plot and themes, but we do that through a collective act of imagination, in which we bring to life the human experiences the play contains. Every member of the company or the

classroom is implicated, contributing their ideas and skills, so they become fully invested. The rehearsal room is a place where the world of the play and the interpretive choices we make are constructed socially. These choices are negotiated within the group (the company or the class); just as the play is co-created by the actors, their director and designer, so it is co-created by teachers and students.

By 'standing in the shoes' of the characters and inhabiting the world of the play, students are implicated and engaged with their whole selves. In grappling with scenes and speeches, we know that students are grappling with the themes and ideas in the play, experiencing them from the point of view of the characters.

At the heart of the rehearsal-room pedagogy in the classroom is the idea of young people encountering Shakespeare as fellow artists. The text is central to our discoveries; working with Shakespeare's language in the same ways that actors do, the students can create outcomes that offer real insight into the text, in which they can take great pride, and which are often genuinely beautiful. For the actor in the rehearsal room, there is little distinction between play and work; they make plays for a living. It can be very helpful to point this out to the young people we teach: the playful approaches we ask them to commit to and take seriously are real work in the real world. That fact changes the investment of the students and makes them realise that these are not approaches we have made up for them, at whatever age they are; they are essential approaches that any professional actor and director must use to understand, own, and interpret the plays.

Our approaches invite an intuitive, spontaneous response which is developed through questioning. The work is rooted in speaking and listening to Shakespeare's words and to each other's ideas. What we have found is that this way of working can produce sophisticated analytical responses, both oral and written, challenging the most able learners as well as motivating the most reluctant.

# Connections to Learning Theory

However, this way of working is not just happening in isolation from everything we know about good teaching and learning. There are strong parallels between the rehearsal room and the social constructivist theory of learning. Vygotsky talked about knowledge that is *co-constructed* by an individual within a social framework. [3] Learning happens first through *interaction,* then through *internalisation*. In Vygotsky's terms, the child is a 'collaborative learner', not a 'lone scientist'.

In the classroom as rehearsal room, we use scaffolding all the time – the term used by Jerome Bruner to describe the structured interactions through which adults will lead a child towards achieving a specific goal. [4]We will edit the text, starting with a line, a section of a speech, one page of a scene, or whatever the right starting point is to build from for that group of students.

We also employ what the American arts educator Eric Booth calls "enabling constraints" – the paradoxical idea that limitation is a spur to creativity. [5] We might limit the amount of space a group has to work in, or limit the amount of movement a character can make or the volume at which they can speak. The opening scene between Beatrice and Benedick is an excellent starting point to try out some of these approaches; the edited / abridged version we use in the classroom is provided in Appendix 1.

# Our Working Partners

We work with everyone and anyone that wants to work with us, but a large part of our Education work is delivered through national partnerships. One programme that we developed ten years ago is called the Learning and Performance Network. Through that programme we sought out schools across the UK who were least likely to access the RSC's work. They were

schools in areas of low cultural engagement, where the muscle of arts participation had not developed.

We set out to work in long term partnership with those schools through intensive teacher professional development, creative projects, artist residencies in schools, and regional and national performance festivals. The programme celebrated its tenth birthday in 2016, and over that time we have tracked the impact of our ways of working with Shakespeare on children, teachers, and the wider community.

What happens, then, when the classroom operates as a rehearsal room? Here are two examples.

## Example 1

The first example is a school in an area that the head teacher describes as socially and economically deprived. [6] The families are also generally deprived of literature; this limited reading heritage has resulted in the children having a limited range of reading, as well as a limited vocabulary. The head teacher describes how the children have the mechanics of reading and writing, but struggle to develop the higher levels, or what he calls 'the craft of the writer': the ability to put language together – something he believes is difficult to get unless the children are swamped with good literature.

As part of this school's work with us, the children worked on *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and watched an RSC production. In the play (Act I, scene 1, lines 5-8), Valentine says to Proteus:

> I rather would entreat thy company
> To see the wonders of the world abroad,
> Than – living dully sluggardized at home –
> Wear out thy youth with shapeless idleness. [7]

Eight weeks after seeing the production, a ten-year-old girl who usually shows limited language usage in her spoken and written language came up to the head teacher at the end of a Physical Education lesson and said: “Sir, I feel absolutely sluggardized.” The head teacher observed that for the child to use the word would already have been an achievement in her writing; for her to use it eight weeks on in normal conversation for him showed the real impact.

## Example 2

The head teacher of a Primary School in Middlesbrough started working with us in 2012. The school is in one of the most deprived wards of the country. Since joining our long-term partnership programme they have been using rehearsal-room approaches to bring the stories, characters and language of Shakespeare’s plays to life for pupils. Today, any visitor to the school will see display boards that are crammed with the evidence of that work: pieces of writing, drawings, poems, artwork and images of children in performance, across every year group from nursery to year 6, all based on their work with Shakespeare. This school now leads a cluster of eleven other schools in rehearsal-room approaches to Shakespeare. Teaching staff, school governors and pupils talk with a sense of pride and excitement about what has been achieved. The Chair of Governors says: “The children have developed a different armoury to draw on that has impacted on their learning, an appreciation of language and key skills to analyse motives and understand inference.” In 2016 in the national tests which eleven-year-olds take at the end of their primary school education, this school’s results in writing were their best ever with 94% of children achieving a good standard of writing, against a national average of 74%. This is a result that the head teacher and her staff firmly attribute to Shakespeare and RSC rehearsal-room approaches.

Typically, children attending schools that we are in long-term partnership with will get exposed to a wide range of Shakespeare’s plays. Primary

school children will enter secondary school having seen, or studied, for example *Othello*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Henry IV Part I*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest, Much Ado About Nothing*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, or *The Two Gentlemen of Verona.*

Teachers report that students spontaneously discuss terminology as they reach for language to express the understanding they have discovered through using rehearsal-room approaches. They note how groups become "trusting classes who [are] not afraid to inquire and who [are] not afraid to show that they did not know the answer." Many teachers also report that their classrooms become more relaxed environments; the atmosphere is significantly different. The benefit for teachers willing to step into unknown territory and work with us is the satisfaction of seeing their students achieve higher grades in examinations; they credit this academic progress to the students' increased powers of analysis. There is a personal bonus for the teachers too; they frequently tell us that this work reignites their love of their subject. It reminds them why they came into the profession.

Students tell us that they think "*this is a good way* of learning" because they are "living it" – that is, they find themselves imagining how the characters might feel, and we see them make connections to their own lives. They say: "I feel more confident. It helps with problems in life by seeing the characters' problems". Like all great works of art, Shakespeare's plays help us understand a little better ourselves, each other, and the world in which we live. Shakespeare invites us into an imagined world where we meet characters who experience dilemmas that we recognise.

Using Shakespeare's powerful language is an exciting intellectual challenge. Students tell us that they love to use the language and work out what it means and look for clues in it; the ambiguity in the language is something they enjoy. And crucially these kinds of responses are typical for all kinds of learners – not simply those already motivated. In research undertaken in 2017 with 100 schools, 97% of respondents confirmed that working with the RSC and their regional theatre partner had greatly improved student engagement with Shakespeare's plays. [8] 95% of

respondents reported that students were more willing to contribute ideas and opinions in lessons; 84% of respondents felt that RSC rehearsal-room approaches help students critically analyse text; 94% of respondents considered that rehearsal room approaches to Shakespeare help students find a voice; and 95% agreed that feeling confident about Shakespeare also impacts on students' self-confidence.

On children and young people with challenging behaviour or who were withdrawn from school life, the impact of these ways of working is profound. What we hear from teachers and parents all the time is that Shakespeare's work captures the imagination and attention of the very children that they often least expect it to be of interest to.

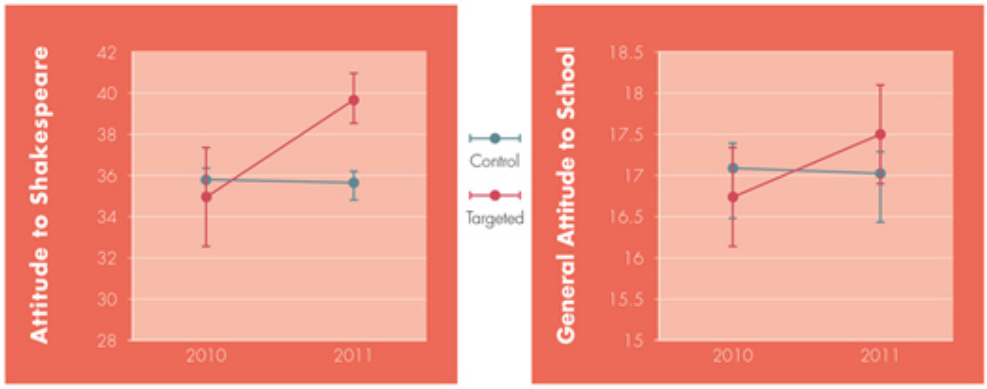
However, accessing the works of Shakespeare using these approaches is not just about impacting on attainment levels. Work on Shakespeare also seems to create a sense of pride in the school and its local community and contributes to a feeling of ownership and belonging; it develops a cultural confidence. Shifting attitudes to Shakespeare can lead to a much larger shift in the aspirations and beliefs of schools and communities:

> Our pupils and their families generally have little experience of culture and performance. Exposing them to Shakespeare through the partnership with the RSC has challenged assumptions of parents about Shakespeare and their aspirations for their children, as well as the frequent cycle of negative attitudes towards school and education. Parents have often commented that they 'didn't get Shakespeare', but now their little one comes home reciting it and telling them what it means and they are so excited by it. [9]

In this school, there was initial resistance from parents to the idea of a partnership with the RSC: disbelief that Shakespeare could have anything to offer or that the RSC would go and work there. Three years on there has been a profound change. Responses from parents now include: "My child is learning where I did not and this gives me hope for the future"; and "There is another life out there and I want to be part of it."

Why, then, does this happen? Part of the answer lies in the rehearsal-room technique. Our belief is that the way children first experience Shakespeare's work is very important; is it read or is it part of an embodied learning experience? But Shakespeare's language is also remarkable, of course; the combination of rhythm, word choices and use of metaphor stimulates the brain in ways that normal speech fails to do. Research by Liverpool University in 2013 monitored the brain activity of volunteers as they read works by, for example, Shakespeare, William Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot. [10] Researchers then monitored the brain when the words were translated into modern everyday language. The more challenging language set off far more electrical activity in the brain – sections of the brain literally 'lit up' as the volunteers encountered unusual words, surprising phrases or different kinds of sentence construction.

We undertook research to investigate what we were seeing with children and young people and our experience suggests that rehearsal-room approaches to teaching Shakespeare lead not only to significantly better attitudes to Shakespeare than ordinary classroom methods, but also to improved attitudes to school generally. Research from the Centre for Educational Development, Attainment and Research at the University of Warwick explored attitudes to Shakespeare, school and learning in classrooms where the rehearsal-room pedagogy was being regularly used and in classrooms where it was not. [11]




The graph shows the changes that happened during one academic year of the programme; target-group students' attitudes to Shakespeare and to school in general improved significantly, whereas in the control group, no such improvement occurred. We would call this the 'If I can do Shakespeare, I can do anything' effect – enabling children to have ownership of this complex part of our cultural inheritance means they feel differently about themselves as learners. If children feel they can unlock Shakespeare, then other seemingly difficult things can also be conquered and enjoyed. We know from experience that 'getting Shakespeare' unlocks so much for students, teachers, and parents. In this context, teaching Shakespeare goes well beyond the mere appreciation of the plays; unlocking the plays can take on a larger symbolism about feelings of inclusion and equality. Through our work we have seen young people of all ages claim Shakespeare's work as their birthright; as something that is theirs to own. It is a thrilling thing to witness – seeing children as young as four or five view Shakespeare's work as something to love, as opposed to something to fear.

Thus, the students and teachers with whom we are privileged to work teach us about the relevance of Shakespeare's work to the world we live in today; they show us the connections that can be made between the artistic practice of our theatre company and the teaching practice of primary and

secondary school teachers. They also show us the difference that exposure to Shakespeare's work can and does have on the lives and aspirations of young people of all backgrounds and abilities.

Our responsibility is to create inclusive pathways into Shakespeare's work and the arts, sharing the skills and knowledge that we have as widely as possible with the most diverse range of audiences, participants and theatre-makers who represent the society in which we live. That is a responsibility we share with all cultural organisations and institutions for higher education; in doing that, we transform attitudes, enhancing educational and life chances. Our work focuses on how young people particularly can use this language of power to release the power of language and their own potential. We need to help our children, our students, and each other, learn how to listen, how to discriminate between good arguments and bad ones, how to fight one's own corner. In other words, we need to teach them Shakespeare.

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**Webography**

Link 1.

Link 2.

Link 3.

# *Much Ado About Nothing*, Act I, scene 1, lines 110-139 (edited)

## Annexes

BEATRICE: I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick: nobody marks you.

BENEDICK: What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?

BEATRICE: Courtesy itself must convert to disdain, if you come in her presence.

BENEDICK: Then is courtesy a turncoat. But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted. Truly, I love none.

BEATRICE: I thank God…I am of your humour for that. I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me.

BENEDICK: God keep your ladyship still in that mind! So some gentleman or other shall ‘scape a predestinate scratched face.

BEATRICE: Scratching could not make it worse an ‘twere such a face as yours were.

BENEDICK: Well, you are a rare parrot-teacher.

BEATRICE: A bird of my tongue is better than a beast of yours.

BENEDICK: I would my horse had the speed of your tongue. But keep your way, a God’s name, I have done.

BEATRICE: You always end with a jade’s trick. I know you of old.

## Notes

[1] A response from an anonymous teacher in Oman.

[2] *Cf.* URL.

[3] Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), Soviet psychologist whose main work was in developmental psychology. For a more thorough discussion of how the theories of Vygotsky and others are built on in RSC Education, see Joe Winston, *Transforming the Teaching of Shakespeare with the Royal Shakespeare Company*, London, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015.

[4] Jerome Bruner (1915-2016), American psychologist; one of the pioneers of cognitive psychology in the US. For a more detailed description of the relevance of Bruner’s work in RSC classroom pedagogy, see *Transforming the Teaching of Shakespeare with the Royal Shakespeare Company* (see previous footnote).

[5] For further discussion of Booth’s term “enabling constraints”, URL, accessed August 2018; and *Transforming the Teaching of Shakespeare with the Royal Shakespeare Company* (see footnote 2).

[6] For the sake of privacy, the details of this school have been withheld.

[7] William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in *The Complete Works*, Jonathan Bates & Eric Rasmussen (eds.), The Royal Shakespeare Company, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2007, p. 56.

[8] The Work of Royal Shakespeare Company Education Department: report by the Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (University of Warwick). January 2018.

[9] Quoted from the response given by a secondary school in an area of significant disadvantage with historically low aspirations.

[10] James L. Keidel, Philip M. Davis, Victoriana Gonzalez-Diaz, Clara D. Martin, Guillaume Thierry, “How Shakespeare tempests the brain: neuroimaging insights”, *Cortex*, Volume 49, 4 April 2013.

[11] Steve Strand, “Attitude to Shakespeare among Y10 students: Final Report to the Royal Shakespeare Company on the Learning and Performance Network student survey 2007-2009”, Centre for Education Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick, 2009.

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## Quelques mots à propos de : Jacqui O’Hanlon

Jacqui O’Hanlon joined the RSC in 2003 and has been Director of Education since 2008. She is responsible for the strategic direction and management of the Education work of the company. During her time at the RSC she has established the company’s Schools’ Broadcast series, developed its national partnership programme, Associate Schools, expanded its international work and deepened its relationship with the Higher Education sector. She developed and edited the *RSC Shakespeare Toolkit for Teachers* …

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