Shakespeare in Circles: How a New Approach Enlivened My Classroom

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It's a dirty job teaching Shakespeare. But somebody's got to do it."
—Pechter 1990, 173

In my memories of high school, no unit was more frustrating for me as a student than the yearly Shakespearean text. Even in college, I dreaded my required Shakespeare course, fearing the complexity of his language and the mustiness of his plot lines. I believed that I would never "get" his plays.

As a young teacher, I sympathize with my students' aversion to the Bard, as I am not too far removed from those feelings myself. From my own experience on the students' side of the desk, I know that no unit is as strenuous or exhausting as one involving Shakespeare's works. And though I "get" his works now, I often end up doing mental somersaults to haul my reluctant students through them. Despite my own negative experiences with his works, I dedicated myself to discovering a new way to make Shakespeare come alive for my students.

In my first year of teaching, I struggled through two exhausting units on Macbeth and Othello. I bored my students and myself with several weeks of trudging through what students bemoaned as "stupid, old English." Unlike my experienced colleagues, with drawers full of useful teaching tools from many years' experience, I had no prepared summary worksheets or vocabulary logs or reflection questions to whip out to help along my struggling students.

As it's my nature to be nontraditional in my approach, I tend to shy away from borrowing materials from colleagues. Instead, I often do what all new teachers are admonished not to do: I try to reinvent the wheel with each new unit. The semester's looming Shakespeare unit was no different. Others had successfully updated materials on Shakespeare's works for their students (Bucolo 2007), and I felt the need to try as well. I needed to change the landscape of the classroom, both for myself and for my classes of seniors for whom Shakespeare—and English literature overall—was an old, stale, and lifeless experience.

Taking Inspiration
Inspired by scholarly articles on creative approaches to instruction and assessment (Athanas 2005), I decided to experiment with a creative teaching style for this Shakespeare unit. I began with the Literature Circles model. Briefly, to accomplish literature circles, students form small groups to discuss and study a self-selected text. For literature groups to function effectively, the teacher must "front load" the process by clearly defining roles and tasks each student is expected to perform (see
figure 1). For example, a “quiz master” may be responsible for generating provocative questions during the group’s discussion. With these roles clearly defined, students know what is expected of them throughout the unit of study.

Though task assignment is an important part of the success of literature circles, the importance of student choice of text cannot be underestimated. As Nancie Atwell (1998, 36) stated, “If we want our students to grow to appreciate literature, we need to give them a say in decisions about the literature they will read.”

The Literature Circles model was something I had studied, but had not applied in my classroom. My professors had lauded the results of this model, claiming that the cooperative atmosphere enables students to engage with text at multiple levels and interact with their peers both academically and socially. Additionally, contemporary research has shown that literature circles are effective for many educational goals, including the learning of foreign languages (Sai and Hsu 2007). I decided to experiment by applying a literature circles approach—defining roles and allowing for student choice—to study four of Shakespeare’s works: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and The Merchant of Venice (Proudfoot, Thompson, and Kastan 2001).

The Literature Circles model can be applied in any classroom that has reading and critical thinking at its core. For example, collecting documents that provide alternative viewpoints on an issue, allowing students to select which viewpoint they want to study (through a matching activity like the personality quiz I describe later, or by simply letting students scan and select), and shaping activities that require intellectual synthesis between and amongst the different sides could be incredibly rich and vivacious. Imagine students trying to reconcile the points of view between a work by Abraham Lincoln vis-à-vis one by Jefferson Davis in a class discussion or a group research paper. The strategy of setting clearly defined roles

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**Figure 1. Roles and Tasks for Literature Circle Groups**

**Discussion Director or Moderator**
Ensures that all members are contributing to group discussion

**Summarizer**
Summarizes what’s going on in the selected text.

**Connector**
Makes connections with other subjects, popular culture, or current events

**Quiz Master, Riddler, or Provocateur**
Asks challenging, thoughtful questions for group discussion

**Stage Director**
Imagines and shares effective staging techniques with the group

**Dramatic Reader**
Interprets and reads sections of the text for dramatic effect

**Psychoanalyst or Character Expert**
Analyzes and traces characters’ motivations or attitudes

**Analyzer or Illuminator**
Identifies and analyzes powerful phrases or sentences

**Wordsmith or Word Wizard**
Identifies and defines difficult words from the selected text

**Illustrator**
Helps others visualize the selected text through drawings and artwork

**Scribe**
Keeps a record of the group’s discussion, burning questions, and great ideas

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and allowing students to choose the texts they will study can be applied across content areas and curricula to encourage engagement, and may provide some surprising and amazing results.

‘Circular’ Reasoning
Notwithstanding my inspired planning, when students entered the classroom and saw the stacks of Shakespearean volumes on my shelves, they rolled their eyes, and groaned, “Come on! Not another Shakespeare play!” Despite their initial disapproval, I wanted to test out Shakespeare’s works with literature circles, and hoped for the best. I wanted to teach four of Shakespeare’s works simultaneously; actually, to rephrase, I wanted four works of Shakespeare to be studied simultaneously by my students. I did not want this unit to be another one of those “teacher does all the difficult thinking for us” units that I had experienced as a student.

On day one of the unit, to introduce the literature circles concept, I divided students into six groups, assigned each group a Shakespearean sonnet, and had the groups annotate and discuss their assigned sonnet. In the groups, students were given roles and were held accountable for the assigned roles’ tasks. After extended discussion, I asked students to summarize their discussions aloud for the rest of the class. The groups, in the time provided, did an impressive job with little direct instruction from me. Though I had to “translate” some of Shakespeare’s words, all the connections and ideas presented about the sonnets were the students’ own. At the sound of the bell, I believed students had seen literature circle discussions working, and I was eager to begin the unit in earnest.

The next day, I had students brainstorm all the different possible assessments they could imagine for a study of Shakespeare. Almost immediately, students shared traditional assessments like vocabulary quizzes, scene summaries, and unit tests. After a little prodding, however, new assessment ideas materialized: dramatic reinterpretations, deleted scenes and alternate endings for the play, online profiles for the characters in the text, character improvisations, and text-based product advertisements. My classroom was buzzing with ideas, and the students were excited that I was entertaining these new assessment options.

I knew that for this unit to succeed, the class would need this energy and these innovative ideas. To economize on students’ energy, I gave students a “personality quiz” (see figure 2 on page 43) to match each student with one of the four texts. The personality quiz approach, I felt, would still be giving students a choice, and it would help guide the students’ selections. Also, it added an air of whimsy to the process of text selection (McMahon 1999). From the quiz results, I formed the literature circle groups; but when I shared the groups with my students, several wanted to swap texts or be in groups with their friends. Because I had dedicated myself to a student-centered approach to this unit, I allowed students to alter their selections of texts and groups. This choice would be the first in a series of autonomous moves my students would make throughout the unit.

The concept of student autonomy—giving students the freedom to choose in a classroom—can be readily applied to different content areas. In a science classroom, a teacher can set up several different labs that share a goal—discovering the effect heat has on various objects, for example—and allow students to choose any one experiment to build their skills. Or in a history class, a teacher may select a country and allow groups of students to study different periods in that nation’s history; as a class, students can build a comprehensive history. Either of these examples has the potential to increase engagement and learning among students. Student choice of content is an incredibly powerful motivator in any classroom.

Putting Power in Students’ Hands
Once groups had formed and texts had been distributed, I handed each group a nearly blank unit calendar, with only minor signposts such as “finish Act II by today” indicated. Students were asked to create their own reading schedules together, in groups. My students appreciated the opportunity to set their own pace for reading and, in many groups, calendars ambitiously set reading deadlines days—even weeks—ahead of my previous expectations. Students seemed eager to begin their studies, and I was equally eager to watch this unit unfold.

As soon as calendars were finalized, I posted them along with the students’ assessment suggestions in my classroom for all to see. Each day, my classroom was noisy and full of life. Groups were reading aloud, heatedly debating Hamlet’s or Lear’s madness, discussing the possible racism in Othello and The Merchant of Venice. I had groups in the hallways reading to one another, summarizing soliloquies and generating plot summaries to help their peers. Students were eagerly asking me questions about Shakespeare, his settings, his language, his characters, and themes.

I found that I needed to brush up on my own knowledge of the bard. I dusted off my anthology and pulled out some of my personal Shakespeare guides, chiefly Shakespeare’s Words (Crystal and Crys-
tal 2002) and Simply Shakespeare (Widdicombe 2002) to strengthen my own knowledge. Watching my students grow as Shakespeare scholars was incredible. At times, I felt like a ringmaster, watching trained performers practice all over the tent. Other times, I felt as though I had no control of students and their off-the-wall ideas; but that was exactly my goal. Though my students were boisterous and unpredictable, they were engaging with their chosen texts at impressive levels, and their excitement challenged me to engage more deeply in Shakespeare’s works myself.

Making Connections
For assessment, I went back to students’ original suggestions. Sometimes, they annotated text and responded to reflection questions. Other times, they drew character sketches or wrote and performed original skits. I tried, as often as possible, to give students a choice about how they would demonstrate their knowledge. Therefore, I had the challenging task of coming up with multiple study questions and activities appropriate for four very different texts, for groups in different places in those texts, and for students with different needs. As often as possible, my assignments took into account students’ suggestions, comments, ideas, and necessities, while balancing my need to see where students were in their comprehension and critical thinking.

One exciting project students completed was the creation of a mix-tape soundtrack for their texts. Students were asked to choose songs that connected to their texts in a variety of ways—connections to characters, symbols, setting, theme, plot, or motifs. They spent days excitedly sharing their song selections with one another in groups. Students swapped iPod® units and printed lyrics, listening and commenting on one another’s ideas. The final products students submitted demonstrated impressive critical thinking and connection making. For example, one group studying King Lear began its soundtrack with George Thorogood’s “Who Do You Love?” echoing directly Lear’s challenge to his daughters in Act I.

Figure 2. Shakespearean Text Personality Quiz

For each of the questions listed below, select the statement with which you agree most:

1. The search for life’s purpose . . .
   (a) It’s okay to walk over others on the road to personal success.
   (b) One only finds himself when he has lost everything.
   (c) One’s purpose in life is directed by supernatural forces.
   (d) A person is defined by his financial success.

2. The definition of love . . .
   (a) Love is based on sympathy.
   (b) Love cannot be proved.
   (c) Love is madness.
   (d) Love is destined.

3. Thoughts on betrayal . . .
   (a) Even a hint of betrayal can conquer love.
   (b) Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.
   (c) Everyone can be bought.
   (d) Blood is not thicker than water . . . or gold.

4. Beliefs about greed . . .
   (a) One’s personal desires trump the needs of others.
   (b) People will say anything to get what they want.
   (c) To achieve a position of power, people will do terrible things.
   (d) Debts should never go unpaid.

5. Concept of faith and loyalty . . .
   (a) One can trust the ones he loves.
   (b) Loyalty is not always obvious.
   (c) Blind devotion can be dangerous.
   (d) Personal risk may be necessary to save the ones you love.

   If you selected mostly . . .

   A’s—Othello is the play for you.
   B’s—King Lear will be to your liking.
   C’s—Hamlet will give you food for thought.
   D’s—The Merchant of Venice may meet your approval.
As a culminating activity, each group prepared a five-minute scene from the text for performance. Before the performances, though, each student had to complete a character profile based on the popular Web site MySpace™. I crafted a blank profile (see figure 3), and students amazed me with their abilities to indicate not only characters’ key quotations, but also their favorite movies and books, their favorite songs, and their top eight “buddies.” I noticed that these creative, artistic projects—the soundtrack and the MySpace profile—helped lessen students’ anxiety about performing in Shakespearean English, because they had other opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge in more immediate, culturally relevant, and creative ways. Using an element of students’ popular culture has a positive tendency not only to increase engagement, but also to improve “buy in” of course content (Cooks 2004; Elkmeyer 2008).

**Time for Reflection**

As the unit wound down, I had students evaluate their progress in anonymous letters to me. Not only did students state that they enjoyed the unit, but also many said it was the first time they enjoyed reading any work of Shakespeare. Students wrote that they loved the freedom of choice, the constant input they were asked to provide regarding the format of the unit, the creative assessment options, and the overall structure of the class. They loved that I was there to guide them, but that the majority of the ideas were their own; and they loved watching one another perform.

Reading their evaluation letters was extremely satisfying for me. Affirming that students enjoyed studying Shakespeare in school gave me renewed energy and faith in the profession. Despite the hours spent in preparation and moments of self-doubt, this successful Shakespeare unit showed me that re- inventing the wheel can be exceptionally rewarding. I’ll never look at a Shakespeare unit the same way again.

**References**


