Creative Approaches to Shakespeare in Secondary Schools

A good practice guide
Creative Approaches to Shakespeare in Secondary Schools: A good practice guide
Ilkley is the largest and liveliest literature festival in the North of England. Each year the main festival in October delivers over 220 events across 20 venues to an audience of 25,000 people of all ages; there’s a poetry weekend in the centre of Bradford each summer specially designed to engage families and children and a wealth of year-round events and activities.

The Festival faces south to post-industrial Bradford and north to the rural hinterland – creating a space where everyone is encouraged to explore a common love for words and ideas. Festival programmes feature a rich mix of headline names, literary fiction, poetry, performances, non-fiction events, masterclasses and workshops, a lively Fringe, a Children’s Festival weekend and a range of imaginative events for young people.

The organisation is known for its commitment to cultural diversity and its innovative development work in schools and with young people in informal settings. The Festival runs a year round programme of weekly sessions for teenage writers, a Saturday group for children aged 8-11, a programme of work in inner city schools in Leeds and Bradford and an annual Summer School for young writers.
Our guiding principles and approach

Our approach to all our work with young people is rooted in:

- Encouraging young people to engage with the opportunities we offer and creating activities they find exciting and inspiring.
- Encouraging young people and families, wherever they live and whatever their income, to enjoy books, reading and writing.
- Supporting young people, whatever their ability, to feel that they can achieve and that writing, just like learning a musical instrument or training for a sport, isn’t magic, it’s about practice and learning how to do it.

In the course of this work we’ve developed a number of guiding principles:

- We’re keen that new audiences are sustained and for this reason, have worked hard over the past several years to develop ongoing relationships with schools, communities and individuals.
- We’re willing to try out new approaches, to take risks and to learn. We don’t expect everything to be successful, we always reflect on what we are doing and when it doesn’t succeed we’re keen to see what needs to change.

Putting it into practice

In 2015 we set ourselves a new challenge: given the current focus on a more traditional English curriculum, how can we engage teenagers with Shakespeare, with a particular focus on boys at risk of disengaging with English?

We wanted to test and compare a new approach in three state secondary schools with very diverse student intakes: Allerton High, Leeds; Dixons Kings Academy, Bradford and Ilkley Grammar School, Ilkley.

With funding from the Clore Duffield Foundation we engaged an exciting young theatre company, Chicken Shop Shakespeare, to work across all three schools on an ambitious pilot programme of drama and creative writing workshops.
About Chicken Shop Shakespeare

Chicken Shop Shakespeare is a company of young black actors and film-makers who bring scenes from Shakespeare to unexpected situations, settings and new audiences. Over the last few years they have specialised in performing Shakespeare in unusual urban environments, creating flash mobs and short films.

“When we first started shooting Shakespeare in Chicken Cottage, all the lads in the street thought we were shooting a grime video. We felt the pieces had something … and it grew from there; working in new locations, bringing in a larger cast and learning about Shakespeare.”
What we did

- We worked with a total of 54 children across 21 workshops in 3 very different secondary schools.
- Workshops were tailored to fit the schools’ timetables and respond to pupils’ varying abilities.
- Each school chose a specific play to focus on, aligned to their curriculum: *Macbeth*, *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet*.
- Workshops focused on one or two important scenes from the play so that pupils could dig down into the key themes, language and meaning, as well as learn lines for performance.
- Pupils were selected from across the year group by our partner teachers, according to who they felt would most benefit from engagement with Chicken Shop Shakespeare. Two groups were selected from Year 10 and one from Year 8. Our primary focus was on teenage boys who were losing interest in English as a subject area.
- A bespoke programme of drama and creative writing workshops was delivered to each school by members of the Chicken Shop team, supported by professional writers Becky Cherriman, Michelle Scally Clarke and Festival Director Rachel Feldberg, with the aim of developing pupils’ interest in and understanding of Shakespeare.
- Each group finished the project by recording short performances on film to document their progress. Some groups also produced creative writing and poems in response to the themes of the plays, and performed short flash mobs around their schools.
- The programme of work was supported by an ongoing process of critical reflection whose purpose was to enable Chicken Shop members and the Festival to interrogate the processes used; to identify what worked well and what worked less well and to hone delivery methods and content accordingly.
Overall what worked

- Many of the young people enjoyed the opportunity to act out scenes and were enthusiastic about the chance to do their own creative writing.
- Small things that altered the school routine, such as going into the grounds to perform or being filmed, really excited the young people.
- When Chicken Shop’s actors were acting in front of the groups the atmosphere was electric.
- Most young people’s knowledge and understanding of Shakespeare’s language improved. They memorised and performed sections of monologues and dialogue to camera and/or the group and identified the plays’ universal themes and why and how they were relevant today.
- Teachers’ feedback was very helpful and enabled us to reflect honestly on what worked and what didn’t across the three pilots.
- Chicken Shop were able to trial their approach to Shakespeare with young people in three very different environments. They were able to test the strengths of each company member and how their presence and contribution can affect the dynamic of sessions.

Feedback

“"I didn’t like Shakespeare before. But I enjoyed going outside and doing the acting and performing in front of a camera. Learning lines was tricky but acting The Tempest was the best.”

“What I enjoyed the most is acting it out and building more confidence.”

“I’ve learnt how you say the words and how I can use body language to get across an emotion.”
“I really like Chicken Shop Shakespeare’s accents and the enthusiasm these guys put in. They gave me the big picture on Shakespeare.”
Getting the practicalities right

- Schools have increasing timetable and curriculum pressures. It’s important to align the work closely with the curriculum – English, drama or both – so that schools feel that the project is adding value.

- As with all schools work, much is dependent on working with the right people within school – this may be an enthusiastic teacher or can be the school librarian.

- There needs to be clear communication with the school and practitioners about expectations, roles and responsibilities. For example, is a teacher going to be present at every session and are they responsible for behaviour management issues?

- The timing and duration of sessions is crucial and schools will need you to fit into different lesson times. 45 minutes can feel very short while 2 hours can feel too long, so break the session into shorter sections and plan a varied sequence of more energetic and more reflective exercises.

- Ask the school to make sure that participating young people are clearly briefed in advance on what the project is and of what is expected of them over the duration of the sessions.

Participating young people should be clearly briefed in advance on what the project is and of what is expected of them over the duration of the project.

Issues to look out for

- Plan carefully with teachers and anyone else at the school who’ll be involved before you start. What is the school wanting to achieve? What kind of work have they already been doing with pupils? How can you compliment that and offer additional experiences?

- Find out everything you can about the students you’ll be working with in advance so that you can plan for all eventualities. How many of them will there be? What age and ability range? Are there any particular needs you should be aware of? Have they chosen to be there?
Work closely with schools so that the project is given enough time within the school timetable. If schools want you to work outside school hours or during ‘enrichment time’ think carefully about the impact this will have.

By Year 10 young people can be extremely self-conscious about performance and play. Try to build up from safe starting points so that the young people build trust with you and each other.

Almost all schools have disciplinary codes and codes of behaviour around issues such as sexism, racism, or name calling. Make sure that everyone involved is aware of the school’s particular code. Make sure there is a plan in place so that everyone feels confident in dealing immediately and decisively with such issues if they should arise and that they are clear about the reporting structures within the school.

If you are planning any kind of group sharing or celebration at the end of a project make sure that all the schools and pupils involved will feel valued, as there may be different levels of achievement.

Are pupils there because they want to be or they have to be? This can make a real difference to their attitudes at the start of the project.

General good practice and learning points

- If you’re not a trained teacher, don’t try to be like a teacher, they have different skills! Pupils are working to very rigid timetables and there are not many opportunities to work with external artists. Bringing performing artists into school settings and allowing them to demonstrate their acting talent creates an infectious energy and excitement. Remember, many pupils may never have seen live theatre so the impact of scenes being acted out by professionals can be profound.

- Arts professionals can learn great techniques from experienced teachers. Teachers can pick up new ideas and exercises from arts professionals coming into school.

- Bringing a camera into the project definitely generates more excitement and commitment from the young people involved. But filming also takes time. Make sure you are not overambitious with your filming plans and build in editing time to create a finished product.
How will you share young people’s achievements? Could they perform to their year group or show their films at an assembly? It is important to celebrate the work done.

- Boys, and quiet girls, may not respond to questions put to the whole class. Make sure that everyone is asked to contribute – taking answers from a girl, then a boy then a girl can help, or ask individuals gently for their thoughts.
- Can teachers set the scene before the project starts? It’s really useful for young people to have run through the play’s plot, key characters and themes ahead of the workshops.
- Make a plan and have a backup plan! Make sure you have at least two practitioners per workshop to maintain energy and dynamism.
- Plan a series of short, quick fire activities across the session – attention spans are short and young people are easily bored.
- Continue to communicate with your key teacher or librarian throughout the project. Are there ways for example that pupils can apply what they have learned in classes or homework in between sessions?
- Build in processes for ongoing critical reflection so that you can hone techniques and content throughout. A short debrief session at the end of each session can work well.
- The end product is not as important as the journey of the project. Many young people have never experienced live theatre and have very limited exposure to Shakespeare texts. It may be that success for these young people is learning 2 or 3 lines from a monologue and performing to the group, rather than delivering an expert soliloquy to camera.
- If you are working with young practitioners consider how you will support them during the project to reflect and learn from their practice. It could be that providing an experienced Theatre in Education practitioner as mentor will be useful professional development.
- How will you share young people’s achievements? Could they perform to their year group or show their films at an assembly? It is important to celebrate the work done.
Performing Shakespeare

Mark Rylance (Actor)

Less reverence, more rap: “If I have a general criticism, which is true of my Shakespeare acting and most Shakespeare acting I hear, is that it is too slow. It’s too reverent. It is like taking a rap song in 400 years from now that we think is really wonderful and deciding it should be said slowly so all the lovers of rap can hear every word. To take a song like Honky Tonk Woman and study it for its literature is fair enough, but if you are going to revere it as literature, you are doing a disservice to Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, who would like it to be revered as a great rock’n’roll song. That is what I have always felt about Shakespeare. By all means revere him and love him, but revere him in the way he would want to be revered – as a playwright.”

Daily Telegraph, November 2015
Creative writing around Shakespeare

Becky Cherriman – writer and tutor

1. Begin with themed icebreakers to relate the play to young people and their lives.
   
   For example linking to *The Tempest*’s theme of the sea and islands ask if you were a type of sea or an island, what would you be? Describe this to a partner. This could be an ideal self or an actual self. This exercise will help them to more deeply consider the setting of the play.

   Alternatively, when dealing with relations between Miranda and Prospero ask them to tell a story about their families that is not obvious – a lost or hidden past. To help the young people feel safe, they should be told that they don’t have to reveal anything they are uncomfortable with and that this can be made up.

   Using the phrase from *The Tempest* ‘pluck my magic garment from me’ as a starting point ask, ‘If you were to whip up a magical storm/be invisible like Ariel/Prospero what would you do?’

2. Following on from Point 1, pick up on and explore themes in your writing activities that young people will be interested in.

   For example respond to the theme of the magical forces in *The Tempest* by imagining you have an object that transforms your life in some way.

3. Emphasise the conflict in the play by asking them to identify features of power balance in *The Tempest*.

   What types of power are there generally – power with/power over, overpowered – and in the play – Caliban and Ariel are both slaves of Prospero’s, Ariel having escaped from Sycorax to a different master. Miranda is under Prospero’s command too but he loves her so she has a certain power over him.

   Ask how it feels to be on different sides of a power balance. Encourage young people to consider their character’s relationship to power in their own writing.

4. Ask them to use some of the vocabulary from the play in their own piece of writing. You could do this by producing a list of key words and phrases and asking them to include some of them in a rewrite of a piece – for example ‘touching the object makes the wolves howl/makes you feel as free as the mountain winds’. It will help them to contextualise the play and develop a deeper understanding of the language used.

5. Include a performative element by asking them to perform their individual poems or to join favourite lines together by reading in a group one after the other. Encourage them to put appropriate emotions into their performance and to ‘own’ their lines. It will be fun, will build confidence and remind young people that Shakespeare is supposed to be performed.
Good practice guide
Power

A group poem by pupils from Dixons Kings Academy, based on The Tempest.

The Olympic torch I now hold is something
that is hardly thought and couldn’t be bought by a penny of yours.

I couldn’t believe what I was given.
I saw it and said, “this will change my life.”

“Make the impossible, possible.”

The ball has a scratch, a signature of Ronaldinho,
the pearl speaks,
the chair will teleport and travel through time,
the power is overwhelming as it makes people bend over and kneel.

There’s a snotty tissue and when it is thrown on the floor
if a good person looks at the tissue it turns into a white dove.

Touching the object makes the wolves howl,
makes you feel as free as the mountain winds,
the wild waters, the deceiving snow, the beautiful sunshine,
like the god of power.
**Intro**

Everyone can tell stories, we do it as children when we are playing and say to someone “you be the robber and I’m going to drive the getaway car”, or “you be the sister, I’ll be the grandma”.

We can learn to do it better and learn to write scenes from our stories as a script.

**Warm up ‘going on a journey’**

Gather everyone in a circle. The workshop leader begins an animated journey, with simple actions and sound effects. Everyone does it at the same time following their lead:

> “Down the stairs, out of the creaky door, across the busy road, into the silent creepy wood, through the muddy bog, across the field of tall grass, down to the seashore and into the damp quiet cave. And in the back of the cave is... a terrifying monster.”

**What happens next?**

A story is a journey, with a beginning, middle and end.

They say there are a limited number of stories that a play can tell – and often they are mixed together:

- A physical journey, like the one above with obstacles that need to be overcome – *Lord of the Rings* is a good example
- An emotional journey – Macbeth and Lady Macbeth go on an emotional journey
- Strangers come to town – and everything changes (Prospero and Miranda in *The Tempest*)
- Sometimes everything changes because of a natural disaster, like say a shipwreck (*The Tempest*)
- Your characters go somewhere new and meet new people and situations – and everything changes (Ferdinand in *The Tempest*)
**Driver and Passenger**

Students write a word describing someone’s mood on a slip of paper and drop them into a hat (nervous, patient etc) and a reason for the journey (late for school etc) in another container.

Two students are chosen.

They sit on two chairs side by side, facing their audience who form a ¾ circle with them at the top of it.

Driver and passenger each pull out a relevant word – one from each container – and begin their car journey.

Now they improvise their journey for a couple of minutes, starting as the passenger gets into the car. They can’t say what the reason for their journey is.

Other students guess what the word/reason is and can swap into the scene if they get it right.

**Points to pick up**

What is the key thing about these scenes?

There is conflict. People want different things. They have different personalities. That makes the scene interesting. Drama is all about conflict.

**When? Now?**

Look at this short extract from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*:

**MACBETH** I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?

**LADY MACBETH** I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry.

Did not you speak?

**MACBETH** When?

**LADY MACBETH** Now.

**MACBETH** As I descended?

**LADY MACBETH** Ay.

See how few words Shakespeare uses.

What kind of atmosphere does he create?

See how less can be more.

Come late to a scene, and leave early so people want to know what happens next.
Points to pick up

Notice the metaphorical language, pauses, gaps and silences, body language and how audiences can piece together what’s happening from very little.

**Fine, I’m fine**

Pick two students, A and B.

Pick two other students who will control what they do and how.

A and B have a very simple exchange, so almost nothing to remember.

The controllers tell them where to move, where to look, when to speak their lines, so things can happen before, between and after the lines.

A....... How are you?

B....... Fine

.......... I’m Fine

Points to pick up

The controllers were the writers and director, they were creating the scene and giving the stage directions.

Notice how the controllers and actors have created text and sub text, naturalistic language, pauses, gaps and silences and body language. Again, recognise how audiences can piece together what’s happening from very little.

**Write 5 Lines**

Now students are going to each write a scene which involves two people, A and B.

They only need to write 5 lines which begin. ‘Are you OK?’

Don’t worry about what to write – just start and see what happens.

A1 ‘Are you OK?’

B2 ........................................................................................................................................................................

A3 ........................................................................................................................................................................

B4 ........................................................................................................................................................................

A5 ........................................................................................................................................................................

Read them out in pairs to the whole group. The writer always reads character A. Then swap over.
Points to pick up

What do other people think is going on between the two characters? What’s their relationship? Where are they? What do you think happens next?

Students can also be asked to write as if the two characters are Macbeth and Lady Macbeth – or Prospero and Ariel or Romeo and Mercutio or any other combination.

Create a Character

Brainstorm as a group writing up on a whiteboard or flipchart:
- a range of ages
- describing words for someone: quiet, fearful, angry etc etc
- pieces of clothing someone might wear
- a dream someone might have (to go home, win the lottery, meet Justin Bieber etc)
- what people do with their time – work, a sport, being at home, playing on computer etc etc
- different locations

Chose one thing from each category for the character you are going to create or for the character you already have.

Write a quick few lines about them – a thumbnail sketch.

Points to pick up

Writers make choices all the time so choose carefully.

Choose things which give your character internal conflict – they want to do their homework but they also want to watch a film. Try random elements, push your comfort zone. Try things which are an unusual combination: they are 86, wear roller skates and want to meet Justin Bieber.

Write a Scene of your Own

Use the character you have created and either create another very different character, OR your character meets one of the Shakespeare characters you have been working on.

- Location – pick one – either something linked to what you’ve been doing or a not obvious place these people could be together.
- Why are your characters there?
- In this scene, what does each one of them want?
  - For example. one on their way to the shops late for an interview.
  - The other is waiting outside their house for their friend to come round to play on their Xbox.
- Put the name of the character who’s speaking at the start of the line.

Remember to put in stage directions (in brackets) if you need them.
Points to pick up

Make sure you know what the conflict is between them – and the conflict each person has inside them too.

Begin to write your scene – 5 lines to start with.

When everyone has 5 lines, do 5 more.

Reading out and Editing

With a partner students take it in turns to read their scene out to the whole group.

- Get feedback from everyone on what was good, what could be improved, any ideas people have for what might happen next.

- What does each student think they might be able to change or improve in their scene? Are there any words that could be cut out?

- Finish on a positive note for each student.