'Shakespeare’ – an endangered species?

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Abstract
In October 2008 testing of student attainment, over their first three years in English Secondary schools, was abolished. In this article I will argue that, though this was a much welcomed move, one of the possible consequences of this volte-face by Government was that Shakespeare study is becoming marginalised. After a brief introduction, my past life and current Action Research, Parts One and Two of this article will develop the argument that Shakespeare is in danger of becoming an endangered species, and make the case for the pedagogic added-value that Shakespeare study offers the curriculum, based on the need to make the plays relevant to the student’s life world. In Part Three, I will describe a series of lesson plans which I used to make Shakespeare’s play Romeo and Juliet relevant for 11-14 year old learners. And in Part Four I will highlight three beneficial results of this work, namely: Shakespeare ‘become their (the students) buddy’; the students understood the relevance of the story to their personal and social development; and, tangentially, the teachers got to know their students on a deeper level.

Keywords
Relevant, story, Socratic dialogue, issues, community

A brief introduction
For thirty-five years I worked as an actor, director and producer in theatre, television and radio; and along the way I picked up various awards (British Academy Film And Television Award, 1995; Prix Jeunesse International, 1996; and Sony Award nominee, 1998). So my love of drama has not only paid the bills, but fuelled my soul too. In 1999 I retired from ‘the world of the Media’ and started to work my way through the University of Warwick’s education system: BA, MA and now PhD. I have just completed three years of Action Research in a Warwickshire Secondary School with 11–14 year old Key Stage 3 learners.

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(KS3) students, exploring how selected Shakespearean stories can have an impact on their personal and social development. My research has been based on linking the ‘ideas, themes and issues’ (Qualification and Curricular Authority (QCA) 2008 in Shakespeare’s plays with the Personal, Social, Health, Finance (PSHFE) and Citizenship curricula; two subjects which I have conflated into one: PSD (Personal and Social Development¹).

**Part One … and a portent / Of broached mischief to the unborn times?**  
*(1 Henry IV, V.1.20-1)*

*The World Conservation Union maintains a ‘Red List’ of species around the world where animals are categorized by risk of extinction ranging from ‘Concern’ to ‘Extinct’. As of 2010, more than 40,000 species appeared on the list. I now feel the need to add to that ‘Concerned’ list the animal known as William Shakespeare.*

As part of an ongoing research project with 14-15 year old students, the Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR) has been assessing student’s attitudes to Shakespeare pedagogy for the Royal Shakespeare Company’s (RSC) Learning and Performance Network – the LPN being a longterm partnership with primary and secondary schools. Their 2008, 2009, and 2010 reports concluded that a large majority of students have a negative attitude to Shakespeare, and fail to see the point of doing the plays:

> *Only 20% agreed that ‘Shakespeare’s plays help us to understand ourselves and others better’.*  
> (Strand 2008: 3)

The deduction to be drawn from the above statistic is that 80% of the students in this survey felt that Shakespeare’s plays had no relevance to their lives – which reinforces my own empirical observations that most students engage reluctantly with Shakespeare’s plays, and that this attitude has changed little over the last two decades:

> … although I know nothing about Shakespeare, I know he’s boring  
> (11 year old student, Allen 1991: 41)

The above quote encapsulates the base from which most English teachers start when introducing Shakespeare study to their students. However, within the English education system, Shakespeare still remains ‘the only designated author on the curriculum’ (Correspondence with Ian Davies, DES, 2005). It is prescribed by the QCA (2008) that between the ages of 11–16 two Shakespeare plays are studied in total, or in part, by all students. And a follow up report in the same year, ‘Shakespeare for all ages and stages’ (QCA, 2008), stated that ‘there is a continuing commitment to the inclusion of Shakespeare study’. 
Why then do I continue to regard the Shakespeare animal as an endangered species? My fears were reawakened with the abolition, in October 2008, of the Standard Attainment Tests (SATS) for 11–14 year old students. Because the ‘pressure’ to teach-to-syllabus has now been removed, because the ethos of ‘hyper-accountability’ (Mansell 2007: 20) has been negated at KS3, my fears are that there will be an avoidance of Shakespeare study till the imperative to teach Shakespeare in preparation for the General Certificate Secondary Education (GCSE) at 16. And my concern seems well founded.

After the abolition of SATS, newspapers reported that ‘Shakespeare is being shunned by schools … up to 50% of teachers have cancelled Shakespeare training courses with the RSC since SATS for 14-year-olds in English and maths were scrapped’ (Telegraph 2008). This is corroborated by the RSC’s Education Department: ‘bookings are well down from this time last year’ (RSC Education Interview 2009). And though the take up of RSC’s short courses have ‘stabilised’ since that initial dip, ‘Applications to the LPN are about half what they were last year’ (RSC Education Interview 2010) – which could be interpreted as a decline in a long-term commitment to Shakespeare study.

So, couple teacher’s overall relief at the abolition of the Shakespeare examination for 14 year olds, which were deemed too hard and too challenging, with a majority of students holding a negative attitude to Shakespeare, and one can postulate that we could be heading down the slippery slope which, ‘will, I fear, lead to an attitude amongst some schools that Shakespeare can be dropped altogether’ (Strand, RSC Survey 2008). And despite the Chief Advisor on School Standards’ letter (Hackman 2009) to headteachers affirming that throughout secondary school students are still required to study at least two Shakespeare plays, I have a nagging feeling that teachers might opt for pedagogy-of-least-resistance and thus expose poor Will to the ‘slings and arrows’ (Hamlet, III.1.60) of hunters and revisionists who for a long time have felt that Shakespeare was far too elitist, and of little relevance to the young of today.

The arguments for and against Shakespeare studies, closely linked with the concept of ‘bardolatry’, have ranged/raged between the polarities of ‘His works are a central part of the heritage of English literature: we have a moral obligation to teach Shakespeare’ (Allen 1991: 44) through to Whitehead’s (1996) question: ‘How many of his plays really come within the linguistic and emotional range of the young adolescent?’ (p. 145) – a question which goes to the heart of any exploration on the added-value (Gilmore 1996) Shakespeare’s dramas might offer. It can be argued that in today’s multi-ethnic, multilingual Britain, students have little enthusiasm for colonialist icons of British social and cultural history. Such icons appear to have little relevance to students. Their icons are living celebrities, not objects ‘in a glass case’ for, ‘as beautiful and valuable as they may be, (they) are still detritus of the past. In preserving them we render them fixed and lifeless, and leave to chance the possible impact they may have on people’s lives’ (Skrebels 1997: 83).
With students today, education is closely linked with the question of relevance, and students’ perception is that they are being educated for the work force. Therefore for a majority of students, there seems to be little reason why they should apply themselves to the study of a four hundred year old ‘dead white male’s plays’ (Crump 2004) other than a QCA imperative:

*I don’t really see why we have to do Shakespeare anyway ... I don’t see why it is on the curriculum ... I don’t think it affects our careers and stuff.* (14 year old student, Diment 2003: 18, 20)

So how do teachers make a ‘dead white male’ writer – live? Gibson (1993), that champion of active teaching of Shakespeare, wrote that because Shakespeare opened up the ‘possibilities of other ways of living’; ‘other sets of values and beliefs’; and ‘other ways of defining oneself’ (p. 14) his body of work constitutes available case studies for students to analyse forensically ‘like a detective’ (Gilmore 1996: 79). Like a Hercules Poirot, a Miss Marple, or a Sherlock Holmes, students can seek out the clues, the reasons why *they* think the characters acted as they did on their journey through a Shakespearean story. And Shakespeare’s humanity, with its illusive quality of never being consistent, provides a fertile model for human conduct – particularly with reference to the characters often being agents of their own destinies (Gibson 1993).

Preeminent on Gibson’s (1993) added-value list was the quality of Shakespeare’s language which he deemed, ‘energetic, vivid, sinewy, active, physical, sensuous, reflective’ (p. 14); and, as Berry (1993) and Leavis (1952) added, speaks to students’ emotions; and is an effective way of developing insight into the power of speech acts (Vygotsky, cited in Britton 1994) – a skill which does need developing in young learners. Gibson (1994) argued that teachers can enable students to make both critical and empathetic connections between themselves, and the ‘ideas, themes and issues’ (QCA 2008, 2009) embedded in a Shakespeare play; and unless students can relate those underlying ‘issues’ to their own life-world – what Bruner (1986) has defined as the progression of the reader-hearer to the reader-owner – there is only an historic justification for the protected inclusion of Shakespeare study in the national curriculum.

When Gilmore (1996) argued that the central question should not be ‘Why teach Shakespeare on the curriculum?’ but, ‘What value can Shakespeare *add* to the curriculum?’ (p. 79) he goes to the heart of this debate. Blockside’s (2003) investigation as to whether Shakespeare was ‘iconic’ or ‘relevant’ noted that, if Shakespeare had nothing valuable to offer students, then his place in the curriculum was suspect because he could be replaced with something more pertinent and relevant. But Neelands (2004) argued that *relevance* can be demonstrated by drawing on Shakespeare’s issues in symbiotic parallel with the social realm, and that a humanistic Trans-Disciplinary (TD) approach to pedagogy has epistemological justification because liberal education – ‘learning
for life’, learning for the ‘good life’ (Habermas 2000) – has embedded within the curriculum overlapping ‘ideas, themes, and issues’. Therefore, in order to serve the need for deep learning and deep personal and social development to take place (Petty 2006), and in order to illuminate further the relevance of Shakespeare’s stories, a cross-disciplinary ‘para-aesthetic’ (Neelands 2004: 50) approach seems appropriate, because it moves learning away from pedagogy based on knowledge-transfer and towards transformational-knowledge (Ben-Shahar 2006).

So – the key word in this article is relevance. Unless Shakespeare lovers redress the balance of only 20% agreeing that ‘Shakespeare’s plays helps us to understand ourselves and others better’, then Shakespeare’s plays will continue to be enjoyed solely by a select band of ‘geeks’ and ‘boffins’ in school who will, in due time, become the ‘blue rinse’ or ‘Grecian 2000’ patrons of Shakespearean production; after they have strutted and fretted their ‘hour upon the stage’, they will be ‘heard no more’ (Macbeth, V.5.24, 25) – and the danger is that neither will Will!

**Part Two …And future ages groan for this foul act.** *(Richard II, IV.1.129)*

‘Groan’. Groan – indeed. If Shakespeare study quietly slips off the English curriculum for 11–14 year olds, what a loss that would be. Gibson (1993, 2005) was also exercised by the question: ‘What value can Shakespeare add to the curriculum?’ and he offered fourteen core reasons which included: ‘a necessary element in aesthetic education’; ‘an instrument of bourgeois hegemony’; and ‘part of British cultural heritage’ – all of which seem, at best, quaint; at worst, fodder for those vociferous detractors of Shakespeare’s primacy in the cannon (Eagleton 1983; Sinfield 2003). But Gibson (1993) also noted that Shakespeare’s body of work constitutes sociological and psychological case studies for students to analyse in parallel with our own lives. And that Shakespeare’s humanity, with its illusive quality of never being consistent, provides a fertile model for the exploration of human conduct.

Shakespeare’s (alleged) schooling taught him that there was an ‘aspectuality of truth’ (Bate 1997: 327) which in his literary production was reflected in the validity of the many issues in his plays. Egan (1989) argued that Shakespeare wrote in binary opposites: ‘conflicts between good and bad, courage and cowardice, fear and security’ (26) – for every Othello there is an Iago; for every Goneril there is a Cordelia; and for every Malcolm there is a Macbeth. And as Prospero and Caliban; Hal and Henry IV; Oberon and Titania; Juliet and Capulet all fight for their individual truths, students discover that ‘truth is not singular’ (Bate 1997: 327). As Gibson (1994) wrote, if ‘education is concerned that the individuals should not be imprisoned in a single point of view [then] Shakespeare’s plays have this quality supremely’ (p. 141). Shakespeare’s stories act like a ‘maieutic’, a midwife delivering truths (Saran 2004: 9), and by embracing his role as ‘impartial facilitator’ (Harwood 1998: 154-70), Socratic teacher (Nelson cited in Saran and Neisser, 2004), and ambidextrous storyteller
(Bate 1997), a teacher can use Shakespeare's chronicles to encourage learners to discuss moral issues and to exercise judgment and choices on the various dilemmas that beset so many of the characters (Saran and Neisser, 2004; Gibson 2005). I argue that our responsibility, vis-à-vis Shakespeare, is to make Will relevant for 21st Century students – or he might well become extinct. We need to demonstrate to today’s students that his ‘ideas, themes and issues’ are as significant today as they were 400 years ago. And that the challenge of exploring text and sub-text is worth attempting:

… I found the language hard. As I first read the script I thought, oh no! But now the production is over I understand Shakespeare a lot better (13 year old student, Interview 2008)

My longitudinal Action Research has developed a TD approach which overlays Shakespeare’s themes and issues on PSD topics on the curricula, in order that ‘deep learning’ (Petty 2006: 29-30) can take place in both the learning-for-life curriculum and in Shakespeare study. And as student identification with Shakespeare’s characters is aided by the stories being ‘peopled’ with those they can relate to – ‘mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, wives, relations, and confidants’ (Gibson 2005: 2); and as the ‘relationships’ between the characters are revealed to be those of the students – ‘love, hate, jealousy, quarrelling, awe, despair, contempt, and wonder’ (Ibid: 3); and as the stories explore how best to live in a ‘community’ as Shakespeare wrote on – ‘justice, politics, wealth, war’ (Ibid.) and ‘Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself’ (Macbeth, I.7.32), an awareness of the contemporariness of a Shakespeare play develops. As Gibson (2005) observed, the complexity of students’ own lives are Shakespeare’s abiding concerns; there is no other writer who conducts such multiple explorations, who writes such multiple interpretations, who holds such ‘multiple conversation’ (White 2003: 311).

Part Three …Let us from point to point this story know, / To make the even truth in pleasure flow. (All’s Well That Ends Well, V.3.321-2)

To make the transition from theory into practice, I will now briefly describe six Sessions I held with 11-year-old students in a Warwickshire school2 during which I used Shakespeare’s story of Romeo and Juliet as a springboard into various PSD topics on the curriculum.

Sessions 1 and 2: Community and Our Issues

Working with all the first year students in their new Secondary school, we focused on ‘Settling into your new school’ (Hill 2003) and ‘What issues concerned you?’ Through a number of games we started to explore kinaesthetically how our new community can work best. Needless to say, in Session 1 the games were played with a great element of chaos, collision – and laughter.
With me as the non-judgemental facilitator, we sat round in a large circle discussing what we were part of, and how we had played the games. A student said: ‘We been part of a community – but not a very good community.’ I asked if you can have a community of one. Based on John Donne’s idea that ‘No man is an Island unto himself’ I drew an island on the white-board with a pin man standing on it. Question: Will this person be happy? Several students suggested: ‘No, he’d be unhappy’; ‘He’s lonely’; ‘He needs other people’. In order to illustrate this answer I got one student to enter our circle alone, and to walk around. Question: Can we have a ‘community’ of one? Answer – a resounding ‘no!’ I slowly added two more students, then four more, eight more, then sixteen more, then everyone joined in – bumping, jostling, and laughing. As the group moved around one particular boy whispered to me ‘Brian – we need rules’. I froze everyone and got him to repeat what he had just said – bravo for peer-on-peer teaching, for ‘collaborative learning’ (The Innovation Unit 2008: 23).

In smaller groups of eight the students discussed what six ‘rules’ they thought were needed in order to create a successful community. And in a loud and totally engaged manner they got stuck in. After about ten minutes I asked each group to elect a spokesperson democratically, and then share their rules with the whole year ‘community’. Their feedback, which I wrote on the board, included:

- Everyone is equal, be aware; Don’t bump into one another; Look out for each other; No killing; Respect the community (don’t drop litter); Listen to each other; Hand up to speak; Cooperate with people, don’t be silly; Break the law 5 times and you have to leave the community; Respect everyone; Don’t be nasty; Always be friendly.

The second session was inspired by their feedback from Session 1 – Home Thinking (not Home ‘Work’, but Home ‘Thinking’ – a nuance, but one of significant importance to the students). I had noted that a number of the students had asked: ‘Why are we discussing community issues in social education?’ I had to respond. I told the students a short allegorical story:

… I had a friend called ‘A’ [I got a student to stand to the right of the white board] who had a friend called ‘B’ [another student stood to the left of the white board, as I drew a ‘house’ made of ‘bricks’]. ‘Aren’t those bricks perfect, really perfect’ said Friend ‘A’. To which Friend ‘B’ replied, ‘What you are talking about? The house is perfect, well nice, – but why are you going on about the bricks?’ Friend ‘A’ replied, ‘No bricks – no house’.
I got them to discuss quickly amongst themselves what the ‘point’ of this story was, and the feed-back was just perfect:

*Like, we’re the bricks, and together we make the house. So basically it is us that make the community.*

I suggested that we might need to know *ourselves* – our strengths and weaknesses – if we are to be useful ‘bricks’ in the ‘community’; and we’ll need to know what makes us happy, what worries us, and how we deal with those issues. In ‘friendship’ groups of six the students discussed, quietly and privately, what five ‘issues’ concerned them right now. The work was controlled and intense. Then they anonymously wrote their ‘top three’ issues on a piece of paper:

*Bullying; racism; People pushing in line; We all have our own point of view; People taking the Mickey out of our work and us because we are only in the first year; Family issues e.g. divorce; My little sister arguing with my parents; Sex; Boyfriend problems – falling out; England are not doing well enough in the football.*

And the *Home Thinking* on Session 2 was also very illuminating as students noted that:

*Everyone has issues; It was good to talk about issues that concern us; … people look at things in a different way; That if you work together as a community you can do stuff and get things like achievement.*

**Session 3: Romeo and Juliet**

In the third session we created a big circle in order to enact – with acknowledgement to both Winston’s (1998) ‘story stick’ (22) idea and the RSC’s Education Department ‘Shakespeare Whoosh’ – the story of *Romeo and Juliet*.

A brief explanation: if pure story telling is ‘two-dimensional’, then my version of the ‘Whoosh’ is ‘three dimensional’, with the students as the pop-up characters. The pedagogic objective of these human ‘pictures’ is to illustrate, clarify, and reinforce both the chronology of the story and the ‘issues’ being explored. For instance, in the first year of my Action Research I was focusing on the issues of ‘communities’ (or in the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, ‘dysfunctional community’); ‘acceptable behaviour’; ‘bullying’; ‘self-responsibility’ and ‘knife crime’. Two years later, and with the same cohort of students, I revisited *Romeo and Juliet* to explore ‘relationships’ and ‘sex education’. The *Whoosh* is not a one-hit-wonder. In answer to a *Home Thinking* question on ‘What is the point of the *Whoosh*?’ students wrote:
50 people got to interact in the lesson instead of listening.
It gave us a clear view of what happened in his play.
The point was that we could see the issues ourselves.

So I, as the story-teller (S.T.), read the story of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. At times the students passively listen; at other times, randomly selected students ACT/create a pop-up version of the scene being told. At the end of each scene the S.T. says ‘WHOOSH’ and all the students ‘clear [the circle] and fresh volunteers will be chosen to continue the action’ (Winston 1998: 22). My version of the story of *Romeo and Juliet* opens with passive listening, then moves to whole year chanting, and then on to acting out the first confrontation between the Montague and Capulet families:

*S.T.* ‘A long, long time ago, in a beautiful city in Italy - Verona was its name - two families the Montagues (include half of the circle), and the Capulets (include the other half of the circle) lived in hatred of each other. Their hatred went back such a long time no one living could even remember why they started the feud in the first place. But bate each other they did. (Start the first half the circle chanting ‘Montague’, countered by the other half chanting, ‘Capulet’.) Even the ruling PRINCE (S.T. as Prince) found controlling these families difficult – and the Prince’s word was law! (S.T. stops the chanting.)

(ACT) One hot, hot, day some of the servants of the Capulet family are hanging around in the Cathedral square spoiling for a fight with some of the servants of the Montague family. SAMSON from the Capulet family bites his thumb at them (demonstrate and get Samson to ‘bite his thumb’) – this is a serious insult in Italy. ABRAHAM from the Montague family accepts the challenge and the men start a knife fight. (As they come together - ‘freeze both students’…)

*At the end of Sc.1.1:* (S.T.) ‘WHOOSH’ *(And the helpers sit back in the circle.)*

By the end of the 40 minute Session a large majority of this first year community of nearly 70 students had taken part in the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, which concluded:

*S.T. … They all stood in horror round the dead children.*
*Cause and effect.*
*So much hatred.*
*So many deaths…*
*Five deaths.*
*Five young lives.*
The Prince begs the two families to now live in ‘peace’ before
there are more wasted lives.
Mr. Montague tells all assembled that he will erect a golden statue
of Juliet Capulet for all to see and remember.
And Mr. Capulet promises the same in memory of Romeo
Montague – ‘All must see these statues – lest we forget this tale of
woe, this sad, sad tale of Juliet and her Romeo.’ (WHOOSH)

My Diary entry read: ‘They were all absolutely still at the end of the R and J
story – and even though I had closed the story-book (my folder) I had to
break the spell with, “let’s give a round of applause for all those who had got
up and joined in.” The power of Shakespeare’s story was palpable.’

Session 4: Acceptable behaviour and bullying
The whole lesson was dedicated to the following conundrum which was
discussed in small groups and whole year sharing:

Q: What advice would you give to Montague and Capulet on how to
work together?
Romeo & Juliet should be allowed to say their opinion; Stop fighting – if you
don’t like each other leave others alone; Listen and think and become friends

Session 5: Rights and Responsibilities
And the whole of session was taken up with discussing this question:

Q: Whose fault is it that Romeo and Juliet had to get married secretly?
The students offered the following people to blame: the Parents, the Nurse,
Friar Laurence, Romeo, Juliet.

I wrote each name on a separate piece of paper and placed these around the
room. I then invited the students to go to the area designated for their chosen
character. Then I asked them, in smaller groups, to write the reasons why they
blamed that particular character:

- **Romeo** running away was not a good idea … he made it worse for himself
  by killing one of Juliet’s family.
- He (**Friar Laurence**) should have persuaded them out of it … he disobeyed
  the law of his religion.
- She (**Nurse**) told them to get married by Friar Laurence.
- It’s her (**Juliet**) fault because she would be killed by her parents if she
  married Romeo.

And an overwhelming majority of the students blamed the **parents**:

‘… because the parents were fighting. So it made them want to marry more.’
I ended this Session by acknowledging that this group had argued well, as had that group – and that, and that, and that group too. In fact all had argued well and I agreed with all of you – because truth is not singular.

Session 6: Knives and Gangs
We opened this Session by re-enacting our story of Romeo and Juliet backwards, from the suicides of Romeo and Juliet in the tomb back to the knifing of Tybald and Mercutio, in order to discover what could have been done to stop all the killings.

The overriding consensus was that the warring families were at the root of this dysfunctional community. I asked, has much changed since those times? They suggested that not much had changed. I projected some newspaper headlines, and students read them out:

- The apparently random shooting of 11-year-old Rhys Jones on a Liverpool street yesterday exposed a barely concealed culture of violent gangs.
- They put a gun to the back of my head. I heard them cock it. It jammed.
- They’ve dealt drugs, carried guns, knives and axes and seen their friends killed. And they’re still only teenagers.

I then showed them a photograph of flowers left by teenagers at a scene of crime, with a card that read “Put down your knives” – and I left the students to make their own connections between reportage on gang warfare today, and Shakespeare’s 400 year old drama, Romeo and Juliet.

Part Four: …and the conclusion shall be crowned with your / enjoying him (The Merry Wives of Windsor, III.5. 117-8. My italics, and my apology to W.S.)
Gibson (2005) wrote that Shakespeare’s characters, themes and stories have been, and remain, a source of meaning and significance for generations – and the key to his longevity is that the narratives offer endless opportunities for reinterpretation and reemphasis, because they reflect back the preoccupations of listeners down the ages. It is this mystifying and magical flexibility that enables students empathetically to visit, consider, re-visit, and re-consider the journey that the characters take. And as the students begin to appreciate that Shakespeare’s stories are peopled with those who they can relate to, an awareness of the relevance of a Shakespeare play arises:

What you did was make it accessible – made Shakespeare someone they knew … and the way that you always framed Shakespeare was that there was no sense of reverence about it … So studying it in English wasn’t a problem … they all think Shakespeare is their buddy, definitely think that; they’ve enjoyed it …

(Teacher, Interview 2010)
In this ‘brave new world’, bombarded with social and economic turmoil, new demands are being placed on young people to develop the social and cognitive skills to work together flexibly and creatively. Young students often live in, and see before them, a landscape which seems increasingly fragmented and challenging and they need the security of the school in which to develop their personal and social skills – school being one of the few places which ‘remains one of the fixed communities where this cultivation can be trusted to take place’ (Winston 1998).

**Q: Since the start of Secondary School, were any of the PSD lessons of any use in your own life, in or out of school?**

A: ‘It did help, I learned how to get on with people in the class, with some people it is a bit more difficult but I’ve learned how to get along with them a lot better than I did before. And also outside of school I’ve helped myself to communicate better with my family and they understand me more and everything.’ (14 year old student, 2010)

Over the three years Action Research I have encouraged 11–14 year old students to ‘philosophise’ – to explore, and develop, various debates, tensions, and arguments that effect their lives – in parallel with Shakespeare’s ‘high definition, high density’ stories. And the reason for using stories rather than the text, is subliminally to illustrate the relevance of Shakespeare’s work through the PSD topics, free from the constraints of archaic language:

> It was a lovely way of developing their literacy skills, their awareness of Shakespeare, and at the same time gave them something that is as relevant today as it would have been four hundred years ago. So in that respect it was a lovely novel way of approaching particular real life situations through a story.

(Teacher, Interview 2010)

And through developing the ability to philosophise on the journey the characters take, to be able to understand what the characters did and why they might have done it and then to be able to offer the characters other advice as to what they could have done better learners develop the skill of empathy. Boal called this ‘mataxis’ (Somers 1994: 11):

> whilst engaging with the situation in the shoes of another, the student views what happens to the character from the reality of self… so that ‘the I’ ‘I-now’ perceives ‘I-before’ and has a presentment of (anticipates) a ‘future-I’- a possible ‘I’

(Boal 1995: 28)

This TD approach is not reinventing the wheel, but creatively rediscovering the use of Shakespeare’s plays for new generations of, at worst Shakespeare-appreciators; and at best Shakespeare-lovers. By making his plays relevant,
learners will make Shakespeare ‘their buddy’ – will protect this endangered species.

The Greeks used the word Drama as meaning ‘to live through’:

participative educational drama should be, concerned with conflicts significant to the lives of those taking part ... then who knows what success we may have in educating children to become sensitive, aware, mature citizens, able not only to see the world from their own viewpoint, but through the eyes of others.

(Heathcote 1972: 157, 161)

And I conclude with one unexpected benefit of my Action Research:

... I think that what has happened in PSD is a very special experience for them ... it hasn’t happened for other years. I think we are so tightly embedded together – I feel very close to my form now. During form time I feel I really know those students. That coming together, doing very personal work, has stood me in really good stead.

(Teacher, Interview 2010)

Notes

References


