Chapter 7
Teaching Shakespeare in the Elementary School through Dramatic Activity, Play Production, and Technology: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT
In order to learn whether Shakespeare can be taught successfully in the elementary school, the author devised and implemented a unit designed to teach Macbeth to one fifth-grade class using dramatic activities, theatrical production, and technology integration. The work challenges the use of standardized testing as the final measure of student achievement. It demonstrates how Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development exposes the limitations of measuring only what students can demonstrate under testing conditions, and how Gardner’s (1993) Theory of Multiple Intelligences offers a variety of avenues for learning more effectively. This approach is identified with that of a reflective practitioner, and is designed to assist professionals who are looking for practical models for using Shakespeare’s plays in their classrooms. The underlying motive is to help bring them to a wider audience.

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INTRODUCTION

In order to learn whether Shakespeare can be taught successfully in the elementary school, I devised and implemented a unit designed to introduce Macbeth to a fifth-grade class. I documented the process to provide a case study model for teachers which can be emulated as a whole, drawn from partially, or simply used as an inspiration for creating original curricula. Built into the activities were project-based tasks that I could use to assess whether I had achieved my goals, and also to see whether the ten-year-old children were able to display the higher-order thinking skills needed to meaningfully address the subject matter.

I developed my class plan knowing that the preparation and performance of a play would be at its center. I believed this strategy would allow a richer experience than only dealing with the text as a literary artifact of a bygone era. By memorizing lines and making decisions about presentation, young actors make discoveries and connections not required of the casual reader. However, in considering the age-level of the class, I felt it was necessary to preface the production with a series of interactive drama activities to familiarize the students with the play before they had to deal with language they may have had difficulty understanding. I also wanted to include a constructive task following the production, so that I could assess their understanding in an authentic way. I decided to have the students create a website guide to introduce Macbeth to readers who were approaching it for the first time.

Underlying this project was a fundamental belief that a positive early experience with Shakespeare is more likely to foster a life-long relationship with the author than the traditional high-school introduction, which often consists of lectures and reading assignments. As Cullum (1967) suggests “The elementary school is the ideal place to introduce Shakespeare.” (81). In elementary school, there is more room for fun, for tapping into the heart of what makes the plays worthwhile. At this stage, building enthusiasm and confidence with the difficult material can make a significant difference in later grades.

DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

Performing Shakespeare in high school, or even junior high, can be challenging. In this respect, McCaslin (2000) points out that:

This is a challenge to the teacher as well as to the class, but it can be done intelligently and effectively if approached in the right way. First, the play will be far too long as it stands. If the teacher familiarizes the class with the story, has them
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