

Imaginative Departures with Two Shakespearean Plays

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Imagine Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter* as the Catholic high school cheerleader who gets pregnant and must face shame at school, at home, and in her church. Picture Shakespeare's Macbeth who eliminates the current student council president to assume that position himself. Visualize John Proctor of the *Crucible* as a Muslim shopkeeper who is deported from the United States because someone falsely accuses him of being a terrorist. How can these modern parallels of the classics come to life for our students in the English classroom? The answer is through process drama. ■ Though process drama has been used for

years in England, Australia, and many elementary classrooms in the United States, most secondary US teachers are unfamiliar with this method of teaching. According to Jeffrey Wilhelm and Brian Edmiston, leading practitioners in the field, process drama is "creating meaning and visible mental models of our understanding together, in imaginative contexts and situations. It is not about performance, but exploration" (xx). There are no scripts to memorize and no props to gather. Rather, as Betty Jane Wagner adds, "process drama practitioners transform texts, sometimes using them as starting points, but always exploring the spaces between episodes in a story to create an imagined world and change the story into something quite new" (7). In our classrooms, we have used process drama as a tool by which students assume the persona of characters in a literary text and improvise what the characters might say and how they might react in challenging situations. Though process drama can be applied to many genres, our students created modern dramatic interpretations of traditional texts in order to solve problems that parallel those in two Shakespearean plays.

We have found process drama to be a significant and important technique in the teaching of Shakespeare's plays because, despite the fact that

his plays are full of entertaining and manipulative plotting, his language can create a barrier for most high school students. Many do not want to take the extra time, nor do they have an intrinsic interest in analyzing Shakespeare's words in order to interpret the story. Our job is to motivate them to do that. Wilhelm encourages us to make what we teach "significant to students as it helps them make sense of the world and their own lives" (87). By finding ways to transform *Macbeth* and *Othello*, for example, so that the main characters became contemporary teenagers with major decisions to make, we brought the stories closer to our students, who otherwise might not have identified with a king or a military leader and the responsibility such positions carry. Using the student council and the varsity soccer team in modern versions of *Macbeth* and *Othello*, respectively, we found a pretext for why students should care about Macbeth's recent promotion from Thane of Glamis to Thane of Cawdor to King of Scotland and about Iago's resentment toward Othello's choice of lieutenant.

Having a pretext is vital, according to Cecily O'Neill, who explains that "Useful starting points for drama can be found in all kinds of sources . . . [especially those which] involve people who have to sur-

vive in impossible circumstances, make decisions, or solve problems” (Manley and O’Neill 88–89). Inviting our students to make a difficult decision (like Macbeth’s decision to kill Duncan) or to discover the moral fiber of a character (like Iago) helped to create motivation to read and a sense of relevance to their lives. In fact, Jane, a high school senior, remarked that the activities “were good because they let you get inside the true character and really made you think about how a certain character was really feeling.” For most students, the language barrier was broken because they were shown a way into the often dense and intimidating world of Shakespeare.

Kara’s Modern *Othello*

The modern parallel for *Othello* is set in a suburban high school in present day involving a conflict between the varsity soccer captain, Theo (*Othello*), and one of the players, Ian (*Iago*). Ian feels that Theo should have named him rather than Chris (*Cassio*) as co-captain. This “injustice” fuels the plot of the modern drama.

Students entered the parallel drama before even looking at, let alone reading, Shakespeare’s text. First, from detailed written character descriptions that I wrote, students assumed the role of one of these modern characters. I set the mood with the following narrative: *It’s Monday night. You’re home in your bedroom listening to the radio trying to do some homework. However, you’re distracted. You can’t focus. Something is bothering you. In your journal write about what’s bothering you. Why can’t you concentrate on your homework? What’s got you so upset? Be sure to base your entry on an implied tension or issue that is suggested in the character descriptions.* Some students chose to think for a moment before writing; most began immediately.

This episode concluded with me knocking on the desk to simulate someone knocking on their bedroom doors. *Someone’s at the door. Put your journal away. You don’t want anyone finding out your deepest thoughts.* Some students laughed; others immediately closed their notebooks. A few continued writing. Shortly after this, a class discussion revealed two apparent themes in all of the journal entries: stereotyping and jealousy. I told students that these themes would be the focus for our reading of William Shakespeare’s *Othello: The Moor of Venice*. After providing significant historical and contextual information for the play, I assigned the first scene for

homework. Students appeared to move more quickly than usual as they opened their anthologies to the often intimidating words of Shakespeare.

Students continued to engage in modern episodes involving various drama strategies as they read the play. One of the most versatile and accessible was the tableau, a frozen moment of action. Using tableaux, students delved into the internal motivations surrounding Ian’s/*Iago*’s desire for revenge. Because their tableaux were based on Act 1, Scene 2, their objective was to show how Mr. Baker (*Brabantio*) would confront Theo about his relationship with Diana (*Desdemona*). In addition to showing this frozen altercation, they had to create a title and provide speaking lines (spoken when I tapped them on the shoulder) that portrayed at least one of the two themes and clear characterization. No one hesitated. Groups of four and five moved to secluded places in the room. Some asked to go into the hall because they did not want anyone “stealing” their ideas. Their talk was focused and animated. They reviewed moments from the Shakespearean parallel scene as well as from the previous scene. They asked questions and found answers from one another. Some groups went back into Shakespeare’s text to confirm their impressions of the characters. The tableaux that resulted revealed that students were developing a strong understanding of the characters, especially the duplicity of Ian/*Iago*. They were tackling Shakespeare’s language and winning. To conclude the episode, I asked why all of the groups focused on Ian/*Iago*. *Isn’t the title character Theo/*Othello*?* A lively discussion followed. We went back into the text and marked lines that revealed *Iago*’s duplicity. My modern parallel continued through Act 2, Scene 1. Then students created their own modern versions while we read the rest of the play.

Assessment came in two parts. One was their individual journal entries detailing where they took the modern parallel from Act 2 through Act 5. Each student chose one modern character and created a journal from his/her perspective. The second assessment was a group presentation. First, students gathered in teams of three or four to share their journals. Then they created a timeline on poster paper of their collaborative modern version. They negotiated and compromised about what would be the most believable and authentic version to portray to the class. Finally, they used their completed timelines to develop a slideshow presentation. (In process drama this is a sequence of tableaux.) I displayed

the timelines around the classroom and each group presented its modern version to the class via the slideshow method.

Mary's Modern *Macbeth*

Whereas the *Othello* structure is the method of instruction and assessment for teaching a Shakespearean play, the *Macbeth* structure is designed to coincide with traditional methods of instruction and assessment. After students read and discussed the events of Act 1 of *Macbeth* in the traditional manner, I read aloud an original narrative in which Macbeth and Banquo are high school students at the mall. A fortune teller at a booth claims that Macbeth will become student council treasurer, then president. Lady Macbeth enters and informs them that the current treasurer used the prom money to buy an unreturnable stereo for his car. This conflict gave students a pretext for deciding what should happen next as they pondered how a prom could happen now. In the first episode of the drama, students created fundraisers (Macbeth's idea) using revolving role play. For this method, students counted off by twos. The "ones" played the role of Macbeth, and the "twos" played the role of a vendor selling a fundraising idea to Macbeth. After approximately five minutes, each student in the pair switched roles and continued the episode for an additional five minutes. During the episode, the vendors created a picture of their product and a list of the benefits. Playing two opposing roles in the same episode helped the students playing Macbeth in the second segment to empathize with the vendors who were creating a practical fundraising idea, having just done that themselves. In the next episode, all vendors presented their fundraising campaigns to the class; and when I asked the students who should get the credit for all of these fabulous ideas, a majority gave the credit to Macbeth. At that point, I asked students to let the proper authorities know about their opinion. Some opted to inform the student council advisor; others opted to write to the principal. In any case, students were able to punish the Thane of Cawdor appropriately by stripping him of his title as student council treasurer and were able to reward Macbeth in letters to the authorities suggesting what should happen to both characters. This served as episode three and a natural link to Act 2 of *Macbeth*, when students began to see Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's greed intensify.

After students read and discussed the events of Act 2 of *Macbeth*, I read aloud an original narrative in which Macbeth, as the new student council treasurer, quickly wants to be promoted to president. Students recalled that Duncan is currently the student council president, so they were ready to explore what Macbeth would do to eliminate him. In the first episode, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, with help, planted something in Duncan's locker that would get him into enough trouble to lose his position as president. This took the form of an improvisation that groups of four created. In the process, I handed students slips of paper with lines from Shakespeare's Act 2 for them to incorporate into their improvisations. This strategy encouraged the groups to fully understand Shakespeare's words on the slips of paper before adding their own. Some asked me for word definitions; others explored the text for context clues. Each group created meaning together in such unique ways that no two improvisations were alike.

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Once all groups performed, we proceeded to the next episode in which the police (students in role) came to do a random check of lockers. The class, playing police officers, interviewed the object found (a student pretending to be the object in hot-seating or talk-show fashion) and wrote up a report. Because the student playing the object decided to portray illegal substances, the police officers in their report wrote that Duncan was arrested for illegal possession. Finally, in the third episode, students wrote a journal entry from the perspective of Malcolm (vice-president) or Donalbain (secretary), who decides to attend a different school after witnessing what had recently transpired and fearing for his own safety. These entries were used later in the drama structure as the modern version continued to unfold. At the same time, students seemed to more eagerly and confidently read the remaining acts of Shakespeare's play.

Reflections

Not only did we initially notice our students reading Shakespeare's works more confidently and with more enthusiasm, but we also noticed other benefits of this imaginative approach to teaching Shakespeare. In fact, we observed improved reading comprehension, enhanced enjoyment and retention of a piece of literature, and greater student motivation to read and participate in class. Additionally, our drama structures met several state standards.

Improved Reading Comprehension

If they want to participate in the drama, students must read closely. In fact, Anthony Manna claims that process drama "encourage[s] reflective and critical reading" (97). One student, Alicia, wrote about her experience with process drama and *Othello*: "In order to do the modern version, you really had to know what was going on in the actual version." She had to read closely in order to participate; therefore, she was motivated to comprehend more completely. According to Sandra Bidwell, "Truly understanding and internalizing literature requires emotional involvement with the material" (39). In both drama structures, we observed that our students were engaged with the text. On a daily basis they entered and left our classrooms discussing, sometimes even arguing about, the plot of the plays.

Enhanced Enjoyment and Retention of a Piece of Literature

Wendy commented, "This will be one of my more memorable experiences. Doing the reading this way made Shakespeare's work more interesting, broke it down, and made it easier to comprehend." Wilhelm and Edmiston agree that "you remember what you learn much better—as something you did rather than as something you heard in school" (xiii). We found that by eliminating the intimidation factor, we helped students *experience* the plots of Shakespeare's plays and, in turn, they realized that they have more in common with his characters than they first believed.

Greater Student Motivation to Read and Participate in Class

Wagner cites a study in which process drama activities were used with high school juniors. Having the

students engage in process drama while reading a text, instead of using "a traditional approach involving close textual study, research papers, lectures, and passage memorization," resulted in a noteworthy change in "the students' attitude[s] toward literature" (184). We experienced this same transformation with our students' attitudes and motivation when we integrated process drama into our units. After participating in the parallel drama, one student, Andy, wrote, "I liked how we related the story to modern times. It was interesting to see that the basic ideas and themes of Shakespeare can still be incorporated into today's life." Andy certainly found relevance in the study of a text from the distant time period of Renaissance England. Anita Manley explains that in process drama, "Participants cooperate to deepen understanding as they explore issues that are relevant to personal, social, and academic concerns" (5). The key to the success of process drama in the classroom, then, seems to be making the content students are studying applicable to their lives. Not only did students like Andy find Shakespeare more pertinent, but they also found the experience enjoyable. Carol wrote, "It was fun and allowed us to use our imagination and creativity." Because she and her classmates found a way to personally connect with the text, they were motivated to make the story come alive.

Meeting State Standards with Process Drama

State standards for teaching language arts can be met using process drama. For example, Ohio's standards for grade twelve students in the area of reading comprehension require students to "Apply reading comprehension strategies, including making predictions, comparing and contrasting, recalling and summarizing and making inferences and drawing conclusions" (Curriculum and Assessment 78). In the *Macbeth* drama structure, students had to recall and summarize the events of the previous episodes to write a journal entry from the perspective of Malcolm or Donalbain in Act 2. In the *Othello* drama structure, students went into the text and found lines that indicated Iago's duplicity after seeing, through their tableaux, his true/false self depicted. Another state standard requires that twelfth-grade students "compare and contrast motivations and reactions of literary characters confronting similar conflicts . . . using specific examples of characters' thoughts, words and

actions” (94). Both drama structures required students to make comparisons between Shakespeare’s characters and our newly-created modern ones. Finally, state standards involving listening, viewing, and speaking were met as students in both drama structures were required to “apply active listening strategies” as the others in their class became characters in the new play, to “select language appropriate to purpose and audience” as they decided what their character might say, and to “adjust volume, tempo, phrasing, enunciation, voice modulation and inflection to stress important ideas and impact audience response” so that their classmates would believe in their portrayal of their character (155). These connections to the standards are crucial in a time of standards-driven education, when teachers are often asked to defend their methods, particularly those that are imaginative departures from traditional pedagogy.

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Because of our success with process drama and Shakespeare we now approach all literature with endless possibilities of transforming a distant text into an engaging memorable experience for both teacher and student. We now envision George and Lennie from *Of Mice and Men* as wandering minor-league baseball players searching for their American Dream in the “big leagues.” We now tune in to Wrestlemania, where Hulk Beowulf Hogan

and Stone Cold Steve Grendel vie for professional wrestling supremacy. Just as with Shakespeare, our students will no longer be passive and seat-bound; rather, they will be active participants in a drama, feeling and dealing with universal life experiences. We expect students who experience this innovative teaching tool to echo the words of high school senior, Wendy: “The way you taught this section was a very rare and daring form, but the outcome of it was a wonderful result because the majority of us can walk away and say that we comprehend Othello.” The process of drama made that possible.

Works Cited

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