

Exploring Shakespeare with your students

Some thoughts from Mary Hartman and Bard Education

Why Shakespeare?

1. Exploring Shakespeare aligns with the BC Curriculum and supports social and emotional learning.

Exploring Shakespeare's plays through active, playful, student-centred inquiry supports all the Core Competencies and provides opportunities to engage with all the Big Ideas in both Arts and English Language Arts curricula. Theatre is all about communication, and Shakespeare's language provides excellent opportunities to develop creative and critical thinking. Inviting students to share and reflect on their own insights, ideas, and interpretations of the text while collaborating with others helps develop both a sense of self and a curiosity about others. Furthermore, this approach gives students agency to decode complex language and find practical solutions to how they'll interpret it.

2. Shakespeare offers the power of both drama and poetry.

Drama is the ultimate democratic literary form: it has no central narrative voice. Every character speaks for themselves. Theatre is the ultimate democratic art form: myriad artists collaborate to bring a play to life. Every time a play is performed, it will be different because there are different people involved. Both the individual and the collective are celebrated. Add to this the power of poetry: Shakespeare's language transcends realism to resonate for us on many levels. Shakespeare's plays include a vast array of human experiences and emotions, and they offer language to express it all.

3. Shakespeare's plays provide complexity and nuance.

In our increasingly polarized world, it's invaluable to expose students to complexity and nuance. Shakespeare created characters who defy categorization as 'heroes' and 'villains': they're complex people in challenging situations who make choices that we can interrogate and to which we can relate.

4. Shakespeare's plays raise compelling questions.

Many people look to Shakespeare for answers, but he doesn't provide them. Instead, Shakespeare's plays give us something much more valuable: questions. Through the plays, Shakespeare raises questions that resonate for us with the same urgency they had centuries ago. Presenting these questions to our students prompts them to think for themselves and grapple with what it means to be human.

Top 5 tips for supporting this exploration

1. **Plays, not Works.** Shakespeare's language is complex and can often feel like work. That's quite understandable. After all, his plays are usually published as *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. But here's the thing – treating Shakespeare's plays like work takes all the fun out of them.

Consider this: William Shakespeare was a *playwright* who wrote *plays* that were performed by *players* (as actors were known at the time) in *playhouses* (as theatres were known at the time). Recognize a pattern? Embracing play over work will transform the way your students approach the material, making it less intimidating and more delightful.

2. **Text before Context.** Start by giving your students short, image-rich lines without context and invite them to explore and interpret these lines. Let your students puzzle out the meaning and discover how the words and ideas resonate for them. **Then** share the context with them: what play the lines are from, who says them, what's happening when the lines are spoken. Discuss how that might change or expand their understanding of the words and the lines. This is far easier and more effective than starting with the context and then trying to convince the students that the material is relevant. It will also help your students relate to the language, have empathy for the characters who speak these lines, and have a sense of ownership over Shakespeare's language.
3. **Spoil it!** Don't expect your students to glean the story from reading Shakespeare's complicated language. Tell them what happens, and then look at the details together. Remember that Shakespeare stole most of his plots; it's not the plot that's most important and delightful, it's the story: how the characters and events are conjured and expressed through the language.
4. **Less is more.** Covering a whole play can be daunting. But there's no need to start at the beginning of the play and slog through the whole thing. Instead, find the most compelling, most engaging bits and start with those. Invite your students to explore these snippets of language, or speeches, or short scenes while you fill in the plot details between them. Don't 'cover' the material, 'discover' it together!
5. **Avoid Bardolatry.** "Bardolatry," or the excessive admiration of Shakespeare, considers Shakespeare to be "The Bard", placing him on a pedestal as if he were better than all other writers. We prefer to treat Shakespeare as one of the many skilled bards who have existed across all cultures throughout human history. And notice and discuss when Shakespeare isn't perfect. Invite students to interrogate and challenge the language when characters say things that are racist, misogynist, colourist, ableist, or otherwise contrary to our values today.