



# *Discovery Zone*

## **Exploring Shakespeare with Students**

### *Underlying Philosophy and Practical Strategies*

Teachers are often expected to 'cover' material. What if we invited students to 'discover' instead? Active, inquiry-based exploration of Shakespeare that places students at the centre of the process can lead to remarkable discoveries and powerful learning.

### **The Power of Play**

#### **Plays vs. Works**

Shakespeare wrote plays. He was a playwright. His plays were performed by a company of players in buildings called playhouses. But the big, heavy, familiar book is almost always referred to as The Complete Works of William Shakespeare. So, we've gone from plays to works, and we've been working on Shakespeare ever since. Working on Shakespeare takes all the fun out of it, makes it a whole lot harder than it is and completely misses the point. Playing Shakespeare in the classroom engages students on multiple levels holistically, fostering joy as well as deep learning. You can read about the [research](#) that supports the power of play in learning on the [website](#) of the National Institute for Play or read Stuart Brown's book, [Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul](#).

#### **Playing vs. Performing**

While some students have a natural affinity for performing and may even choose to take elective courses in drama, there are others who are naturally shy and even intimidated by the idea of performance. This is especially true in general classes such as English Language Arts. By adopting a spirit of exploration and discovery in the classroom, teachers create an environment in which students can play at their own comfort level. Issuing an invitation rather than an expectation will allow students to find the ways they express themselves. The Discovery Zone resources provide opportunities for creative self-expression through visual art, music, and creative writing, as well as through performance.

### **Text vs. Context**

#### **Text before Context**

Quite often a Shakespeare unit begins with pictures of the Globe playhouse or the sentence, "William Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564". It's no wonder it's then difficult to convince students that Shakespeare is relevant today. Instead of context, why not start with text? Give a teenager a line like, "Thy lips are warm" or "You are too hot" and they'll connect with Shakespeare immediately. Lines like "My heart dances" or "O I could weep my spirit from mine eyes" or "Full of scorpions is my mind" or "I will move storms" are engaging and resonant at first glance and offer students an opportunity to connect with the language. It's worth telling students along the way that Shakespeare was writing more than 400 years ago, but that's not what's most important, especially at the beginning.

## Text vs. Context, continued

### The Text out of Context (at least to start)

Giving students the opportunity to experience lines like these and play with them – without the burden of trying to get it “right” – fosters personal connection and creates investment. Having established this connection, it’s then interesting for students to see how the meaning of the line might change in its context, as they learn about the character and the story.

### How much text?

There are some secondary school students who will benefit from reading an entire Shakespeare play, but most will find more value in having deeper engagement with shorter passages. Depending on the grade level and the amount of time available, a meaningful experience with Shakespeare might involve a collection of individual lines from a variety of plays, brief image-rich passages, several lines spoken by a single character, a deep dive into a single speech or scene, or a unit on a play that engages deeply with selected passages rather than ‘covering’ the entire play.

## Challenging assumptions about Shakespeare’s language

### Old language vs. young language

The most common complaint about Shakespeare is the language, and almost everyone thinks of it as old. But five years ago, were you five years older than you are today? Of course not. Here’s a new way of framing it: Shakespeare was writing when the English language was 400 years younger than it is today. So, Shakespeare’s language isn’t older than ours. It’s younger, more energetic, more vibrant, more daring, more outrageous than the language we speak today. And that’s why young people are perfect for Shakespeare.

### Old language vs. new language

Further, Shakespeare gets credit for coining about 1,700 words and usages. In other words, around 1,700 words and usages appear in print for the first time in Shakespeare’s plays. Now, in the past decade, lexicographers have been whittling the list down as they find slightly earlier usages, but it is undisputed that in the 150 years between 1500 and 1650, more than 10,000 words entered the English language. More than half of these neologisms are still in use today. So not only is Shakespeare’s language young, but it’s also new. Since young people are steeped in their own neologisms, it’s another reason they’re a great match for Shakespeare.

### Student agency, authority, and ownership

Allow students to choose the text they’d like to explore and the ways they’d like to explore it. After helping them discover what it all means, ask them what it means to them and how it resonates. Encourage them to connect the Shakespeare with their own experience. Honour their interpretations. Creating a non-judgmental, appreciative and celebratory atmosphere in the classroom will foster curiosity, creativity, and community while supporting deep, meaningful learning.

Find 50+ FREE resources to support this exploration in the **Discovery Zone**.