

Discovering Shakespeare in the Digital Era

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Abstract

People who love language and literature always have a special place for Shakespeare in their hearts. Shakespeare is read throughout the ages and understood using various approaches. Recently the Internet has digitalised the way in which Shakespeare is read, understood, and interpreted. There are a lot of ways to deal with the creative, collaborative, and interactive environment of Shakespeare. A variety of electronic resources has been used in the classrooms to teach Shakespeare effectively. Pedagogies and methodologies are enhanced by the strengths of the Internet. This paper will explore the digital approaches in which Shakespeare can be discovered by the language / literature teachers and students in the high-tech era.

Shakespeare belongs to the sixteenth century stage. But he is relevant even in the twenty-first century classroom. His works are translated into various languages and are adapted as films throughout the world. He has coined new words and phrases and has contributed both to the English language and drama. Shakespeare is talented in taking a familiar story and creating a fantastic stage-play with comedy, tragedy, suspense, philosophy, psychology, etc. Academicians and non-academicians manage to create a variety of visual worlds with the help of his language which is poetically rich and strikingly vibrant.

Literature classes share an exclusive desk with Shakespeare. Literature students read and enjoy Shakespeare. They never forget him or his characters throughout their lifetime. Teachers cherish the memory of reading Shakespeare for the first time, get delighted by teaching Shakespeare every day, and feel astonished whenever Shakespeare gives a new nuance of meaning to life through his drama and poetry. It is no surprise that Shakespeare has become a special attraction to Multimedia and Web Technologies today.

Gone are those days when the teachers read Shakespeare in falling and rising tones and the students listened with their mouths wide-open. Understood or not, they took notes from the teacher's speech as they did not have any other source for learning. Today there are lots of

theatre technologies, stage designs, and multimedia tools. Students have a lot of resources to learn Shakespeare. The recent advancements in technology have led digital communications into a new learning phase. Creativity and experimentation have joined hands with technology to enhance Shakespeare studies.

Learning Objectives in Shakespeare's Plays

Shakespeare's plays are popular in language and literature classes. There are various reasons for why his plays are prescribed for the school or college level studies. His plays can be read or learnt to know his life, times, and theatre; to explore some of his great themes such as kingship, romance, and ambition; and to discuss the ways in which some of the issues, themes, and ideas in his plays remain relevant in the 21st century.

In cultural point of view, Shakespeare's plays can be read to understand the significance of the social, historical and cultural contexts; to discuss how characters' actions reflect the various contexts of Shakespeare's time; to understand the cultural significance of Shakespeare and his place in our literary heritage; and to appreciate the moral and philosophical significance of Shakespeare's plays and their relevance for a contemporary audience.

In terms of characterisation, Shakespeare's plays can be read to understand the meaning of 'character' in a story; to identify the distinctive features of his famous characters; to appreciate how characters are brought to life through performance; to appreciate how characters interact and create dramatic tension through their language and actions; to understand the complexity of Shakespeare's characters and to make connections with other plays by Shakespeare; to understand how characters are developed during the course of a play; and to discuss the archetypal, psychological, feminist aspects, etc. of Shakespeare's characters.

In terms of interpretation, Shakespeare's plays are read to be appreciated that they can be performed and interpreted in different ways; to realise that stories can be told in different ways (including dramatisation); and to make a confident, critical, and personal response to a whole play, using close textual reference.

In linguistic point of view, Shakespeare's plays are read to understand that the text is a script which is brought to life in performance, to identify some of the distinctive features of Shakespeare's language and how language has changed over time, to appreciate the dramatic conventions and linguistic qualities of scenes and understand their significance to the play as a whole, etc. (*Shakespeare for All Ages and Stages* 10-20).

Difficulties Faced by Teachers and Students

Shakespeare can be read, understood, and interpreted in many ways. However, many teachers and students face difficulties while teaching or learning Shakespeare's plays as a part of the curriculum. Some lack relevant resources on Shakespeare's plays. The interpretations are done or written mostly by English authors, so there is no Indian touch to the interpretations and analyses. Shakespeare's language is archaic. Even native speakers find it difficult to understand the original plays. The teachers and students rely more on summaries which degrade the value of Shakespearean language. The relevance of a 16th century dramatist to the 21st century life and world is not sought or found out by most of the teachers and students. Many teachers and students think that Shakespeare is outdated. They are not aware of the different approaches in which Shakespeare's works can be dealt with.

Discovering the Digital Shakespeare

The world has become high-tech. To overcome the difficulties in reading or understanding Shakespeare, the teachers and students can seek help from the digital media. Digital Shakespeare intertwines three principles: text as language, text as theatre, and text as student performance (Ochse, 47). Roleplays and stage plays are the popular techniques to teach or learn Shakespeare effectively. Comic Strips and SMS Shakespeare, Remix Shakespeare, Rap Shakespeare, *No Fear Shakespeare*, Tamil Shakespeare, *Youtube Shakespeare*, Audio Shakespeare, Video Shakespeare, Animated Shakespeare, and *Versoapp Shakespeare* are some of the 21st century learning / teaching strategies used to discover the Digital Shakespeare.

Shakespeare in Comic Strips and SMS

Many students had examined the ways in which Shakespeare's plays were reworked and reproduced over time, explored the techniques as well as cultural and historical contexts that inform such representations, and experimented with the ways of reworking Shakespeare (Denley, 136). One of the students had created a comic strip *Confrontation at Dunsinane* as a presentation of *Marvel Comics* and *DC Comics* in conjunction with *Immortal Bard Comics*. Another student had created "*Much Ado About Nothing: the SMS version*" where the character Beatrice discussed her attitudes towards men and marriage with her uncles, Leonato and Antonio, through a text message conversation. (Denley, 136)

Remix Shakespeare

Sampling & remixing; borrowing & reshaping; appropriating & recontextualizing are relevant to Shakespeare's theatre as well as today's students who read Shakespeare (Pettitt, 2009). In a classroom project initiated by Shamburg & Craighead, the students chose movies from different genres (e.g., *Star Wars*, *Happy Gilmore*, *Fight Club*, and *Twilight*) to use as backdrops for their *Romeo and Juliet* movie. They chose relevant prop and costuming ideas to remix. They used movie trailers from the Internet to introduce their remix movie (77).

In their second activity *Audio Macbeth*, the students were planning, rehearsing, and re-recording their readings of the text. They remixed a variety of music and sound effects to create an audio play. For example, they used musical clips such as a creepy techno sound to a lone Western guitar to create the soundtrack for the Witches' first meeting in the audio play. They made use of crunching potato chips as the sound of the murderers' feet in leaves and the sound of coconuts as the horses of Banquo and Fleance. They were concerned with the words in action and in context (Shamburg & Craighead, 77).

According to Shamburg & Craighead, "Shakespeare and his plays are products of remix" (76). They gave interesting illustrations to prove that Shakespeare was a great appropriator. As remix has become very popular in the digital era, their students remix sound effects, audio clippings, backdrops, costumes, dialogues, trailers, etc. from the Internet to create their own *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*.

Rap Shakespeare

Shakespeare becomes 'a toy chest and a toolset' which allow students to live in the settings and use the language the Bard has crafted in the 16th century. (Shamburg & Craighead, 74) For a classroom project, Terry, a student at Toronto's York Mills Collegiate Institute, wrote a rap song out of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. "My name is Macbeth / I'm the Thane of Glamis. / I might not be the king / but I'm still hella famous" as a rap song became a big hit as a Rap Shakespeare. In the *Othello* rap, two students sat in front of a blackboard, rapping lyrics out of a spiral notebook. The students did a spot-on summary of the play with a good beat: "Iago's lying, Iago's cheating / Iago needs a good beating / Iago's lying, Iago's cheating / He's got to stop all this deceiving" (Smith 3)

YouTube Shakespeare

YouTube's motto is "Broadcast Yourself." Participating in a virtual network of Shakespearean artists, both as producers and critics, *YouTube* gives students a real stake in the shaping of Shakespeare for our time (Desmet, 69). It contains Shakespeare audiobooks, animated plays, movies (old and new), amateur videos, expert lectures, etc. It also contains rarities from the popular culture such as the Beatles performing the "Pyramus and Thisbe" scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to an episode from *Gilligan's Island* that involves a performance of *Hamlet* (Desmet, 65).

Teachers use *YouTube Shakespeare* for lesson plans and classroom instruction. They encourage the students to publish their Shakespeare productions on *YouTube*. Students who produce or reproduce Shakespeare performances for class assignments or stage performances upload their videos in *YouTube*. They evaluate amateur Shakespearean video productions, involving in self-review and peer review processes (68). *YouTube* helps students appreciate

literary details in Shakespeare and learn more about the cultural and aesthetic value of imitation, parody, and irony (65).

No Fear Shakespeare

No Fear Shakespeare provides Shakespeare's language side-by-side with a Modern English translation. It gives line-by-line modern translation of Shakespeare's plays. III BA students of CTTE College for Women, Chennai, read the Modern English Translation of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. They were able to understand the difference between Shakespeare's English and Modern English with respect to vocabulary, sentence structures, grammar, etc. They were able to identify and enjoy the figurative language (similes, metaphors, imagery, etc.) used by Shakespeare, visualise the scenes in the play, and understand the context better.

Tamil Shakespeare

A few students who were more proficient in Tamil than in English were given the English - Tamil translation of Shakespeare's play. They enjoyed reading the translations and gave the feedback that they could understand the plays in a better way. Students who were not proficient in Tamil did not show interest in *Tamil Shakespeare*.

Audio Shakespeare

Audiobook of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* was downloaded from the Internet and was given to the III B.A. students. They tried hearing it using the text as reference but could not understand the lesson. They could not follow *Audio Shakespeare* as the audio book was in British English.

Animated Shakespeare

An animated movie of *The Tempest* was downloaded from the Internet and shown to the beginners. As they were unable to follow the language, they were instructed to read the subtext while watching it. Initially the students felt bored as they couldn't understand the play. To avoid boredom, the teacher introduced the characters and narrated the plot to the students.

When the animated movie was shown at a stretch, the students felt boring. To avoid monotony, the teacher paused after each scene and asked questions to the students checking their understanding of the play. As the students were enthusiastic to find answers to the questions posed by the teacher, they watched the scenes carefully and answered the questions correctly. After seeing the full animation movie, they gave the feedback that they could understand the play in a better way.

Movie Shakespeare

Filmmakers use a lot of strategies to adapt Shakespeare's plays to the modern cinema. The students find it challenging to study the techniques used by them in modern adaptations of *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Macbeth*. III B.A. (English) students viewed *The Tempest* trailer

and movie. They identified the differences between the trailer and the movie, and reviewed the movie as they analysed the text in the classroom.

Verso Shakespeare

Video clippings on the play *The Tempest* were identified and uploaded in *Versoapp*. III B.A. (English) of C.T.T.E College for Women used the classroom code and viewed the video clippings, anytime anywhere. They also typed the answers for the questions in Comments box. They found the video clippings very useful as they could visualise the scenes and understand the context / characters in a better way.

Conclusion

Subjecting Shakespeare to the tools of digital technology is not only useful but also natural. There is a connection between Shakespeare's age and today's digital media. Both are not print-dominated; both witness a collaborative creative production and liberal use of others' works. (Shamburg & Craighead, 74) Connecting the values of performance and the trends of digital culture can turn Shakespeare into a Trojan horse - a deceptively simple concept that can be filled with powerful ideas. (Shamburg & Craighead, 77)

Remix and Rap Shakespeare make the 16th century Bard a 21st century rock star. The students learnt imitation, parody, and irony through *YouTube Shakespeare*. Students were able to appreciate Shakespeare's poetically rich and strikingly vibrant language using *No Fear Shakespeare*. Students who were good in Tamil were able to understand and interpret *Tamil Shakespeare*. They used Shakespeare audio books, trailers, movies, etc. from the *YouTube* to understand Shakespeare in a better way. They viewed video clippings and answered questions in *Versoapp*. Discovering Shakespeare is indeed challenging and interesting in the Digital Era!

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