

It's elementary! Learning and building community through Shakespeare

Abstract

This research examines two distinct but related approaches in which elementary school students can benefit from being meaningfully engaged in the works of William Shakespeare. On Lopez Island in Washington State, Richard Carter works through Shakespeare with students to discover how best to present these plays for their rural community. He guides these young people through rehearsals to become comfortable and confident in depicting their characters, and as part of this process, builds a sense of community. The rehearsals lead to a four-day festival where full productions with costumes, lights, and sound are shared on a community stage for the public. In Vancouver, British Columbia, Sue Mack also explores Shakespeare with her Montessori elementary students using a process drama approach that examines the story and characters from a literacy/language arts angle, focusing on vocabulary, story structure, comprehension, setting, conflict, and character development. She uses devices such as role playing, hot seating and tableaux to help her students enter and explore the stories of Shakespeare. From there, the students read an abbreviated script and begin to rehearse. The process leads to a performance staged in their classroom with minimal production elements.

Although secondary students around the world commonly study and often perform the works of William Shakespeare, there are far fewer instances in which elementary school children are engaged in learning experiences related to the Bard's plays.¹ This paper will examine two innovative approaches used by educators/facilitators to explore Shakespeare with children at the elementary school level. Of particular focus will be how these projects have the potential to build community in various capacities. Initially we will examine the work of Richard Carter, who has been engaging elementary students in Shakespeare productions for over ten years on Lopez Island in Washington State. This will be followed by a look at another approach used by Sue Mack, who in

¹ The innovative, inspirational and well documented work of Rafe Esquith and his grade 5 Hobart Shakespearians is an exception. Esquith, a grade 5 teacher in Los Angeles, and his class of inner city youth yearly study and perform unabridged versions of Shakespeare in their classroom (<http://www.hobartshakespeareans.org>; Esquith 2007).

Vancouver, British Columbia, has been exploring Shakespeare with her Montessori grade 1, 2, 3 class for a couple of years. Our intention here is not to compare these approaches, but instead to begin an introductory exploration into the various benefits that are gained by engaging elementary students in Shakespeare. This paper marks the beginning of a broader and more extensive research study into elementary educators/facilitators and their students employing theatre for community development.

Research studies on using theatre with elementary students indicate learning benefits in various areas: reading comprehension (Deasy 2002, Wagner 1998); writing (Moore & Caldwell 1993); motivation (Deasy 2002); problem-solving (Catterall 2002); empathy (Kardash & Wright 1987). It seems clear that there are numerous gains to be made when exposing children to theatre processes. In this paper, we would like to build on this research by looking specifically at how theatre impacts community building in the two elementary settings mentioned above. By nature, theatre is a social activity; therefore it seems fitting to incorporate this art form within a classroom or group setting if one of the objectives is to build community. However, social impact and the community building that occurs when creating theatre with young children has yet to be thoroughly researched (McKean 2006).

Richard Carter and The Community Shakespeare Company

In the first of these two contexts, we will explore the work by Community Shakespeare Company, which is headed by artistic director Richard Carter along with producer Susan Wilson on Lopez Island, population 2000. The company works with both elementary and secondary students, but for the purposes of this study we will focus

on the work with the younger children. Over the years, Carter, a teacher-artist, has developed a method of working with his young actors that is both artistically engaging and community focused. With feedback from the young actors he edits and adapts the Shakespeare plays for age and ability. For instance, his latest project, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is edited to 90 minutes for the grade 1-7 performers. In this adaptation, he maintains much of Shakespeare's original text, but also includes his own iambic pentameter to maintain the flow of the play and to synthesize the longer and descriptive passages that were edited. The script Carter brings to the first rehearsal has been thoroughly worked; nonetheless, the young actors continually provide him with feedback on how best to adapt the play for production (<http://www.communityshakespeare.org>; Peterson, O'Connor, Newman 2006).

Carter has an MFA in playwriting and has been working with youth for over 30 years in various environments. His understanding of how children learn along with his passion for introducing theatre to them have been integral in the success of his company. He guides young students through rehearsals to become comfortable and confident in depicting their characters, providing them with fundamental skills to increase the chances of success during performance:

I focus on voice (projection, diction), with the classic example being that when kids slow down and can be heard, their funny lines get laughs. I also target physicality, specifically, how a character stands and walks, and I emphasize that this characterization must exist from the moment an actor walks on the stage until the moment they exit. This has the "by-product" of teaching kids to stay very focused for a given period of time (R. Carter).

The rehearsal period, which typically occurs over a 10 week-period, leads to a four-day festival where full productions with costumes, lights, and sound are shared on a community stage for the public. The community of Lopez becomes fully involved in the production, in that parents and community members help with costumes, sets, props, and in certain cases with actors playing older characters (J. Carter & Ewart, 2007). Although the final production is something Carter and his company target when they begin to rehearse, the essence of what he sees the company achieving is a sense of community among the young actors and the different generations:

I focus on creating an environment which is fun, safe, and inspirational. Within this environment, I set high expectations for behavior (centered around mutual respect). My experience teaches me that when we do this, social interaction amongst children organically produces positive results, particularly in the area of self-confidence. The "learning" which occurs (reading skills, acting techniques, knowledge of a particular subject such as Shakespeare) is essentially a by-product, albeit a happy one (R. Carter).

Success as performers is an integral aspect of the process, but according to Carter “creating an atmosphere in which young people can feel safe, supported and nurtured” becomes equally as important (<http://www.communityshakespeare.org>).

In a study on the educational benefits of Community Shakespeare Company, Jeanna Carter (2004) found that the most significant impact was the creation of community. Skills such as public speaking, reading, comprehension were found to be significantly impacted, but while interviewing current and former members, J. Carter discovered how individuals were “empowered by their participation in each production,

mainly because of the community building process, which is recognized not only by a closing celebration, but which continues in the development of ongoing relationships with the intergenerational community members” (J. Carter, p. 2-3).

A Midsummer Night's Dream

In his most recent project (September-November 2007) working with elementary students, Carter notes some of the community benefits that have arisen during rehearsals:

Yesterday, for example, I was working with 1st graders as the Faeries. My daughter (Breton), in grade 7, said to me, "I remember when I was a fairy." It put her current status (as Helena) in perspective for her; and another 7th grader who is playing Titania taught the little girls when to say their lines and what do in their parts, without my having to ask her. This mentoring naturally takes place in the setting, as part of the natural social activity. What more could we ask for as adults? Likewise, the realization by Breton of how far she has come (from Fairy to Helena) is something I couldn't teach her (R. Carter).

Sue Mack and the Shakespeare project

Taking a slightly different approach in her work with children in grades 1, 2, 3, Sue Mack uses Shakespeare's theatre as a cross-disciplinary way of learning in her multi-age classroom. She is new to using theatre as part of her teaching and curriculum, as it is only in the last two years that she has turned her attention to incorporating this art form into her teaching practice. Although she has experienced the arts throughout her life, she has no formal training in theatre aside from a few theatre workshops and an

undergraduate course in Drama Education. Nonetheless, as a Montessori teacher, she continuously seeks ways to make learning child-centered and independent. Her philosophy to teaching is “to ignite curiosity in her students, so that [she] can then draw out ideas from them, intrinsically motivating them to learn for learning’s sake” (Mack, 2007). This approach to learning is used within her theatre lessons, where she presents “Shakespeare’s plays as an invitation to explore” (Mack, 2007). In the months leading towards the production, she uses process drama strategies (Bowell & Heap 2001; O’Neill 1995; Saxton & Miller 2004) to develop skills, curiosity about the story, confidence to work through drama, and build trust and safety among the students in her classroom. During this time, her students explore the story and characters from a literacy/language arts approach, focusing on vocabulary, story structure, comprehension, setting, conflict, character development. She uses devices such as role playing, hot seating and tableaux (Fels & Belliveau 2008) to help her students enter and explore the stories of Shakespeare. In the past two years, she has used Lois Burdett’s *Shakespeare Can be Fun* series. This collection, written in a narrative format, presents the Shakespeare plays in rhyming couplets and includes many illustrations created by elementary children. After working with process drama and thoroughly exploring the story using Burdett’s books, Mack introduces the students to an abbreviated script of the selected play and begins to rehearse. In the Spring of 2007, the play Mack and her students explored was *The Tempest*. We will take a brief look at particular moments in the process undertaken by Mack and her students.

The Tempest

As many teachers and directors working with youth have experienced, casting a play is a sensitive issue that needs to be done in a thoughtful and delicate manner (Gonzales 2006). Mack invited her students to write down on a piece of paper the parts they would like to perform, or whether they wanted to work on production elements (i.e. props, set, music). Because the abbreviated script only had 13 roles and she had 16 of her 21 students wanting to play a role, she decided to have two casts: the Ship's Company and the Island Company. Most of the students were part of both casts, except for the major roles (Prospero, Ariel, Miranda, Ferdinand) which were played by separate actors from each company. A surprise was that none of the children opted to play Caliban. Even after some encouragement, no one in the class wanted to interpret the half-man/half-monster. So, Mack took on the role herself, which in the end proved quite fitting given her teaching philosophy. Caliban is perhaps the one with the least power in the play, and as a result in the rehearsing Mack was able to momentarily release the power of being the teacher, in charge of the classroom. Literally low to the ground, Caliban (Mrs. Mack) must adhere to the power of others. In this sense, she gave ownership to the students in the creative realm and this gave them the sense that they could make staging decisions. This sense of ownership then manifested itself in other aspects of the production: in their creation of the music, set, costumes, posters, post-show party. According to Mack, "their ownership became present in other areas of their learning. Some of the children seemed to blossom with a new self-confidence in their reading, writing and independent projects" (Mack, 2007).

Some of the most notable aspects Mack discovered during her process of working with Shakespeare included student motivation, commitment and a sense of community.

Each morning students would ask: “Can we rehearse? Can you read more about Shakespeare? When are we going to work on *The Tempest*?” This enthusiasm led students to the library to discover more about Shakespeare. It also led others to construct ships that would represent the wrecked vessel on which Duke Antonio, Sebastian, Ferdinand and others initially sailed on. Masks were created to depict the more fantastical characters such as Prospero, Ariel and Caliban. As well, one of the students, who had opted not to perform decided he wanted to compose the music for the play (which he did splendidly). Initially it was thought that the play would be done as a reader’s theatre, but within two weeks of rehearsing the play, the majority of children were off book and by performance time all of them had their texts (as well as that of others) memorized.

Community impact

The parents and school administration were supportive from the beginning but the expectations were quite unknown. When welcoming the audience for the fourth and final performance, the school principal mentioned how Mrs. Mack had indicated to her at the beginning of the school year, in September, that she intended to do a Shakespeare play with her grade 1, 2, 3 class: “I encouraged the idea but with the busyness of the school year and the various responsibilities associated with teaching this age group I did not expect to see a Shakespeare production with music, costumes, set done in June” (Principal’s comments). One of the parents wrote their thoughts on this project and on the impact of this production:

Mrs. Mack has [...] opened up a whole new realm of possibility for integrating language arts, theatre, history, geography, team-building, and so on. The possibilities are basically limitless, and the impact could be absolutely profound. Just look at the effect on our class. I'm guessing most of them will

never forget this, and they now have a personal relationship with one of the greatest achievements of western civilization. [...]For a few magical weeks last June, those children were the Kings and Queens of Mrs. Mack's enchanted island. I can't think of a greater gift a teacher, or a school, could give to a class (parent comment on e-mail).

Conclusion

Many factors impact the learning and outcome in both these settings, such as the experience/expertise of the facilitators, the school's reception to such work, the readiness of the students; however, similar results seem to emerge in the two groups: first, a curiosity and deep desire for learning intrinsically about Shakespeare; and, perhaps more importantly, a positive community environment. The next step of this research is to document more closely how community is being developed in these two elementary settings, as well as other settings where facilitators are using Shakespeare with elementary aged students. A more in depth literature review along with the selection of appropriate methodologies for the research will be developed to help generate and analyze the emerging data. Methods will include interviewing elementary students, facilitators, teachers, parents and community members, along with conducting focus groups. In addition, the researchers will observe the process in these two sites over a few years and document observations of the ongoing community development that is perceived while the elementary students are engaging with Shakespeare.

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