Distance Learning and Role Play: A Web-Bard Pedagogy

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As most any high school or college English teacher can verify, it is the rare group of students that approaches the study of Shakespeare with anything other than a mixture of anxiety over the difficulty of making sense of the plays' language and annoyance that, once again, they will be forced to engage in an activity they find both unjustifiably difficult and irrelevant to their lives. Students dread the "Old English," as they mistakenly call it, they will be expected to decipher and the daily plot quizzes they know they cannot pass (at least not without the help of SparkNotes.com). They balk at the maddening glossary at the bottom of the page, interrupting their reading every other line, and the confusing crowd of characters (all with funny-sounding names) they will be expected to disentangle. They worry over the lectures and discussions that will parade out all the usual half-understood English class shibboleths such as "motif," "theme," and "symbol." Most of all, and worse still, they fear the imminent prospect of being bored out of their minds.

The apprehensions students bring to Shakespeare are well understood by most teachers, the best of whom have at their disposal a ready reserve of tips and techniques, on call at a restless moment's notice. More unexpectedly, surveys conducted with pre- and in-service teachers show that the worries Shakespeare provokes are not limited just to students. A good number of those undergoing teacher training and development in our classrooms, at both the undergraduate and graduate level, admit to frustrations similar to those expressed by students. Students, many have come to determine, are regrettably correct and Shakespeare, "really is" "stuffy," "unapproachable," "difficult" and, it must be said, "boring." Still, they are expected to teach him and so they will buckle down, focus on the task at hand, muddle through as best they can—and look forward to "The Great Gatsby" in the spring.

Background

The project described here began as an effort both to learn more about student and teacher attitudes toward Shakespeare, and to try to influence those attitudes through a combination of online and in-class instructional techniques. Each semester for the last three years a faculty member from the Department of English has joined with a member of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at a Southern-Central Regional University to engage in an interdisciplinary project that pairs synchronous online role play in the course management system, Blackboard, with traditional face-to-face meetings. The purpose of the project has been to explore Shakespeare's life and works with pre-service and in-service teachers in a course taught in the University's College of Education. While instruction in Shakespeare has been the project's primary rationale, of nearly equal importance was the desire to model online role play as a promising teaching strategy for these same students, one that will move students and teachers alike beyond their initial, often ambivalent or even negative, assumptions about studying Shakespeare.

Prior research has shown the efficacy of role play as an educational technique, which asks students to enter an imaginary world or to consider a problem or idea in light of a particular, pre-defined situation (Van Ments, 1989). Research also indicates that online role play is becoming an increasingly popular teaching method, one that is a logical Internet-era extension of traditional role play pedagogy (Bell, 2001a; 2001b; Freeman & Capper, 1999). Role play, whether online or face-to-face, is useful both because it is highly experiential and because, as Bell has written, "it can lead to powerful behavioral and attitudinal outcomes" (2001a, p. 68). Perhaps most important, role play is fun; it is one of the few classroom activities that is enjoyed by nearly all students who engage in it (Van Ments, 1989; Bell, 2001a). As for instruction in Shakespeare, little work seems to have been done regarding electronic instruction in general, let alone online role play in particular (Birmingham, Davies, & Greiffenhagen, 2002).

Methods

Project Activity Summary

The Shakespeare role play project as designed and implemented it contained four separate but interlocking activities, each building on the others over a span of several weeks. These activities were:

- Asynchronous Discussion Questions
- Synchronous Online Interview with Shakespeare
- Asynchronous Online Assessment
- Face-to-Face Assessment with Shakespeare

While the first activity, in which students formulated discussion questions for their interview with Shakespeare, worked well as an asynchronous online activity, it can also be undertaken successfully face-to-face. Likewise, student assessment of the interview would work equally well either electronically or in the classroom. A face-to-face meeting with the instructor role playing Shakespeare was, however, considered to be not just desirable but crucial, for reasons discussed in more detail below.

Project Activity One: Asynchronous Discussion Questions

Much work was done to prepare for the online role play. Students in the class began the project several weeks before the interview was scheduled by reading and researching material to formulate pre-role play questions for Shakespeare. These questions provided a useful index to students' initial attitudes toward the study of Shakespeare; they also indicated what students think is most important for them to learn about him and what they think is most important to teach their own students. Student-generated questions for Shakespeare tended to break down into the following broad categories:

- Biographical: (For example, "How many children did you have?" "When did you retire from the stage?" "How old were you when you married?")
- Historical/Cultural : ("Why were women not allowed on stage?" "Did your company ever perform at Court?" "What sort of people attended your plays?")
- Pedagogical: ("At what age would you introduce modern students to your plays?" "What are some ways to teach *Macbeth*?" "Should students be forced to memorize lines?")
- Personal: ("Did you love your wife?" "Were you jealous of Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe?" "Did you base characters on people you knew?" "How were you inspired to write *Romeo and Juliet*?")

An analysis of six semesters' worth of these preliminary questions yielded the following breakdowns:
- Biographical: 31 questions asked
- Historical/Cultural: 71 questions asked
- Pedagogical: 29 questions asked
- Personal: 261 questions asked

It was expected that students posed to Shakespeare twice as many personal questions as all others put together. Responses to the other categories of questions are readily available, after all, in reference books and on the Internet. Hence students took advantage of this sort of imaginative activity by asking questions they could not find answers to in traditional resources, questions that for one reason or another sparked their interest in Shakespeare. What ended up eventually frustrating so many students, however, was that personal questions, once they were submitted in the interview, were the very ones that were either ignored or flatly denied an answer. The instructors, naturally enough, did not wish to comment on matters they, or any scholar of the period, can know nothing about. This position was taken out of fairness to Shakespeare himself (asking a man if he loves his wife represents, after all, a considerable breach of good manners), and the role play instructors did not wish to spread literary gossip without being able to identify it as such, which, under the implied rules of the role play, they could not do without destroying the illusion that Shakespeare himself was online. While a good number of students expressed frustration, even anger, over refusals to discuss personal matters—"Why aren't you answering me????" was a question that appeared many times on the screen—they were understanding when the reasons for those refusals were explained to them later during the face-to-face debriefing session.

It can only be concluded that, whatever their initial anxieties about studying and teaching Shakespeare might have been, the sheer variety and thoughtfulness of the questions posed to Shakespeare in the weeks leading up to the online interview were clear indications of a genuine interest in the man, his works, and his times. The questions also showed a deeply felt need on the part of these teachers to learn how best to approach Shakespeare with their own students, and they confirmed that for most of them, some

sort of biographical or personal approach seems to be the best choice insofar as they recognize that this approach has done much to spur their own interest.

Project Activity Two: Synchronous Online Interview with Shakespeare

The online role play was the centerpiece of the entire project, and occurred when the role playing instructor logged onto the online environment as "William Shakespeare," thus concealing his personal identity and allowing students to imaginatively conduct an hour-long interview with Shakespeare himself (Ko & Rossen, 2004). Only after the role play activity, during a face-to-face assessment session with the class, was the identity of "William Shakespeare," a professor from the university's Department of English and Theatre, revealed. After a few moments exchanging awkward hellos, he began by asking the class what they most would like to know of Shakespeare. Many of the questions posed during the remainder of the chat session were the same as those offered in advance through the discussion forum. Interviews inevitably, however, took on a life of their own as students grew comfortable with the online activity and, as they stated later, began to buy in imaginatively to the idea that they were speaking to Shakespeare himself. In choosing which questions to respond to, the role playing instructor had, of course, his own hobbyhorses, ones that he thought would benefit students in their own classrooms. Questions, for example, on Early Modern culture were given high priority, the answers to which may not be easily accessible in a print or online source. Gender roles in Shakespeare's era and religious beliefs in the time period and how they might have affected the plays, were topics that were almost always taken up. Questions about individual plays were also answered, as the instructor did his best to keep the focus on various ways to teach them. Finally, historical concerns such as the publishing or staging practices of the era were almost always responded to. While the instructor made no effort to speak in blank verse, he strove for a formal tone, paying as much attention as possible to spelling and grammar before hitting the Enter key; because he did so, the tone of student discourse appeared to rise, in that questions and responses seemed to become more thoughtful and carefully formulated as the interview progressed.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the interview activity took place in the half hour or so after Shakespeare left the virtual classroom and students continued to post questions, now to one another, and offer reflective comments. While much of this discussion comprised of complaints over questions that were not responded to or answers students did not much like (many students took umbrage, for instance, at the notion that Shakespeare borrowed the vast majority of his plots, or that he most likely intended to earn a good bit of money in his chosen career), much of it centered on the exercise itself and its usefulness to them as both students and teachers. Students also raised important epistemological issues, asking one another how they are to know whether Shakespeare's comments were accurate, and whether they had been "seduced" into believing in Shakespeare's truthfulness simply because his name kept popping up on their screens. As Van Ments (1989) pointed out, the problem of ensuring accuracy within a fundamentally imaginary scenario is inescapable in role play instruction (p. 28), and it is clear from observations of this phase of the activity that this was the case with the Shakespeare project as well. But in the end what might have been a considerable obstacle to learning--the aura of uncertainty that grew around Shakespeare's statements once he left the chatroom--became a clear advantage once students began to address the problem directly. In fact, what was most rewarding about this post-interview discussion was the way students were observed exercising significant critical thinking skills as they evaluated the interview, assessed the accuracy and usefulness of Shakespeare's statements, recognized their own biases and presuppositions about studying Shakespeare, and drew disparate conclusions about the relevance of the exercise (Khan, 1997).

Project Activity Three: Asynchronous Online Assessment

The students' task over the following week was to complete electronic surveys that allowed them to clarify further their thoughts on the significance and usefulness of the role play session. The survey consisted of the following questions:
1.   What expectations did you have going into the role play interview?
2.   Did anything surprise you about the role play experience?
3.   What did you find useful about the experience?
4.   Did Shakespeare's statements strike you as accurate? How might you verify the accuracy of his statements?
5.   Evaluate your experience with the role play in terms of your prior experience with Shakespeare. Did it add to your knowledge of Shakespeare?

6.	Did the role play increase your motivation to want to learn more about Shakespeare and his works?

7.	Have you changed your opinion about the appropriate age to introduce students to Shakespeare based upon the role play?

This survey has proven to be a highly effective assessment tool; in particular, it provided insightful student-generated answers to the larger question surrounding this project: What was the point of the Shakespeare role play? The surveys suggested that students understood the project as attempting the following:

- Teach facts about Shakespeare and his era.
- Provide insights into his plays.
- Model a technique that would work in these teachers' own classrooms.
- Provide fun.
- Motivate teachers to want to learn about Shakespeare.
- Motivate teachers to want to teach Shakespeare, even when his works remain, as they do for the middle school teachers, outside the established curriculum.

Below are examples of typical student comments regarding each of these purposes:

1.	Teach facts about Shakespeare and his era.

I learned more about Shakespeare in that chat than I ever learned from studying him in high school or college.

I learned so many facts I did not know. I think it was useful because Shakespeare talked just like people today do, and he did a lot to get us interested in his life and times.

2.	Provide insights into his plays.

I found out lots of information about his plays that I would never have known unless I had done this chat with Will; his plays are things I usually try to avoid because they are too difficult.

I liked his explanations of the plots of the plays and their overall themes, especially about Hamlet *and* King Lear*. I'm not very familiar with these plays, so I found the discussion of these plays enlightening.*

3.	Model a technique that would work in these teachers' own classrooms.
Before the role play I thought Shakespeare was confusing, but now I see a way that you can incorporate him in ways other than just reading his plays. Role play can get students involved just like we were, and I would like to do a chat session like we did.

It is a great idea to use in our own classrooms! It will allow students to escape for just a little while and try to put themselves in Shakespeare's times.

4.	Provide fun.

Role play made Shakespeare a REAL person! I loved the fact that I felt like I was talking to HIM! It was a ton of fun.

I loved it! I give it a 9 out of 10 because it was such fun. I don't give it a 10 because it wasn't long enough and I didn't get all my questions answered.☹

5.	Motivate teachers to want to learn about Shakespeare.

After the role play, I wanted to examine his life more closely. I would also like to find out more about his career as an actor and writer.

I found role play valuable because I saw Shakespeare in a whole new light! It was like he was actually there, talking, discussing and explaining his life and works. This was very useful because I have become more interested in William Shakespeare and am eager to read more of his plays and sonnets.

6.   Motivate teachers to want to teach Shakespeare.

The role play made me see that Shakespeare could be introduced and understood at an earlier age.

I very much appreciate Shakespeare now because I have learned more about the period. So I want students to learn about him too. I think the life of William Shakespeare is interesting and his pieces of work astonishing.

Project Activity Four: Face-to-Face Assessment with Shakespeare

A week or two after the role play session, the role play instructor met with the students in person to discuss and evaluate the exercise. Research into role play emphasizes the importance of a debriefing session of some type (Bell, 2001a), and as Van Ments (1989) has written, debriefing is an indispensable "two-way process," one that "establishes the learning in the student's mind" (p. 49). Odd as it may seem, students appeared a bit startled when a rather ordinary looking college professor walked into the classroom rather than the Bard himself. Many pointed out during this debriefing session that the identity of Shakespeare had been a subject of intense speculation in and outside class in the weeks leading up to the face-to-face meeting. This meeting provided another opportunity to assess all stages of the exercise, but its most important function was that of offering further significant points of instruction, which it is recommended be conducted in class if students are to evaluate the online activities with suitable distance and objectivity. For what students most seemed to need at this stage in the project was a sustained examination of the benefits, drawbacks, and epistemological difficulties online discourse and role play present. Moreover, they required both a firmer sense of the biographical uncertainty surrounding Shakespeare and, more generally, a more complicated perspective on the limitations surrounding any effort at historical and biographical reconstruction. Relative to other playwrights of his era, quite a bit about William Shakespeare is known. But relative to what modern readers and theatre-goers "would like" to know about him, very little is known indeed. Once it was explained why all their personal questions about Shakespeare lingered on the screen, unanswered, or why one can say with certainty that Shakespeare acted at the Globe in the first decade of the Seventeenth Century, but one cannot explain with any certainty at all as to what might have compelled him to write "Othello", students were left with a richer sense of historical, biographical, and literary complexity. These teachers seemed to appreciate these points. They frequently stated during this assessment meeting that the textbooks they use or will use in the classroom and the resources they consult to prepare for class leave little room for ambiguity, or for the sort of problematizing of settled assumptions the role play project was designed to effect.

Conclusion

Role playing Shakespeare is doubtless a promising way to teach and motivate students, and if students are to be taken at their word, then online role play might also prove an equally successful instructional technique in these teachers' own classrooms. Virtual role play appears to allow students to make necessary imaginative leaps to engage a Shakespeare character without the emotion of embarrassment over something "too" realistic—a walking, talking, yellow tights-wearing Shakespeare-- hindering those leaps   In online surveys completed after the interview, students commented again and again on the surprising "reality" of the role play activity. In fact, the term "real" was used more frequently than any other as an overall description of the experience:

I was amazed by how quickly you could become wrapped up in the role playing. It was very easy to let yourself believe that you were really talking to William Shakespeare.

Will seemed so real, even though a part of me knew it wasn't REALLY Shakespeare.

The role play made Shakespeare seem so real to me; the chat session could help students understand that he was a real man.

I was shocked that the person knew so much about Shakespeare's life and works. I practically thought for a while it was really Shakespeare himself.

To be honest, at first I thought role play was kind of dumb since Shakespeare is dead, but as he started talking, he came to life, and I really thought I was talking to him.

The project's realistic but not "too" realistic nature also explains, perhaps, what made it so much fun. The face-to-face assessment with students indicates that students found the interview with Shakespeare "real" enough to prompt an enjoyable imaginative response to Shakespeare, but not quite so "real" that the students' attention was drawn too unduly to the discrepancy between what they perceived (that a man going by the name of William Shakespeare was conversing with them) and what they knew (that Shakespeare has been dead for four hundred years).

In the end, it seems clear that what role play did unusually well was to satisfy the students' longing--a longing they no doubt share with anybody who reads and enjoys imaginative literature--for authentic authorial presence. Asking students to consider what an author might have intended can be an illuminating approach to literature, and is surely a legitimate area of literary inquiry. Still, as in any consideration of authorial motive, the proper watchword for role play instructors seems to be this: Be careful, and while being careful, be honest with students as to why such care is necessary. So long as instructors make clear that they are aware of the difficulties involved in invoking authorial presence so dramatically, and share and discuss those difficulties in a direct and probing way, then role play of the sort presented here can be an appropriate and productive teaching tool.

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