

How and Why We Teach Shakespeare

College Teachers and
Directors Share How They
Explore the Playwright's
Works with Their Students

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The Tempest: Teaching with the
Shakespeare Reloaded Website

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Shakespeeding into *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*: Teaching with the Shakespeare Reloaded Website

Liam E. Semler

What are the virtues of structuring learning as a type of game when teaching Shakespeare? The Australian “Better Strangers” project has recently begun exploring the potential of gamified learning scenarios to enrich teacher professional development and student learning at high school and university.¹ Gameplay is viewed by many educators as an effective way to encourage student engagement and creativity within formal teaching contexts. The move to gamification is partly a response to the digital revolution which is transforming not only the educational landscape, but also the neural landscape inside students’ heads. Students have an increased desire to learn by exploring ideas freely and a decreased desire to live unplugged. In this context, the possibilities of online gamified learning cannot be blithely ignored (nor, of course, should they be blithely adopted).

In 2015 the Better Strangers project piloted a teacher professional development module called Shakeserendipity at our partner school Barker College. In 2016 we launched the online version on the Shakespeare Reloaded website (<http://shakespearereloaded.edu.au/activities/shakeserendipity>) and

invited teachers and students to try it as a way of enriching their understanding of Shakespeare. The structure of the online module is simple yet effective. It contains three games focused on *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, and *The Tempest*. Each game presents the player with the backs of nine playing cards that may be flipped over by clicking on them.

“Behind” each card is a hyperlink to a resource (such as an academic article, video, or extract of play-text) relating overtly or in some cases obscurely to the play being explored. For example, one card in the *Julius Caesar* game links to a video clip from the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production (2012) of the play set in Africa and a review of it in *The New Yorker*, while another card links to an article on how modern cities are permeated by surveillance and digital technologies. The former card relates clearly to the play while the latter is more cryptic, yet both provoke illuminating discussions of *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare’s Rome, and the play’s contemporary relevance. All the resources linked to in the game are freely available open-access content found on the internet.

The game structure of Shakeserendipity performs a curatorial role (on behalf of the project team) by assembling the content in a pedagogical architecture. A maximum of four cards may be flipped in one session and the content behind them shuffles randomly whenever the webpage is refreshed. For added intrigue and fun one card is designated a Wild Card and another a Tame Card with correspondingly radical or conservative content behind them. The abovementioned article on modern cities is the Wild Card resource on the *Julius Caesar* module, while its Tame Card links to an extract of the play-text on Cinna the Poet (act 3 scene 3).

We trialed Shakeserendipity as a professional learning workshop for English teachers. Individual teachers flipped the online cards and then engaged with the resources at home. After a week or so they convened as a group with a facilitator to discuss the various resources and share their ideas about the play that were provoked by the resources. They were particularly encouraged to embrace new ideas and blend disparate concepts during the full group discussion.

The game structure causes serendipitous encounters with ideas and thus provokes novel thinking while simultaneously hindering any individual's conscious or unconscious bias towards engaging with familiar or favoured resources to the exclusion of others. The teachers' anonymous feedback showed that they loved Shakeserendipity. One wrote, "I love the left of field resources and how they can spark discussion," and another commented: "Not only does it deepen a student's (and teacher's) understanding of Shakespeare through its enforced intellectual elasticity, but it offers them insight to the depth and malleability of literature as a whole."

In May 2016, Shakeserendipity became the subject of an unsolicited newspaper review by 16-year-old South Australian student Dylan Carpinelli.² He wrote: "Although this isn't a game in the traditional sense, it is a refreshing approach to learning." He even suggested "as an addition, the facilitator can then create a quiz based on the information on the cards." Nonetheless, he declared it "a bit confusing to work out at first" and thus "difficult to get into." His review concluded: "We need more activities that are as interactive and innovative as this." The Better Strangers team took the critique on board—thanks, Dylan!—and created Shakespeed as a response.

Shakespeed (<http://shakespearereloaded.edu.au/activities/shakespeed>) uses the same game mechanism as Shakeserendipity, yet revises it through the lens of the student market's intuitive preference for video resources and bite-size content. In other words, in the Shakespeed modules, which currently focus on *Macbeth*, *Richard II*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*, there remain nine flipcards of which two are nominated Wild and Tame Cards, but every resource that one might find behind the flipcards is a piece of video of approximately 2–5 minutes' duration. It might be, for example, some video art, a music video, or a movie clip, and it might relate simply or obscurely to the play in question, but in all cases it will be brief.

If Shakeserendipity exemplifies "flipped" learning (because often lengthy resources are engaged with by teachers at home before they come together in seminar

meetings to discuss them), then Shakespeed exemplifies what the project team calls “unflipped” learning because no preparation outside class, beyond knowing the play under analysis, is required. Students merely come to the class and the Shakespeed cards are flipped and played onscreen in class time and then discussed in various ways immediately afterwards, also in class time. This is a virtue of the short duration of the video content. Should a teacher wish to develop the initial ideas provoked by Shakespeed they may do so by extending them in various learning tasks such as essays, debates, or creative pieces inspired by the exercise. Importantly, while the game structure and the video resources make initial pedagogical engagement easier, they require professional expertise from teachers and genuine intellectual effort from students to succeed in class.

In the case of both Shakeserendipity and Shakespeed much planning and design underlies a simple mechanism which can be used quite diversely by the facilitator or teacher according to their professional expertise. This seems to put the right amount of effort and complexity in the right places.

Why is it so effective and how can a simple five-minute game fill an hour with engaged and creative thinking that delivers participants new insights into a Shakespearean play? Well, the initial game-style fun of selecting which cards to flip on screen and then to view (via lively management of group picks or individual voting in class) moves easily into watching videos that are legible to anyone (even if containing challenging or unexpected content) and present ideas that everyone will have views on. Moreover, it is intellectually pleasurable and rewarding to make connections to the Shakespearean text from the video content and discussion around it because such connection-making is fresh, personal, and collaborative. There is an upbeat vibe in class as students’ insights about the play spark off the videos and build on each other’s insights, thereby taking the class in unexpected directions and setting up lines of discovery and engagement that students and teachers then want to pursue further. It’s time for some examples.

Australian high school teacher Catherine Hicks shared the *Macbeth* Shakespeed module with her Year 12 class in North Queensland as part of a larger learning activity.³ Students were to write a memoir from the perspective of a minor character in *Macbeth* and Hicks used Shakespeed “as an activity to help them brainstorm the themes and ideas and create modern interpretations of the play.” She reports “some good discussions and writing about how Shakespeare can be reimagined in a way of their choice” and notes that the British Council’s “Shakespeare Lives in 2016” video of Lady Macbeth’s “Unsex me here” soliloquy with its “grotesque” animated sequence “is a particular favourite.” She also notes that the students appreciate the game’s mechanism enabling them to email themselves a copy of the links to the resources they picked.

In the *Macbeth* Shakespeed game the Wild Card is a YouTube audio clip (with lyrics displayed) of the song “Metaphor” by Swedish alternative metal band In Flames. The song’s persona reflects on the pain, sickness, and entrapment of his desire. His meditation is highly suggestive of the rich mixture of obsessiveness, hunger, and disease in (some!) relationships and the envelopment of one person’s subjectivity by another’s. The music is a powerful accompaniment because of its blend of hypnotic melody and rough-edged refrain. As the Wild Card, this resource is meant to be a particular challenge to students’ ability to think associatively and creatively in response to *Macbeth* and its success will depend on the teacher’s guidance and adequate time for student reflection and discussion. Hicks had to work hard to make the possibilities come alive with her Year 12 class and I had a similar experience when I used the “Metaphor” flipcard with a postgraduate class at the University of Birmingham’s Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon. This is no criticism of the students at either institution because they did their best with this decidedly radical Wild Card in tight time constraints. Indeed, the postgraduate students were highly enthusiastic about creativity because the course they were taking (and in which I was a guest teacher) was all about creativity and led by the inspiring Professor Ewan Fernie. Nor

do I believe Hicks and I are hopeless teachers—but like any teachers we need to be learning all the time. Indeed, since the human mind is so shaped by its habits, if Hicks and I taught the same students with the same flipcards a second time, we would probably all get more out of it because both teachers and students would be developing capacities sown by the previous experience. I don't think the toughness of this Wild Card is a reason to scrap it as a Shakespeed resource, but rather to ponder how hard it is for students at all levels of institutional study to engage in thoroughly creative, real-time thinking and how much teachers have to learn about ways to nurture agile creativity in class.

The same postgraduate students responded well to a flipcard that linked to a resource where some principles of Gestalt psychology are explained. The video presenter, Trace Dominguez, explains how the brain simplifies reality by seeing wholes rather than parts. It does so by various unconscious strategies that group things according to certain principles including “proximity,” “similarity,” “closure,” and “common fate.” One student in the class started rethinking the way we automatically treat the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* as a single unit when they need not necessarily be understood this way. Another student, Lauren Bates, wrote this about the mad Lady Macbeth in act 5:

Lady Macbeth is at one point talking about Duncan—the old man would have so much blood in him—and then changes to talking about Macduff's family—Thane of Fife had a wife—which then switches to Banquo—Banquo is buried—this ties in to the way that the brain groups things together that are similar and in similar proximity. Thus Lady Macbeth becomes overwhelmed by the murders as they all merge into one entity.⁴

It is not hard to see why a video on how we perceive reality could prompt lively discussion of character perception in and audience reception of *Macbeth*.

Let's set aside *Macbeth* and turn to *The Tempest*. I played *The Tempest* Shakespeed game with a regional high

school class in Australia. They flipped a card that linked to a short video called “Caliban” which was produced for the V&A Museum’s celebration of the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth in 2014. The video shows a slow-moving solo dance performed wordlessly by Michael Peter Johnson in an exquisitely designed costume evocative of tree bark and earth-dwelling insect against a background of ambient music. The narrative of the short piece is the gradual uncurling of the figure till his face is dazzled by a glimpse of light before his body re-curls to an inert state once again. Students immediately enjoyed commenting on the character in terms of his being (part human, part earthy, part arboreal) and his experience (coming out of the earth to the light of the sun, coming out of his shell into exposure to the world, moving from inert comfort to stimulation and even pain before retreating to closed comfort again). Some students expressed their visceral dislike of his appearance, especially where his face showed signs of encrustation with tree matter or lichens. “He’s just yuck, icky,” said one squirming student who could find no better words for her reaction. This unfiltered, intuitive revulsion felt by modern middle-class students was something to reflect on when it came to discussing the prejudicial reactions of the Europeans to Caliban in the play.

The conversation moved easily to discussion of how Shakespeare represents Caliban’s connectedness to the materiality of the island. This included discussion of his vocabulary, memories, and lyricism, and his physicality and behaviour. All this was very good, but what I did not expect was that some students had swiftly interpreted the video allegorically and not as being about Caliban at all. “It is the island,” said one; “it is knowledge,” said another. Now this blew me away. They saw this vivid performance of Caliban’s silent uncurling and re-curling as an analogy for the progression of the island from a state of uncolonized nature to a type of painful encounter with European culture before its return to a decolonized state after Prospero and the courtiers depart. Similarly, the video became a narrative of the global impact of the enlightenment or Western reason. This evoked

much discussion of the nature of Western reason and its moral value across cultures and in the play.

I also ran *The Tempest* Shakespeed activity during an information session about “Studying English at University” for Year 12 students and their parents at a recent Open Day at the University of Sydney. It was loads of fun to divide a packed room of 50 teenagers and parents down the middle (all still in their seats) and conduct a noisy vote on which cards they wanted to flip. The whole room watched two flipcard videos: one video was an animated explanation of the conundrum of “Free Will” and the other a pacey celebration of the age-old and globally adored game of chess. I assigned one video to be discussed by half the room and the other by the other half and gave them ten minutes to come up with novel ideas about *The Tempest*.

The “Free Will” video provoked an avalanche of ideas ranging from Prospero’s curtailing of the free will of all the other characters throughout the play to Shakespeare’s manipulation of characters according to his free will. I bounced this back to the group with the added context of the Jacobean theatrical scene in which numerous other forces are at work curtailing Shakespeare’s freedoms, such as the composition of his acting company for which he had to write (who is the lead, who is the clown, who are the boys?), the trends for particular stories and styles that surge through the theatres of London (travel tales, tragicomedy, Italian pastoral comedy, and masque influences), and the idiosyncrasies of writing for an indoor theatre (such as intimate music, sound, and lighting). This was a discussion that could have gone on forever and kept circling back to the characters’ and actors’ experiences in the play itself. One student noted how characters take on a life of their own in the writing process and thus exert their free will against the constraints imposed by their writer and I replied by adding that freedoms also appear in rehearsal and in the process of acting by “parts” and “cues” rather than acting by knowledge of the whole script.

The chess video celebrated the game as a political, metaphorical, and artistic pursuit that permeates popular and high culture. What was fascinating about this video

prompt was the stark division of knowledge about chess: the parents were all over it, but the 17-year-olds (to my astonishment!) were very sketchy indeed on how one plays the game and what its technical terms are. This skewed the exercise, because while the students remembered the chess game played by Ferdinand and Miranda in *The Tempest*, and recognised the video's clips of chess being played in *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars* films, they had to rely on their parents to comment on the influential vocabulary, strategies, and political resonances of the game (moves, pawns, check, stalemate, endgame). This combination of child and parent knowledge was a thrill to see as we unpacked *The Tempest* together. What is Prospero's chess game? What are his key moves? What is his endgame? Is it a checkmate or a stalemate? Is the Ferdinand–Miranda betrothal a romance or a political coup or both? And what are Caliban's and Ariel's moves?

Shakespeed is not chess, and students are not exactly players. However, if we think about teaching and learning in terms of game mechanics that provoke thought while also preserving student and teacher autonomy, it might be no bad thing.

Notes

- 1 The Better Strangers project is a research and teaching partnership between the University of Sydney, the Australian National University, James Cook University, and Sydney K-12 school Barker College. The project team comprises: Linzy Brady, Will Christie, Kate Flaherty, Penny Gay, Claire Hansen, Andrew Hood, Jackie Manuel, Liam Semler, and Lauren Weber. Shakespeare Reloaded is the project's open-access website (www.shakespearereload.education.au).
- 2 Dylan Carpinelli, "The Ultimate Bard Game," *Crinkling News* (May 3, 2016), 14.
- 3 In these paragraphs I rely on personal email communication from Catherine on December 8, 2017 (used with permission).
- 4 I quote personal email communication from Lauren on December 7, 2017 (used with permission).