



Shakespeare: Page Stage Screen

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OVERVIEW

This case study reports on an English assessment where editorial teams of students work with a passage from a Shakespearean play and prepare the text either for publication in a modernised, scholarly edition, or for a modern theatrical performance. The assessment demands that the results be presented in the form of the annotated 'edition' of the chosen passage and a properly referenced, 3000-word commentary on editorial and directorial decisions. Introduced in the academic year 2005-2006, the assessment represented significant innovation in a research led School which places small group tutorial teaching at the heart of the educational experience. The case illustrates how imaginative assessment design can be used to develop the skills of critical reasoning and independent group decision making.

Keywords

Great designs for assessment, English, group assessment

INFORMATION ABOUT THE MODULE

The module *Shakespeare: Page Stage Screen* encourages students to explore how Shakespearean texts continually evolve on the page and through performances. It is a 30-credit Year 3 option offered by the School of English at the University of Liverpool. On an average, about 50 final-year undergraduates take this module every year over a single 15 week semester. Delivery is through three contact situations; a weekly lecture, a weekly tutorial, and a fortnightly workshop. Select screenings of film adaptations of Shakespeare plays are also offered. The module will typically cover the following 'core' Shakespeare plays: *Hamlet*; *Romeo and Juliet*; *Henry V*; *The Taming of the Shrew*; *King Lear*; *The Tempest*

DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE

Students experience the course in five fortnightly blocks, each featuring a single play, with a focus on one or more issues. Within these blocks the main functions of the weekly lectures are (a) to provide a wider context in respect of author and period, and (b) to offer models of approach to particular aspects of language, dramatic interpretation, staging, editing or adaptation. Weekly tutorials which normally have a maximum of 9 students provide group discussion, typically with a detailed focus on specific texts. Fortnightly workshops are oriented towards practical tasks and problem solving, relating to aspects of textual editing, performance, and stage/screen adaptation.

The group project assessment is undertaken in the first half of the semester and is the first of 3 assessments the students experience; the other two being a 2000 word essay and 3 hour examination. The project calls on students' ability to compare different editions of a particular passage from a play and make informed decisions based on their awareness of



existing editorial and directorial traditions. The play used in 2005/2006 was *Hamlet* and students were asked to:

- Consult and compare the three earliest printed versions of this play (the First Quarto of 1603, the Second Quarto of 1604, and the First Folio version of 1623).
- Prepare the text of one of the passages, as if either for publication in a modernised, scholarly edition, aimed at both undergraduates and the interested general reader, or for a modern theatrical performance.
- Provide a commentary that justifies and explains all of the decisions made when editing and preparing the text.

In setting the task it was decided to include episodes from the plays that were widely recognised as inherently problematic textual ‘cruces’, with a rich tradition of multiple interpretations and versions. For example in 2005/2006 one of the passages chosen was **2.2.494-602** (i.e. from ‘Pol. This is too long’ to ‘Ham. ‘[...] the conscience of a King. Exit’). In workshops and tutorials, students were continually introduced to other similar examples, and encouraged to appreciate the sheer multiplicity of views triggered by single textual or performative differences. Once familiarised with this possibility of multiple interpretations, students actively debated their own interpretations and opinions within their allocated teams.

Students were also asked to submit two additional documents recording their own sense of the way in which the group handled the given task. One of these (Appendix I) is a declaration form, identifying the level of contribution and input (as a percentage) offered by each group member. The other sheet (Appendix II) is an evaluation task, recording how well they worked as a team in completing the project. The instructions accompanying the sheets noted that the weighting of contribution would have to be agreed by the group as a whole, and each student had to sign the form to indicate formally that this was a fair reflection of their input.

RATIONALE IN TERMS OF EDUCATIONAL IDEAS

The rationale for this assessment was based around three educational objectives:

- It should develop critical reasoning and independent group decision making
- The assessment should be formative as well as summative
- It should align itself to the QAA Benchmark statements for English.

To implement the first objective the tutors began by considering the learning outcomes associated with this module. The learning outcomes set out in the School of English Year 3 Handbook stated that students should be able to demonstrate ‘a more complex sense of Shakespeare as his work has been received, edited, performed, and adapted;’ as well as ‘an ability to suggest ways of approaching text and performance, whether in terms of reading/critical interpretation, editing, staging, or cinematic adaptation’ (School of English, 2006). The group task therefore calls on students’ ability to compare different editions of a particular passage from a play and make informed decisions based on their awareness of existing editorial and directorial traditions. There are, for instance, significant differences in the versions of *Hamlet* offered in the earliest quarto and folio editions. Rather than asking students to simply memorise these differences or regurgitate existing critical views, the task asks them to derive their own collective, critical decisions from this information. This is much more than a simple ‘text-comparison’, since decisions would depend on students’ own analysis of the thematic preoccupations of the play as a whole and their knowledge of the larger critical debates surrounding the play. Depending on the version they choose or devise by conflating multiple alternatives, the characterisation of Shakespeare’s most famous hero could change drastically, from a young man hallucinating and on the verge of a nervous breakdown, to an accomplished and competent - even ruthless - courtier, doing what was necessary in order to survive in a hostile political environment. The associated commentary would then have to explain and defend the reading presented by their resulting version of *Hamlet*.



The implementation of the second objective, the combination of formative and summative feedback, is intrinsically linked to perceived teaching and learning needs within the module. While the module had always included fortnightly workshop sessions, it was felt that the practical skills developed in these sessions - particularly in terms of group work, editing and performance analysis - could not be assessed adequately through the existing means of summative assessment: the individual essays and the examination. In the absence of assessed tasks, students also lacked motivation to undertake unmarked 'practice' assignments, which made it difficult to offer any formative feedback. As a result, they often struggled with similar analytical tasks set in the examination. Researchers have pointed out that in order to be effective feedback needs to be prompt (Chickering and Gamson 1991), and should promote peer and tutor dialogue around learning (Gibbs and Simpson 2004/5; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006). The introduction of the assessed group project enabled tutors to offer feedback that meets these essential criteria. Moreover, it led to a rise in workshop attendance. We found that students motivated their team members to attend and contribute to such sessions, since they were aware that all of them would need to acquire the necessary editorial and analytical skills in order to carry out a fair share of the assessed task. As a result, tutors were able to give prompt feedback on students' grasp of concepts and techniques, such as the process of collating textual variants, or commenting on stage setting. Thus an iterative process of using formative feedback to prepare for subsequent summative assessment was established right from the very beginning, which continued after the completion of the project itself. As mentioned above, students received feedback on the group project before embarking on the remaining assessments through the essay and the examination. This took the form of written comments on the school essay comments sheets, as well as verbal discussion during a subsequent workshop. Students could therefore use this initial collective experience to develop their own individual learning and critical approaches. Without this opportunity to 'close the gap' between the students' current learning and the intended objectives of the learning process, feedback becomes useless. As Boud has suggested, 'The only way to tell if learning results from feedback is for students to make some kind of response to complete the feedback loop (Sadler, 1989) [...] Unless students are able to use the feedback to produce improved work [...] neither they nor those giving the feedback will know that it has been effective' (Boud, 2000).

Thirdly, the group project aligns itself to three objectives cited in the QAA Benchmark statements for English, namely, that an undergraduate education in English should:

- problematise the act of reading so that students can reflect critically upon textual reception both in history and in their own practice;
- offer students a knowledge and appreciation of contextual approaches to the production and reception of literary and non-literary texts;
- develop a range of subject specific and transferable skills, including high-order conceptual, literacy and communication skills of value in graduate employment (QAA, 2000, section 1.3)

Of these, the first two are closely aligned with the two module learning outcomes (mentioned previously); the third merits further elaboration. In recent years, the employability of new graduates has become a key national issue. The student employability profile prepared by the HEA English Subject Centre (HEA, 2004) shows that key skills acquired by English graduates and valued by employers include analytical abilities, communication and initiative. However, it also shows that English students are perceived to be significantly weaker in certain areas of competency, including:

- Problem-solving ability
- Working under pressure
- Working in a team
- Time management
- Planning, co-ordinating and organising
- Computer skills.

The current assignment clearly involves working as a group, within set deadlines, to produce a defensible solution that has to be presented with the help of a range of



computer skills (word-processing, use of spreadsheets to quantify textual variants, image-processing for page-images and set-designs, etc). As such, it demands some degree of involvement in each of these 'key-skill' areas from participating students, and is therefore particularly suitable for final year students about to enter the highly competitive graduate job-market.

EVALUATION

Since 2005-06 was the first year when this form of assessment was used in the School of English, we were especially interested in finding out the opinions of both students and tutors. The results of the assessment itself constituted a rich indicator of the efficacy of this form of assessment and of its associated modes of learning and teaching. As Yorke has observed, '[t]he act of assessing has an effect on the assessor as well as the student. Assessors learn about the extent to which they [the students] have developed expertise and can tailor their teaching accordingly (Yorke, 2003). Most student teams received a grade of high 2.1 or 1.0; the latter included some exceptionally sophisticated efforts in terms of editing and directorial commentaries. The best work showed initiative and imagination: for instance, a few student teams had used library resources to locate additional advanced scholarly texts on editing and bibliographical research to further enhance their knowledge of the techniques covered during workshops. Such initiative obviously should be encouraged actively in the future. Feedback from individual tutors was also promising: it was generally felt that the assessment managed to motivate students while being labour-efficient, in the sense that it drastically cut down the number of scripts that needed to be marked and second-marked by a factor of 4.

Feedback was also sought directly from the students, both in the course of the semester and at the end, through the usual module evaluation questionnaire. It was explained to the students during the final revision lecture of the module, and by individual tutors, that we particularly welcomed comments on the new group project. The students took their responsibilities as 'pioneers' seriously, and most of the anonymous evaluation questionnaires contained some reference to the group project. It emerged that the majority of students found the experience rewarding. Some significantly pointed out that such group tasks would have been even more useful in the first year, when they had struggled to build up a network of friends and contacts in the university. Others mentioned that the experience of 'fighting it out' with their team members had stood them in good stead during group discussion exercises during job-interviews.



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APPENDIX I: DECLARATION FORM

ENGL340 Shakespeare

Team-work Project Coversheet

To be submitted on Thursday 23 March 2006,
Ground Floor Reception, between 10am-12pm & 2-4pm

You must submit **one** copy of this sheet with your team-work project. **You must all sign it.**

Please note: Projects handed in without this cover sheet completed will be subject to the same deductions as late work until a completed cover sheet is provided.

Candidate Number	Share of Work (%)
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	

The percentage given should be a fair reflection of the amount of work each group-member actually did. Do **not** make allowance for illness or other mitigating circumstances. Your examiners will make those decisions. Any individual unable to make a full contribution to the group should make sure that the relevant documentation (e.g. a doctor's note or a completed Mitigating Circumstances form) is submitted to the School of English.

Any candidate who has not contributed equally to the project, as indicated above, will receive a proportionally lower mark: anyone who has contributed nothing to the project will receive a mark of 0.

We are in agreement that this distribution of the project mark is a fair reflection of our contributions to it.

Signed

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

APPENDIX II: GROUPWORK EVALUATION

ENGL340 Shakespeare: Team-Work Editing Task

GROUP ASSESSMENT SHEET

Use this sheet to evaluate your group work activity in completing the project. Tick the boxes which seem relevant to your team, then evaluate your overall performance by allocating a grade.

Performance			
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very good	good	o.k.	poor
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Group Management

The group had clear objectives	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The group's purpose was unclear
The group worked in an organised manner.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The work progressed in a disorganised manner.
Group deadlines were adhered to when possible.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Deadlines were rarely met on time.
The group coped well with unexpected events.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The group was unable to respond to unexpected events.

Delegation of Tasks

Everyone was consulted over their role within the group.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Roles were dictated within the group.
Everyone understood their role within the group.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nobody was clear about their role within the group.
The group avoided duplication of tasks.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Everyone was doing the same thing.

Communication

Everyone was able to contribute their ideas.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The group was dominated by certain individuals.
Effective communication within the group was maintained at all times.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Communication within the group often broke down.
Group meetings were run efficiently and effectively.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Group meetings were poorly organised.
The group was able to discuss and criticise people's ideas.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The group avoided debating the merits of a suggestion.

Please now rate your overall group performance using the following grades:

- A** The group performed well in all aspects
- B** There were some very good features of the group work
- C** The group work was largely satisfactory
- D** There were some serious inadequacies in our group approach
- E** The group work was inadequate in most respects

Group Grade
