



RSC Associate Schools programme Case Study

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RSC Certificate in Teaching Shakespeare

My journey with the Royal Shakespeare Company began in September 2014; I was approached by my head of department with the news that we had the opportunity to become a part of the RSC's Learning and Performance Network. Up to this point, my experience of teaching Shakespeare had been mostly unsuccessful due to my own lack of understanding of the language of his plays, and my limited exposure to resources that would help support student engagement. Therefore, although this was a great opportunity, I felt uneasy, as I believed the course would ultimately shine a light on my own inability to understand Shakespeare's language. However, it has done the exact opposite. The training and ongoing support I have received from the RSC has been far from condemnatory; it has been less about my lack of knowledge and entirely about giving me access to a toolkit of skills I can use to decode the language.

I teach in a diverse school, with over 50% of students having English as an additional language. The new GCSE reforms has meant students not only need to read and understand Shakespeare, but write analytically about his plays as well. The daunting task of helping students to become comfortable with the complex language of Shakespeare's plays seemed impossible. However, after just the first training INSET with the RSC, I was able to see that the Rehearsal Room approach was the exact tool we needed to overcome this hurdle. Initially, as I began to incorporate the RSC strategies into my teaching it was very challenging for me as it was a completely different way of delivering my lessons, and a new way of learning for the students. However, it has now become 'just what we do', and part of the fabric of English teaching at Eastbury.

As the years have progressed, the RSC approach has made me a confident teacher of Shakespeare's plays, and as result, has helped me to teach students in a way that makes Shakespeare's world playful and enjoyable.



The Rehearsal Room Approach

The requirement for students to be on their feet during rehearsal room activities inevitably ensures they are more engaged in their learning, as the reading of the text can be boring and stilted due to their lack of understanding of the words in front of them. When asking students how they felt about this approach, they have always responded positively. After doing an entire unit of Macbeth using the rehearsal room approaches, one of my year 8 students said: *'It made it easier to analyse the text as you can write about how the character was feeling because you have already become the character.'* In addition, after our Midsummer Night's Dream unit, a year 7 student said: *"It was fun, and if you have fun in a lesson, it makes it more interesting. It also helped people who were shy and don't usually talk in class; it gave them a chance to talk and show who they are."*

Students as a whole have grown and developed in confidence. One student in particular, was very quiet and reserved at the start of the Shakespeare unit, however when he began to engage with the active approaches, it was as though new life had been breathed into him; he became one of the most confident performers in the class. It was as if he had found his voice and it was heartwarming to hear and be a part of. This is not just an isolated incident; this story is true for numerous students in our school and has only been made possible by investing time into ensuring the RSC pedagogy is woven throughout the English curriculum.

I have found the RSC approach is particularly helpful for students who struggle with reading, and are disengaged as a result. The fact that students are reading lines, but are not too worried about what individual words mean, has instilled them with confidence, and given them the freedom to get things wrong. The rehearsal room process also makes it about 'us' instead of 'me, and seeing their teacher also engaging in the playfulness of the tasks shows students that we're all on this journey of discovery together.

Activities such as 'interpolated questions' and the 'punctuation shift' are some of the tasks that I regularly use to help students break down the text into more manageable chunks and gain a deeper understanding of its meaning. It also helps students to empathise with the feelings and thoughts of the characters, and understand their motives. This has proven particularly effective with my GCSE classes, where I have seen a huge development in the detail and the quality of their written responses. They are now able to discuss the mindset of the characters in a thoughtful way and analyse language in greater depth. During our reading of Beatrice and Benedick's 'merry war' in *Much Ado About Nothing*, I had students chuckling with laughter at their insults to one another. The fact that they were able not only



to understand but appreciate a Shakespearean joke was something I would never have thought possible.

I believe the RSC pedagogy and active approaches has proven to be a key that has cracked the code for many of our students. In an interview with the BBC, one student said: *"I began to understand. It was like I had the code, so when I went on to another play, I felt quite well informed because it was the same. I could break it down, see how it fits together and try to make sense of it."* The ability to make links in their learning and apply skills in different contexts is one of the skills we struggle to teach students, so for a student to come to this realisation on their own is an amazing feat.

The incorporation of the RSC pedagogy has not ended with my teaching of Shakespeare, but now underpins my teaching practice as a whole. I use the rehearsal room approach in the majority of my schemes of learning and to explore texts that I teach across key stage 3 and 4. The most successful transfer of this approach has been with my teaching of *Oliver Twist* to year 8. When I first began, I had limited experience of teaching the novel, which previously would have meant the text was not an option for me. However, the confidence I have developed through the consistent use of the rehearsal room approach meant I was able to apply the pedagogy easily to a new text. Where Dickens' language can be arduous and challenging to understand, I was able to help students to enjoy the complexity of his characters and appreciate the uniqueness of his writing. The fact that these techniques can be so easily adapted to other texts has proven invaluable in allowing students to learn texts in ways other than the traditional way of reading out loud. It has also opened up opportunities for rich discussions and debates about themes and characters which we previously would not have had.

Impact on Students

Our involvement in Dream 16 was a pivotal moment in the life of our school and those of our students. This moment gave students and staff permission to experience Shakespeare in performance in a unique way, and celebrate the fact that our disadvantaged students could enter into, and flourish in previously uncharted territory.

Being a part of the Midsummer Night's Dream project had a profound impact on our school community. Throughout the process, there was a tangible buzz around the school that was contagious. Students were extremely eager to be a part of the cast, and those that had the opportunity to meet and work with professional actors, gained a sense of pride and fulfillment. Staff and parents were completely in awe of the way the students performed



with such professionalism. One student said: *'The Royal Shakespeare Company not only gave me a life changing opportunity but taught me life changing skills which I can use in the future. This opportunity was just an amazing experience. Not only that but I learnt to be proud and self-motivate myself. I am glad to say I was lucky enough to have had such an experience.'* Moreover, as a result of her involvement as a fairy in the production, a year 7 student joined a drama club outside of school. Once she had finished her performance on the Barbican stage she said: *It was just amazing! I remember being on stage at the end of the show bowing and the rest of the professional cast went off stage and left us only to bow. Seeing all of those people clapping for us – for me – made me know that I have to do more acting. Now I am working on a play and I am the main character. Thank you to the school and the Royal Shakespeare Company for giving me this opportunity. You showed me that I actually have a talent.* This student is now in year 10 and has starred in short commercial films and directs and writes her own plays; she has also recently divulged that she is awaiting her equity card to cement her status as an actress.

Leading the Programme and engaging with other partners

Our collaboration with the RSC has enabled us to not only enrich our own curriculum but has enabled me as a Lead Teacher to develop as a leader within my own school setting, and across the borough. I have worked alongside primary school teachers from other schools to help them in their own delivery of the rehearsal room approach with their students. The transition between KS2 and KS3 is often problematic and difficult for staff and students, but through our cluster we have been able to build relationships that have alleviated some of that stress. Students who have engaged with the work in primary school look forward to making the transition to Eastbury because they are excited to continue their journey with Shakespeare. It has been truly humbling to see how our work with the RSC has impacted so many staff and students beyond the walls of our school. With the support of the RSC we have been able to build and sustain a strong, cohesive cluster of local schools that support each other, share good practice and enjoy Shakespeare together. We have fostered a strong and purposeful group who work together to do something remarkable for the community, and leave Shakespeare's legacy in our community.

As a lead teacher of the programme, I have gained insight into a remarkably effective pedagogy, which I now use to support teaching and learning within my department. I am able to support staff in their use of rehearsal room strategies in their own classrooms, and



feel equipped to suggest ways in which they can incorporate specific activities into their lessons to gain a particular outcome.

Had I turned down the opportunity to engage with the RSCs work, I would have subjected myself, and my students to years of lifeless and joyless lessons of Shakespeare. Now, students are more enthused when it comes to anything do to with Shakespeare, and I have grown and developed in my own practice as a classroom practitioner. We have also secured the future of great Shakespeare teaching in our school, and given students, who otherwise would have never had an interest in Shakespeare's plays, the power to choose to accept or reject the genius of Shakespeare. The fact that they even have this choice is the biggest accomplishment of all.