Shakespeare Works When Shakespeare Plays

Gesturing Shakespeare, or Reading the with the Whole Body (Revised)
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Objective:

This lesson is designed to have students explore, close-read, and perform any text of Shakespeare by engaging in a physical approach to unlocking the language of a play. The physical exercises can also provide students with inspiration should they wish to stage scenes in class.

CCSS.ELA, Standards 1- 6, 10

The Class:

The initial class should take about two 45-minute periods or one block period. The exercises here, however, can be reproduced as a way of exploring a text in subsequent classes.

This class draws on elements of acting training developed by Michael Chekhov, the student and fellow actor of Konstanstini Stanislavski, the great Russian director, actor, and teacher. For Chekhov, actors can explore a script and create a character by starting with a physical, whole-body approach. From this physical exploration, actors can then draw conclusions about the complexities of a text in ways that satisfy the outcomes of the CCSS for ELA. In other words, by doing something with a text, actors can eventually find their way to understanding the meanings of a text.

Insight: Have students begin “doing” Shakespeare and not with the default (and often deadening) approach of “interpreting” Shakespeare. Doing creates a concrete, immediate task with a text that, without forcing, leads students to insights about language. In this way, they will arrive at interpretations and conclusions as a result of other work. This, I believe, is a critical pedagogical tool when teaching Shakespeare.

1. Moving with the 3 Centers

- Have students walk around an open space for a few minutes. The ask them to lead with a “center,” which is located in their heart. Don’t ask them to do anything other than lead

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1 In this lesson, I also draw on additional material from Lenard Petit, a teacher of the Michael Chekhov approach, which is included in his book, The Michael Chekhov Handbook: For the Actor (New York: Routledge, 2010).
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with their heart -- it is important that they don't invent any behavior or do anything that they think they're supposed to do.

- After they've walked from this center, ask them to let this go and to just walk as they were at the start of this exercise.
- Pause and ask if anyone noticed anything different between the two ways of walking.
- Have them repeat walking "normally" and then from their heart.
- Then ask them to place this center in their head. Again, have them spend a few minutes playing with this center, and then ask them to let it go.
- Then ask them to walk with the center in their head and then in their heart.
- Pause and take reflections from the group.
- Then have them resume, but now ask them to walk from their "will" center -- the area around the hips and pelvis bone. Again, have them move from this center to another center.
- Spend some time moving through these centers, giving them the plenty of time to discover what they may be experiencing on their own.
- Once you’ve cycled through this, do a more thorough debrief on what images, sensations, attitudes, etc. came as a result of simply moving from these various centers.

You will get a range of responses from each “center,” with similar sensations collecting around the head, heart, and will. The point here is this: the body in movement creates sensations, impulses, and images in us. For our purposes, we want to students to experience the way the body can be a way of generating creative possibilities and be a way of leading us to intellectual realizations. For the purposes of studying Shakespeare, this lesson asks that we don’t get caught up at the desk tangled in chasing meanings in the text; there is a place for this, but starting with the body -- with physical work -- can allow for more individual success and for powerful tools to understand Shakespeare.

2. The Six Statements of Action, Gestures, and Qualities

Lenard Petit, a teacher of the Michael Chekhov approach, says that, in any human interaction in drama (and perhaps in life), there are six archetypal “statements of action.” In other words, we can express a character’s wants and desires in six fundamental ways. These are:

- I want
- I reject
- I stand my ground
- I yield
- I take
- I give

We may express these fundamental desires in a handful of concrete, physically-achievable gestures. These actions are what you do to embody the actions listed above:
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- Pushing
- Pulling
- Lifting
- Placing
- Tearing
- Throwing

Finally, we can color these actions and gestures with qualities -- i.e., how we execute these gestures. These may include:

- tenderly
- slowly
- quickly
- lightly
- heavily
- quietly
- carefully
- carelessly
- sneakily
- explosively
- sluggishly

2. Getting the Class on Their Feet

- Find an open space, and give each student a handout or a link to the statements, gestures, and qualities listed above.
- Give the class 10 - 15 minutes to experiment with combining these actions, gestures, and qualities.
  - Have each student begin by finding a place to work and by saying one of the statements aloud
  - The student should say, for example, “I want” several times
  - Then the student should choose a gesture that seems to embody this statement
    - She might choose “pulling”
  - The student should then let the gesture of pulling take over for the words so that she is just accomplishing a full-body gesture silently. This gesture could be pulling a rope, pulling a drawer out of a chest, pulling a heavy hand cart, etc.
    - Remind students that they should simply enjoy the gesture without thinking or intellectualizing about it. They should simply note what a full-body gesture is awakening in their imaginations and in their feelings.
    - Walk around the room and encourage students to really throw their whole being into this work. Small gestures aren’t the point here; the whole body, from the soles of the feet to the crown of the head should be engaged.
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- Once students are fully engaged in this work, encourage them to add a quality to the gestures they are doing. Are they pulling angrily, joyfully, carefully, erratically, etc.?
  - There is no right or wrong. This exercise is about creating an exploratory tool to bring to a text.
- Give the students time to experiment with combinations of these actions, gestures, and qualities. Let them play!

- After you've given your class ample time to play with these full-body exercises, have the students circle-up and ask them to finish this meta-cognitive stem, “I noticed . . .”; this will allow each student to share an insight and for you to help draw out a discussion about their discoveries. You may find that students will express that they felt this kind of attitude, or that kind of sensation -- their imaginations will have been stimulated. This is wonderful prep work for exploration of Shakespeare’s text.

3. Gesturing the Text

- Take a passage -- either a speech, monologue, or dialogue -- from whatever Shakespeare play you're working with (and, by the way, this approach will work brilliantly with Shakespeare’s Sonnets, lyric poetry, or other plays). For your purposes, you might find it best to have each student working with a speech on their own, but this is up to you.
- Have students read their passage aloud a few times to get the general meaning.
- Have them look for “gesture words” in the lines (verbs, maybe? images?)
- As soon as they feel inspired, have them put the text down and ask them to “try on” the gesture inspired by the text. See what it brings to them. How does it stir their inner life and feelings?
  - Michael Chekhov writes, “The Psychological Gesture [this is what he calls this fully-realized approach] becomes . . . a kind of a first, rough, charcoal draft for the future picture, after which all the details will gradually emerge and cover the initial sketch.”
  - In this way, the gesture work is akin to explicating the text -- except our tool isn’t just our brain -- it’s our whole bodies.
- After this “sketch,” find a few additional characteristic leading words from the text and pronounce them while making the gesture
- The objective, over time, is to hear the words “in harmony” with the gesture
  - First, execute the gesture without words
  - then, execute the gesture with the words together
  - then, say the words without the gesture. How does the gesture fuel the inner life and how does this inner life find its expression, naturally, in the speech?
- Allow students ample time to explore the text this way.
  - If they are unclear about a word or a phrase, have them consult a dictionary
Then ask them to imagine the person or persons they are talking to. If they know the play well, this may be an easy thing to answer.

Given the context of the speech, ask students to think about what they want the other person to do? This will help to “details to gradually emerge,” as Chekhov says.

- For instance, when Macbeth says to Lady Macbeth, in 1.7, “We shall proceed no further in this business,” what does Macbeth want Lady Macbeth to do?
- A student might say, Macbeth wants Lady Macbeth to “change her mind,” or to “tell Macbeth his is right,” and so on. These answers are all fine.
- Does the gesture for Macbeth’s speech here capture the very shape of his desire to force Lady Macbeth to cave in? If not, how could this be adjusted?
- When you wrap up with a student, you might help him or her summarize what they’ve done. If we use the example of Macbeth, we might say that his statement of action in this line is “to hold his ground.” And we might see that the gesture is pushing and that the quality is forcibly. As you work through this, the relationship between the gesture and qualities and with the language of the text will be completely linked.

4. Sharing

- Once students have explored their text or their scene with action, gestures, and qualities, you may invite some or all of the students to share their discoveries for the class (you know your students best, and you’ll adjust to their comfort level).
- You may have students perform their piece with all the energy and inner life of the gesture, but without having the students act out the gesture itself. The rest of the class can then try to guess at the action, gesture, and quality the performing student chose.
- After the student performs without the gesture, then ask her or him to perform the speech while doing the gesture with the qualities.
  - Does the gesture resonate with the language?
  - What might be adjusted?
  - How does the language and the gesture “harmonize” -- or fail to?

5. Summary

- The purpose of this exercise is to have students engage with a very close reading of a Shakespeare text by exploring the language physically and, eventually at least, intellectually. Physical exploration will reveal that a text is open to many approaches as well as to suggest just how strong, active, and imagistic Shakespeare’s language is (look what it can inspire your bodies to do!). And, finally, doing the text allows students to bypass the notion that Shakespeare is a purely intellectual and very difficult to understand.