

## A Student-Centered Approach to Shakespeare's Macbeth

by  
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Ask junior high school students to tell you about Shakespeare's work, and they will likely say that it's "complicated," "hard to understand," or "for really smart kids." That's what Sally Rothenberg's students said about Macbeth, even though they had never read it or any other of Shakespeare's plays. Ironically, despite a continued aura of bardolotry, Shakespeare himself wrote for the masses. In fact, editors who compiled Shakespeare's plays seven years after his death stated that they collected them not because they are great literary works, but "only to keep the memory of so worthy a Friend and Fellow alive as was our Shakespeare" (Losey 5). In this collection, they refer to Shakespeare's plays themselves as "trifles."

Students who encounter Shakespeare as an "immortal genius" rarely get to appreciate his skill as a good story-teller. Yet it is the universal appeal of Shakespeare's stories, which genuinely illustrate the very fabric of common life, that accounts for the endurance of his work over time. Thus, many literary critics agree on the necessity for each generation to interpret Shakespeare within the framework of its contemporary culture. From the standpoint of English education, imposing the weight and demands of scholarship on Shakespeare's plays not only detracts from the stories, but interferes with the very purpose of the writing. Shakespeare can be best perceived in an experiential fashion, with the engagement of imagination, sensation, and feeling as modes of understanding. Engaging students in the rewarding study of one of Shakespeare's plays however, requires a transformed mind-set, an approach replicating the mind-set of audiences of earlier centuries. When intellect, emotion, and sensory integration form the foundation for comprehension, then students will, by themselves, enter into an exploratory and defining process with the literature.

### Using a Scaffolded Reading Experience to Support Engagement

In order to facilitate individual interpretation and appreciation, teachers

often need to provide support as students read Shakespeare's plays. This is particularly true for Sally Rothenberg, who teaches eighth and ninth graders with learning disabilities to enjoy Macbeth. Rothenberg's approach blends elements of thematic instruction with elements of the Scaffolded Reading Experience that Graves and Graves described in 1994. A Scaffolded Reading Experience (SRE) is a "a set of pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities specifically designed to assist a particular group of students in successfully reading, understanding, learning from, and enjoying a particular selection" (5).

Underlying the SRE model are Campione's gradual release of responsibility model and Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development. Both concepts highlight the importance of supporting or scaffolding students as they enter new areas of work and move from one level of comfort and progress to the next. The SRE provides a menu of pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities designed by the teacher. In designing these activities, teachers should be cognizant of the strengths and needs of their students, characteristics of the text to be read, and their instructional goals. The SRE options appear in Figure 1. The remainder of this article presents aspects of an SRE designed by Rothenberg for use with her students.

### Planning Phase

The SRE described here was part of a thematic approach to literature. Rothenberg has found that by using themes, students are able to study and engage in literature while simultaneously learning about the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts within which the literature was created. In addition, students become actively involved in directing their own learning. Prior to the study of Macbeth, one month was spent studying Greek mythology. The interdisciplinary approach to Greek mythology involved discussions of Greek culture, philosophy, literature, and warfare. During the study of Greek literature, the concept of literary tragedy was introduced and this laid the foundation for the introduction of Shakespeare's Macbeth. In order to design an appropriate SRE, characteristics of the reading material, the instructional goals, and characteristics of the students were considered. The instructional goals,



which resulted from a cooperative effort between Rothenberg and her students, were first to learn why Shakespeare is considered to be a great writer and second to gain an in-depth understanding of literary tragedy.

### Implementation Phase

During Rothenberg's unit on Macbeth, she had two-hour blocks of time with her students each day. However, the activities could certainly be implemented in shorter time blocks over a longer period of time. General pre-reading activities occurred on the first three days. Reading and during-reading activities occurred on days four through eight. The last two days of the unit were devoted to general post-reading activities. General pre-reading and post-reading activities are those activities that preceded and followed, respectively, the play as a whole. As students read the play, on days four through eight, specific pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities were implemented for each act.

#### General Pre-reading Activities

Graves and Graves suggest ten preceding activities from which to choose those most appropriate for a particular instructional setting (see Figure 1). Based on students' lack of prior knowledge related to the play, Rothenberg chose to spend time relating the reading to students' lives, activating background knowledge, and building text-specific knowledge. These activities were facilitated by Rothenberg's thematic approach to instruction.

#### Activating prior knowledge and building text-specific knowledge.

During the unit on Greek mythology, Rothenberg's class had read the Greek trilogy of The Oresteia. In order to activate prior knowledge for Macbeth, the class summarized The Oresteia, and its author, Aeschylus, who created literary tragedy. Based on this discussion, the class came up with a working definition of tragedy.

Using information gleaned during the previous unit as a base, Rothenberg also provided information about the history and culture of Scotland

in the year 1050. There was a lively discussion of the clothing of the period, castles and other dwellings, warfare, and religion. A map of Scotland was posted in the classroom and students discussed the country's geographical features.

Relating the reading to students' lives. First, the concept of literary tragedy developed by the class was expanded upon. Using elements of Frayer, Frederick, and Klausmeier's model of concept development, this included a presentation of what literary tragedy is and what it is not as well as the presentation of examples and non-examples of the concept. Three elements were highlighted: first, showing human misery at its worst and human grandeur at its greatest; second, the monumental struggle of human will against inescapable destiny; and finally the concept of a tragic hero. The example served to relate the reading to students' lives because it came from the contemporary film and book trilogy, Star Wars. This example illustrated for the students a human at his darkest hour and at the height of grandeur, as well as the concepts of inescapable destiny and the tragic hero.

#### General During-Reading Activities

After providing a foundation for the play in its entirety, students began to read one act of the play each day for the next five days. Each day, students were engaged in pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities. Pre-reading activities included responding to a question posed by Rothenberg at the end of the preceding day, verifying teacher and student understandings through discussion and question-posing, and making predictions. During-reading activities consisted of reading aloud from a modern English version of the play with each student assuming a part and the teacher interjecting a key question or statement to guide students' reading. Journal writing constituted the post-reading activity. These activities provided students with opportunities for thorough understanding as well as personal response. After the entire play was read, students engaged in several post-reading activities designed to foster higher levels of comprehension and personal response.



## General Post-reading Activities

As indicated previously, students kept journals of their reactions and reflections throughout their reading, especially in areas discussed before the reading. Students were told that journal entries could be written in diary format and that they should refer to exact page and line numbers as frequently as possible in order to facilitate daily discussions and to aid in the organization of thoughts at the end of the play when students would be summarizing the play as a whole.

Journal summaries and analyses. Rothenberg had her students color code their journal entries to facilitate a discussion of the play. Statements pertaining to Macbeth before the murders were coded in yellow, during the murders in pink, and in the end in blue. Entries pertaining to events in the play illustrating nature's revolt were highlighted in green. By comparing and contrasting their entries, students got a sense of how their individual responses to the play varied. Through discussion, they were able to construct interpretations that went beyond their individual responses. In fulfillment a writing assignment, each student summarized the play in his/her journal by focusing on one of the four categories that were color coded.

Relating to current events. For an in-class project, students worked in pairs on an application activity involving a statement made in the New York Times regarding President Nixon's death. A Conservative Member of Parliament referred to the former president as "a Shakespearean hero of tragic proportion" (Apple, A9). Students were to use their understanding of tragedy and the coverage in numerous articles in the New York Times to defend or refute this assertion. They color coded passages in the newspaper to build their cases, then presented their findings to the class. Each pair was assigned a position in the debate. Afterward, personal opinions were discussed.

On the final day of the unit, students watched the film Macbeth. For homework, students were assigned to think about whether the movie changed their summary of the play and, if so, to rewrite the summary and describe the new perspective and its origin. In addition, they were asked to explain this quotation:

Moral order... has lost a part of its own substance—a part more dangerous and unquiet, but far more valuable and nearer to its heart, than that which remains—a Fortinbras, a Malcolm, an Octavius. There is no tragedy in its expulsion of evil: the tragedy is that this involves the waste of good (Mehl 130).

## Writing to Promote Critical Thinking

In order to promote critical thinking, Rothenberg's students elected to complete one of two follow-up projects related to the play.

Mini-research project. During the witches' scene in the fourth act, a succession of Banquo's progeny in ghostly form appear before Macbeth, some bearing "two-fold balls and treble scepters" (4.1.121). From the first act we know that Banquo is,

"Lesser than Macbeth, and greater."

"Not so happy, yet much happier."

"Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none." (1.3.65-67)

Banquo's son would establish a powerful dynasty which eventually rules a double kingdom. Who were these ghostly kings, and what are the two-fold balls and treble scepters"? Trace the dynasty established. Who were these men, what was their kingdom, how did they rule, and how did it end?

Essay. Many believe that great tragedy has been written during two periods in history: the Golden Age of Pericles in Athens and the Elizabethan period in England. The Golden Age of Pericles produced three of the four great masters of the tragic form: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. The Elizabethan period produced Shakespeare. What do these two historical periods have in common that could have produced such mastery and genius of literary tragedy?

These two assignments produced results that spoke to students' individual perspectives and critical thought. For example, one student's research led her to conclude that Shakespeare knew that Lady Macbeth should have inherited the

throne since she was the only one who had a direct blood relationship with the king. According to this student, Lady Macbeth is the true protagonist of the play

### Final Remarks

Student evaluations of their experiences with Macbeth were high, and after reading Macbeth, they expressed a desire to write their own tragedies, which they did. Perhaps the most essential factor contributing to the success of this unit was the enthusiasm of the students. Their projects created as part of the unit on Greek mythology contributed to a sense of ownership in the subsequent unit on Macbeth.

The SRE model provided Rothenberg with a structure for thinking about instruction such that literature study and engagement could be integrated with reading support. The fact that the model focuses on dimensions for instructional decision-making allows teachers to capitalize on students' strengths and the strengths of the reading material while addressing students' current limitations and the limitations of the text. In this case, the SRE worked particularly well in conjunction with a theme-centered approach to literacy development. Further, students who were experiencing difficulty in reading were given access to and participated in higher order thinking experiences related to reading.

At the beginning of the project, the students did not believe they could be successful with Shakespeare, despite their strong desire to attempt it. Perhaps what the students discovered can best be described by this quotation:

Shakespeare's plays, and particularly the great tragedies, offer an experience that can only be lived into and understood to the best of our individual powers, and our understanding changes as we change; there are no answers that the beginner can, as it were, look up at the end of the book. (Knights 327)

Rothenberg hopes that her students now believe that each of them will find the great stories in Shakespeare's work and will interpret them for themselves and that each interpretation will be significant.

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