Learning to Teach English

Laura-Jane Evans-Jones

When you start to study Shakespeare, you enter a new world. A world that draws you in and envelops you. A world that speaks a different language. A world that is different from anything you have encountered before in English and different from anything that you will study again. The same applies to learning to teach—I can only speak as an English teacher, but I never switch off. I watch TV through Media Studies spectacles, considering how the media techniques enhance the storyline. I watch film adaptations of novels as a critic, noting what they have missed out or added and analysing whether the book or the film is better. I even correct people’s grammar on Twitter and cringe when people misuse homophones in daily life. I can’t be taken to the theatre without analysing the movements and disagreeing with the director about their ‘modern twist on a classic’.

Watching a play is, generally, most peoples’ way in to Shakespeare and, just as you cannot be considered an expert on Shakespeare until you have experience of a wide range of his plays, you cannot get on to a PGCE course without practical experience of a classroom. We start to learn by watching others teach. We are deliberately exposed to a range of teaching and learning strategies to help us find our own ideas about and interpretations of teaching. Even once we have started teaching, watching other teachers is still highly encouraged—if your specialism is an essay-based subject, observing a practical subject can help you see how teaching happens in other settings as well as watching people within your own department to equip yourself with skills and techniques specific to your subject.

Exactly as watching my first Shakespeare play led to a crash-course in The Bard and his ways, my pre-course observations were eye-opening to say the least. Literacy (a hitherto foreign country having been educated prior to its introduction) was a foreign language and I’d never previously considered how my letter sounds blended together to make words. Familiarisation is, however, the happy key to developing understanding, so after an evening of cramming (not dissimilar to speed reading Richard III in one night so I could make intelligent contributions to seminar
discussions the next day) I returned for the rest of my observations semi-fluent in the traditions and language of the Key Stage 2 English curriculum.

Being slightly more at home in the secondary school classroom, I found my second set of observations a mix of familiarity and complete opposition to what I had ever experienced before. I knew what was meant to be happening, and I couldn’t understand why it wasn’t. However, when you put your preconceptions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to one side, you open yourself to learning and understanding far more. Teaching English has changed a lot since I was at school (which wasn’t even that long ago) and it took me a while to get my head around the differences. Instead of a grammar lesson every week, spelling, punctuation and grammar were interspersed into every day teaching; pair and group work were actively encouraged and most of the lessons were split into a heady whirl of starters, activities and plenaries. I recognised WHAT was being taught, but not HOW it was being taught, which was worrying (to say the least) until I started my placements and realised quite how wide a variety of teachers and teaching styles there are just in English departments let alone whole schools. There are, it could be argued, the ‘Globe’ teachers who take a more traditional approach to learning compared with their ‘Stratford’ counterparts who try out new things and push the boundaries of what is accepted within the confines of ‘English teaching’. Do not for one minute let it be said that I am criticising either type of teacher—I believe, having watched many teachers over the last eighteen months, that there is a time and a place for both styles.

As well as observing other people yourself, there are, of course, observations of your own teaching. The audience, if you will. There are forms to be filled in and boxes to be ticked. Perhaps the most confusing thing that you will come across is that everyone has a different opinion about the best way to teach the same topic, let alone the same subject, just as every critic of a theatre show has a different view about what they have been watching. Everyone applies their own interpretation and understanding of pedagogy to what they see, experienced and beginning teachers alike, and working out who to listen to can be a challenge. However, there are as in any field (no matter how big or small) leaders, and just as Shakespeare has his leading critics, so you as a teacher will emerge with an understanding of who to listen to and what to take on board. Everyone who is anyone (and a lot who aren’t) has an opinion about it and something to share. You will need to spend time creating your own philosophy of teaching in much the same way you came to your own conclusions about Shakespeare despite all the reading that you had done about him during your education.
Part of this learning comes through theory and part of it through practice. There is a language to learn and new terminology to be applied. The start of my PGCE truly was reminiscent of my first forays into studying Shakespeare—the language made very little sense and I had no idea what was going on. After being shown how to translate the language into something that I understood and realising how the different parts of the story came together, it was much more straightforward. After so many years reading and studying it, the archaic language of Shakespeare (which pupils everywhere seem to insist upon calling ‘Old English’ despite my best attempts to stop them) is now second nature to me, read and translated into modern idioms at will, much like the way definitions of the key technical terms of English teaching must always be on the tip of your tongue so you can explain once again the difference between a comparison using ‘like’ or ‘as’ and an implied comparison.

However, one of the keys to understanding Shakespeare fully is to bring it to life. Learning by doing has long been held as the most effective ways to teach Shakespeare, and so it is with teaching. You can learn any number of theories of how best to mark a child’s work; but whilst practising your phrasing for a summative comment telling them their spelling needs some work without making it sound like the disaster it really is or working out a gentle reminder about embedding their quotations is undeniably useful, the real chance for learning comes by actually marking their work, by seeing in front of you the difference between an A and an A* or from being able to recognise how to move a pupil’s work across that D/C borderline that makes all the difference in their future lives. A fuller knowledge of what is happening and understanding of what is being said will only come with time and experience. Just as it takes time for actors to develop an instinctive knowledge of what movements to put to a particular scene of a play, so too does it take time for a teacher’s knowledge to become instinctive.

There are no tick boxes for marking GCSE controlled assessment, merely your interpretation and understanding of the differences between ‘sophisticated’ and ‘controlled,’ yet it is almost a certainty that you will be asked not only to teach GCSE classes but also mark their work and be prepared to justify your grading against the marking criteria. It can sometimes feel like you are spending all your time justifying your actions but again, being confident in your assessment of a piece of writing is something that comes with practice even when it is for a ‘real’ GCSE grade. Teaching is about layers, whether that is the combination of planning, marking and teaching or working out how to differentiate yet another lesson on Romeo & Juliet. These layers have their individual challenges ranging from the very simple things that are immediately
obvious to the complex ones that require a lengthy amount of consideration and practice before they fall into place. The more I initially struggled with this, the easier I found it to understand where my pupils were coming from in terms of their comprehension (or lack thereof) about what we were reading. Try to see it from their point of view—on the whole, they can read and speak fluently by KS3, and then they are given a book written in a seemingly completely different language and asked to work at the same level they have previously worked at and, in some cases, improve upon it. Shakespeare can be understood on many different levels, and it is our job as teachers to work out how to help people access the level appropriate to them and their stage of education.

Shakespeare’s own concept of the seven ages of man speaks for itself in terms of the development of a person—we are lifelong learners, whether teacher or pupil. Ben Johnson once wrote that Shakespeare was not of an age but for all time, and whilst your pupils may resist accepting it, so is education. As teachers of a core subject, we are in a hugely privileged position of seeing a large number of pupils regularly, but this also puts a certain amount of pressure on us, quite apart from the volume of marking required! A few days before I left for university, my English teacher told me to keep reading all the time, as ‘all good English students keep up with their reading, particularly Shakespeare.’ Now, as an English student with more than a slight penchant for finding the DVD adaptation of a novel rather than reading it, this was probably very sage advice that I have only recently begun to realise the truth of: the only way to stay at the top your game in any field, be it teaching or Shakespeare or sport or business is to stay in touch with developments in your specialism, and the only way to do this through reading. It might be reading papers or journals, or through news websites and opinion blogs; it might even be through social networking sites such as LinkedIn or Facebook that contacts are made and information is exchanged, but however you keep up, you must keep up. Just as there is seemingly a new theory about Shakespeare’s writings or analysis of his work every few months, so there is with education, but on a much, much tighter scale.

Education changes so rapidly that the best thing you could do as a beginning teacher at the moment is to set up the BBC News email service with an education key word search and get yourself a Twitter account to follow the thousands of other teachers who have set up Personal Learning Networks around the world to help inform and aid their practice. There are a whole raft of threads and discussions specifically aimed at English teachers as well as links to resource websites such as www.tes.co.uk and www.teachit.co.uk and a range of ‘Tweeps’ pertinent to teaching English ranging from NQTs to experienced HoDs and even The Bard himself in a
variety of different guises. In the same way technological advancements have vastly aided the performance of Shakespeare’s plays, so they have aided the preparation and delivery of English lessons. Being able to give pupils a laptop and send them off to websites such as www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise and http://www.kidsspell.com to practise their spelling, punctuation and grammar rather than the slightly Victorian model of a Grammar Lesson every week is a happy development for both teacher and pupils alike. Even on a purely practical level of being able to display and annotate a text instantly on your iWB instead of describing what you want them to write where and hope they get it right—being able to turn language analysis into an interactive, practical activity instead of merely a sedentary, auditory one can only be a good thing (particularly in terms of meeting your visual, auditory and kinaesthetic differentiation targets if nothing else!)

Keeping Shakespeare relevant and up-to-date for pupils is a similarly difficult challenge. They have to study Shakespeare, whether they like it or not, and it is our job to make it accessible for them. Motivating your pupils to care about plays that were written 600 years ago is always going to be difficult, but the more au fait you are with modern technologies, the easier this will become. There is little difference from your point of view as to whether Banquo’s Ghost is keeping a diary or writing a blog, but for your students, the difference is huge. Getting them to consider Shylock’s reactions to the court case by getting them to update his Facebook status not only allows you a chance to analyse their knowledge of the events of the play but also to assess their understanding of the character. You could even make sure that watching the DVD still has a valid ‘interpretive’ angle by getting them to tweet in real time as a member of the audience highlighting similarities and differences between the film and the play as well as their reactions to it. It is amazing how many assessment foci and objectives you can cover with activities that just seem like a bit of fun!

Shaping your teaching materials to suit your pupils is also key: what works for one Year 9 class one Monday morning won’t necessarily work for a different one on Thursday afternoon. Each play is so different yet easily adaptable to a wide range of contexts and settings that it can never get boring. It is amazing how many different groups can study the same play with ostensibly the same scheme of work and come out with completely different answers and opinions. Even within one teaching group each pupil applies their own knowledge and life experiences to their interpretation of scenarios and relationships, shaping their understanding of Shakespeare within their own sphere of understanding.

Everyone has a different sphere of understanding and a different level of knowledge about a text, and you may think at times that because you’ve
studied it for so long and know it so well that you KNOW it but until you sit down and read it in order to teach it, you really don’t. How many people have watched the DVD or a stage adaptation and claimed to “know” the story? I freely admit that I am one of the worst culprits when it comes to this—I like to prepare myself for my Shakespeare planning by watching as many adaptations of the story as I can get my hands on: old, new, dystopian, modern and traditional. I’ve seen *Macbeth* performed by Army men, I’ve seen Shakespeare: Retold more times than I care to remember and I know all the words to every song in *West Side Story*. However much that might inform my understanding of the stories of the plays, it does not necessarily translate to a scheme of work that helps my pupils understand Shakespeare. In the same way that I have pieced together my understanding of what makes a good teacher, I need to help my pupils be able to piece together their understandings of concepts and ideas. Yes, they might need guidance in understanding definitions and finding examples of such things in their texts, but I should never foist my interpretations of something on to them—I am merely there to expose them to the different ideas and interpretations and help them work out their own (although sometimes it is necessary to make a totalitarian statement or two to avoid getting thirty two Controlled Assessments that all comment on how Romeo pulled out a gun and shot Mercutio).

It is not, however, only in theory, practice and paperwork that the parallels can be drawn between teaching and Shakespeare: purely on a personal, emotional level, you have your histories, your tragedies and your comedies. Doing a PGCE is not a time when ‘work’ and ‘life’ are easily separated. Your subject knowledge takes a continual pounding as pupils seemingly find new and different ways every day to trip you up and find new holes in your learning—there is a huge difference between “knowing English” and “knowing English well enough to teach it” and you can guarantee that if there is a gap in your knowledge, they will find it. The tragedies occur, for some, nearly daily. Even the best teachers have their off days, and on a PGCE, there are more than a few off days: actors who know their lines inside out can still freeze and go blank, although for anyone who has ever stood in front of their Year 10 class and not been able to find the words to describe Macbeth’s reaction to the three witches, that is little comfort. As with all actors, practice makes perfect, and you cannot expect to be perfect straight away even if you are a natural in the classroom. As for the comedies, well, the pupils provide them all by themselves with no help from us. They are the reason we do it and, most days, the reason why we come back tomorrow even if it’s the last thing we want to do. After all, there’s more than just a little bit of acting behind being a good teacher. I think Shakespeare would be proud.