Margaret A. Dulaney

Using a Prop Box to Create Emotional Memory and Creative Play for Teaching Shakespeare’s Othello

After teaching in rural North Carolina for about six years, I was on the verge of giving up on teaching Shakespeare to my students. Although they seemed to enjoy the action and the drama of Shakespeare’s plays, the lack of connection between the students and the language and culture of the plays interfered with my ability to generate a sense of relevancy and purpose for them. As an English teacher and a lover of the Bard, however, I was unable to let him go without trying one more time. I thought about my own early experiences with Shakespeare and realized that my appreciation of Shakespeare was an evolutionary process that began with my own struggles to understand his texts while still in high school.

It was not until I took a Shakespeare class in college that my feelings about Shakespeare shifted. The class was required; yet, I delayed taking it until late in my program. I could not help but flash back to my negative experiences with Shakespeare in high school every time I felt the name Shakespeare crawl up my spine. Determined to make an A, however, I surrendered my fears and became inspired by my professor’s passion for all things Shakespeare. He coupled this passion with collaborative and interactive instruction, and I left the class with a newfound excitement for the complexity, humor, drama, and sheer beauty of Shakespeare’s words and characters.

It was my negative high school recollections, coupled with my college epiphany, to which I turned years later as a high school English teacher when attempting to teach Shakespeare’s work to my own students. I clung to the belief that in spite of the archaic syntax of Shakespeare’s work, his timeless themes, clever humor, and intriguing characters could continue to stand the test of time. It was up to me to find a way to bridge the distance between student and text, culture and community, and language and understanding. After all, as Ken Lindblom reminds us in English Journal’s September 2009 issue (guest edited by Michael LoMonico) that focused on all things Shakespeare, Shakespeare did not “write plodding, introspective, and self-indulgent discourses that demanded patience and restraint from the audience. He didn’t create mindless catchphrases or scrub high-minded or controversial issues from his works. He wrote plays that entertained and educated an extraordinarily wide audience—and continue to do so” (15).

Despite my best intentions, however, I made a mistake that many teachers make when teaching Shakespeare and I relied on a tape, a textbook, and the occasional activity in which students re-created a scene in modern language. Although my assessments showed that students learned during this process, there was never that truly emotional connection that I hoped students would experience. Ultimately, I spent more time teaching about the plays than really teaching the plays.

Finally, during my seventh year of teaching I was ready and determined to change my prior teaching methods when teaching Shakespeare, and I prepared myself to teach Othello in my English 12 class. Despite their lukewarm reception the
previous year, I was determined to help this year’s students connect emotionally, culturally, and intellectually to the characters and their experiences in this operatic and psychologically intense drama. I began my lesson revisions by acknowledging that because many of my students could not access prior knowledge of the setting, language, and culture of Othello, I needed first to access their similar emotional memories in anticipation of the conflict and passion to ensue. I remembered from my own high school days, as well as my six years of teaching, that the high school environment is rife with forbidden love, jealousy, and betrayal. I just had to find a way to excavate students’ emotional memories to enhance their understanding of, and build their anticipation for, Othello. People have a way of remembering events and episodes if these events and episodes can somehow be connected to their emotional memories. Armed with these beliefs as well as research on brain-based learning, I prepared to teach Othello.

Constructivism and Shakespeare Together Again

One of the greatest challenges that English teachers face when teaching drama is that despite the fact that drama is intended to be a dynamic text, students’ experiences are often static and stale when they sit in their desks and either read aloud or listen to a textbook-generated CD. Based on the overcrowded classrooms and the limited resources of many schools, this often feels like an unavoidable approach to teaching drama. These daily limitations, along with the particular linguistic complexities of Shakespeare, have unfortunately proven to stifle a truly connective learning experience for both students and teachers.

In “You Gotta BE the Book”: Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents, Jeffrey D. Wilhelm argues that “literary reading depends both on a reader’s entering and becoming involved in a story world, and on using that involvement to interpret characters, setting, thematic possibilities, and so on” (xiii). I did not know Wilhelm’s research when I began this process, but I did understand that my first goal had to be to develop a multisensory experience that generated interest and excitement prior even to introducing students to Shakespeare and the complex cast of characters who live within the pages of Othello. Without such excitement, I knew from experience that my students would check out, and I would once again be going through the motions of teaching about Shakespeare rather than actually teaching Shakespeare.

In his theoretical discussion of “The Role of Play in Development,” Lev S. Vygotsky proposes that “[p]lay is more nearly recollection of something that has actually happened than imagination . . . more memory in action than a novel imaginary situation” (103). Based on this concept, I began to wonder whether or not there were ways that I could use creative play to excavate students’ emotional memories of love, jealousy, and betrayal, key themes in Othello. If so, could these memories help students hurdle the linguistic and cultural barriers of Shakespeare by tapping their emotive connections to Othello’s characters and their experiences in both a rigorous and a meaningful manner? More importantly, would tapping into the emotional experiences of my students help them connect to Othello in a more evocative way than my previous methods of instruction had done?

Despite the fact that my students were seniors, just months away from graduation, I knew that even the most stoic of them enjoyed the opportunity to interact with their peers while engaging in creative and meaningful activities. The potential for this interaction is the foundation of constructivist learning, and as Wilhelm points out, students (especially male students) are more motivated to “read and to learn when these activities involved exploring or developing relationships with family, friends, classmates, authors, characters or teachers” (13).

The Prop Box

Based on my understanding of the importance of constructing meaning through student-centered activities as well as knowledge about my own students, I designed a prop box—a collection of tangible
items that represent significant symbols, conflicts, and characters of a given text. These items, or props, specifically support each text and serve as a catalyst to unearth students’ inherent and emotive knowledge of symbols and their meanings. Based on my understanding of Othello, I selected the following symbols to include in my Othello prop box:

- skull
- white candle
- candlestick
- bridal veil
- plastic dagger
- a handkerchief with a strawberry printed on it

Moreover, I recognized the symbiotic relationship between music and students’ lives, so I also incorporated music into the prop box activity as a way not only to provoke emotional responses and increase memory skills but also to help create mood and tone. Research indicates that Baroque music increases memory because of its relaxing effect on the body and brain (Sprenger 99); therefore, I chose Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” to play in the background as the students entered the classroom.

**The Plan**

As students entered my classroom, I greeted them while dressed in a long, black cape and black eye mask. Beethoven played in the background, and the props were spread across a small table in the front of the room. I watched as several of the girls went directly to the bridal veil and took turns trying it on, while one of the boys grabbed the plastic dagger. I encouraged the students to interact with the props by touching them, picking them up, and trying them on if appropriate. Once the bell rang, I gave them an additional five minutes to talk among themselves about the props and to **play** with them.

After students returned to their desks, I asked them to reflect on the symbols and props by creating a graphic organizer much like a bubble map or spider map (see fig. 1 for an example I created). In the center of the map, they wrote the name Othello, and then each prop would appear in its own bubble. Students then created a visual or picture that represented their perception of the object’s meaning or use. The creation of this bubble map is an important step in the process because “the use of a symbol or picture brings emotion into the learning and helps access another memory lane-emotional memory to enhance learning” (Sprenger 65). This utilization of the graphic organizer not only helps build on prior knowledge but also supports different learners, who will now remember the information based on the colors, words, images, or even position of the information on the page (65). This bubble map creation builds on the individual’s schema that supports both emotive and intellectual recall when these objects appear within the text. These graphic organizers can be referenced, individually and collectively, throughout the reading as a way to recall the meaning and emotive qualities of not only the symbols in the prop box but also the symbols and their meaning found within the text itself.

After completing the graphic organizer activity, students were then asked to create a scene or
scenario that included all of the objects from the prop box. The main criteria for the piece was that each of the items had to be included in the scene, otherwise it was up to the students to write any kind of scene they envisioned based on prior knowledge and creativity.

After individually creating a scene, each student was then put into a group with three other students, and they shared their individual scenes with their group members. Each group then selected one of the scenes and together mapped out a short skit based on the selected scene. Again, each prop had to be included in the skit, and each member of the group had to play some part in it. Students were eager to begin and I noticed that even some of the students who rarely participated became actively engaged and provided provocative and insightful contributions.

Once students had outlined a sketch, I added one final stipulation. Students would present the skits to the class; however, there could be no dialogue included in the skits. The omission of dialogue forced students to consider how characters’ actions and mannerisms, along with the uses of the props, are critical within the context of a play. Ultimately, by taking away the dialogue, I required the students to be less dependent on words to develop the action. Too often, particularly when studying Shakespeare, students become so bogged down by the words that they are unable to connect to the characters and the conflict of the drama. The omission of dialogue at this stage shifted the focus to emotions, symbols, characters, and plot.

One, Two, Three . . . Action!

The students excitedly gathered into their groups and started to share their ideas. Below is one scene that was created in response to the assignment. The group that created that scene was comprised of two male students and two female students. Male 2 is very shy and does not easily engage in discussion. Female 2 often has difficulties understanding literary devices and how they help create meaning within text. She likes to participate but often struggles to make meaning of text.

There is a man and woman who are getting married, and the woman is holding the candle and wearing the veil. She puts the candle on the table, and the couple turn to look at one another; but just as they are getting ready to say “I do,” a woman sneaks up behind the bride and stabs her with the dagger. The bride drops her handkerchief, and she falls to the floor and dies; the skull is propped beside her. The man turns to the killer, hugs her, and they run out of the church.

Prior to presenting the scene, while still practicing, the following conversation took place between the students who constructed this scene:

Female 1: OK, but I get to be the bride because I want to wear the veil. I wonder if she will let me wear it to my next class?

Female 2: That’s good because that means I get to kill you then!

F1: You have to be my husband! [student looks at male student 1]

[Laughter between girls]

Male 1: Whatever. Why can’t we just fight and then someone dies?
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Male 2: Man, that doesn’t really make sense. We have to use all of the props. I’ll be the guy who marries you two.

F1: The preacher?
M2: Whatever, you know what I mean.

F1: I think that we should act like the wind blows the candle out right before you stab her.

F2: Yeah, good. Then it’s like a sign or something, but we can’t talk, so we have to look at the candle like we’re scared or something. It’s like that movie, what’s it called?

F1: OK, but I don’t get why I have to have the skull next to me; won’t that be stupid? I mean I’m sure that if someone falls down and dies a skull won’t just happen to be there.

M2: We have to use all of the props, and anyway, if the skull is next to you, everyone will know that you are dead!

F2: Yeah, then it’s safe for me to take your boo!

F1: Fine, but you better not touch my veil!

[Laughter among group members]

There were similar conversations in which students tapped into some of the fundamental emotions that so compellingly hurdle Othello into a world in which he has lost everything he ever loved, but even though these skits that were built on significant symbols from the play tapped into these emotions, I was still unsure whether this would affect students’ understandings of Othello.

The Results for Students: Emotive Connections

Although I was relying on my prior experiences with students, I had anticipated a positive outcome. The first time that I put this exercise into practice, I was amazed at the insightful and emotively intuitive responses of my students as we progressed through Othello.

First, students were highly engaged, and it often became a game for them to seek out the symbols we had used in the prop boxes and to explain how they impact the meaning of the drama. Students understand that when Othello blew out the candle just prior to murdering his one true love, Desdemona, that the extinguishing of the candle was a prelude to the extinguishing of a life. One student even cried and when another asked her about it, she noted, “It’s just not right. He listened to what every one else said and now he’s killing her because people were running their mouths.” I don’t know what elicited such a compelling response from a student who prided herself on her toughness, but I wager that it was because she too had recently been through a difficult breakup that was rife with gossip and accusations. Understanding the symbolic power of the candle and the suspense it created built a cocoon of emotion that may not have been possible had her emotional memories not been tapped into prior to our classroom reading.

Another symbol that was continually referenced by students throughout our classroom discussion of the play was the skull. Students were not looking for a skull, as I told them one never actually appears in Othello, but instead the skull in the prop box prompted the students to look for death. This one small symbol activated their prior knowledge about skulls, death, and despair. Students knew from the beginning that this play would involve death and darkness, and when they wove the darkness, wedding veil, and dagger into their prereading skits, they knew that the play would involve jealousy and murder and so they sought out the foreshadowing and character choices that would lead to such murder. How could they know based on this one activity how truly sinister and heartbreaking this play was without first tapping into their emotive understandings and connections to the symbols of the skull, the wedding veil, and the dagger?

Could it be that Vygotsky was correct and that creative play is really more of a reflection of memory than creativity? Could it be that if given an opportunity, such symbols and props can be used to create a deep emotive connection to texts for students? Based on students’ responses and their recognition in the power of symbols to create suspense and to represent something as abstract as death, it was evident that students were bringing emotive knowledge and memory to this experience and that they made clear connections between the prop box symbols and their own emotions, thereby engaging a personal understanding of the language of Shakespeare and the story of Othello.
Implications for Using Prop Boxes in the Classroom

As interesting and provocative as students’ initial responses were to the props and their symbolic significance, the real question remained: Could, and more importantly would, this understanding transfer to a deeper understanding of text and the academic objectives that are traditionally expected with a text as rich as Othello? How was this activity recasting rigor in a way that took a different approach but still held the same academic expectations and outcomes? Those questions would only be answered as the students and I progressed through the actual experience of Othello.

One of the most telling experiences was based on one of the last scenes of the play in which Othello is preparing to kill Desdemona. I have taught Othello numerous times; however, students often missed the moment when Othello blows out the candle as the moment that foreshadows Desdemona’s impending death. After the prop box activity, in which many students blew out the candle just before they committed murder, many students noticed this small but significant event and even noted its suspense-building role within the text. Additionally, the first time that Desdemona’s strawberry-embroidered handkerchief appeared in the play, students recognized it from their skits. This handkerchief was no longer simply a prop; it had become a tangible representation of love, hope, faith, and ultimately betrayal.

Through the process of intertextuality (the utilization of one text to enhance understanding of a new text) students created a collective or class text to which they now could make connections that further galvanized and informed their experience with Othello. This leveled the intellectual playing field because regardless of individual experiences, cultural influences, or prior knowledge, each member of the class now shared a common text to which they could refer. This collective memory now included symbols and their significance; characters and their deepest human emotions; and elements of drama and their role in creating a dynamic text. It no longer mattered who had prior experience upon which to draw but instead each member of the class now had this collective prior knowledge and if there was confusion about the significance of a skull or a candle or even a seemingly innocuous handkerchief, students now had a common experience generated through the prop box activity. It, therefore, became even more apparent that by creating this collective or class text, students became empowered to support, guide, and teach one another, thereby achieving a rigor every bit as arduous, insightful, and analytical. Finally, through this process of intertextuality, students were also able to make additional connections to self, text, and world.

What Can We Learn?

Students had not been formally introduced to Othello. Yet when I gave them the opportunity to create scenes based on significant symbols, reflective of no prior knowledge of the play, they created scenes that were eerily similar to many of the most significant scenes, scenes that were created more than 400 years ago. Cultures, histories, and languages may be different, yet the human condition and the resulting emotions transcend all of those factors. Because students were able to make connections between their own emotional experiences with love, jealousy, and revenge in both a personal and interactive way, they were empowered to find relevance in Othello, despite its perceived antiquity and its linguistic challenges.

More importantly, once students actually engaged in the action of the drama, they made analytical and insightful connections between symbols and their role in facilitating a deeper understanding of character, plot, and conflict. This activity helped create and build schema that empowered all students, regardless of prior classroom and personal learning, to begin the reading on a shared intellectual and emotive playing field. Although at first glance this assignment may have seemed somewhat intellectually frivolous, students were still able to achieve the same level of rigor; however, it had been recast so that the outcome was the same, and the path to get there just looked different!

Through this experience, I came to understand that one of its greatest ironies is that to be willing to try the use of prop boxes, a teacher must
be willing to step outside traditional pedagogy in a way that is both engaging and rigorous for students and teachers. Although I am not sure how Wilhelm would feel about the inclusion of Shakespeare in the contemporary classroom, his point that as teachers “we must remember that the ways we mediate literature with students will have a profound effect on the kinds of readers they will become” (47) most certainly reinforces the value of prop boxes within the ELA classroom. Susan C. Biondo-Hench’s Farmer Award–winning *English Journal* article notes that in teaching Shakespeare there are two “essential ingredients—the words themselves and the students” (38)—to consider. Utilizing prop boxes within the ELA classroom reflects the value of both Shakespeare’s words and students’ interactions with those words.

**Margaret A. Dulaney** taught high school English for eight years, and her students inspired her to pursue a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction—English Language Arts Education. She completed her PhD at North Carolina State University in August 2012 and was appointed assistant professor of English education in the Graduate School of Education at SUNY–Binghamton University. Her dissertation explored the pedagogical and cognitive choices teachers make when implementing graphic narratives in the secondary classroom. **Editor’s note:** This article was accepted and edited prior to the author’s sudden, accidental death. We thank Carol Pope for helping us with page proof corrections, and we offer her and Margaret Dulaney’s family and friends our deepest sympathy.

With deep sadness, I append this note to Meg’s biographical statement. Unfortunately, Meg died in a tragic car accident in July 2012, seven weeks after she successfully defended her dissertation with the flair and verve that was so typically Meg. As her dissertation chair and close mentor at NC State, I witnessed firsthand the difference Meg made in the lives of many. To the end, Meg was the quintessential teacher and reflective practitioner, as this article clearly reveals. For her students, she gave her all: she brought her creativity, wisdom, and unsurpassed energy to them. More than anything, she wanted to make a difference for students and teachers. To all of us who knew Meg, she will always be our “beloved Meg”—a soul who brought laughter, insight, and genuine care into our lives. We miss her, but we are pleased *EJ* readers will get a chance to know her a bit here. This story about teaching *Othello* was one of her favorites, so she was excited to share it.

—Carol Pope, Professor of ELA Education, North Carolina State University

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**READWITEDTHINK CONNECTION**

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

“Constructing New Understanding through Choral Readings of Shakespeare” provides another approach to teaching Shakespeare’s plays. Here, students work in small groups to plan, compose, and perform a choral reading based on a character or theme. [http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/constructing-understanding-through-choral-1121.html](http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/constructing-understanding-through-choral-1121.html)