

Connecting Students with Shakespeare's Poetry: Digital Creations of Close Reading

How can students build new connections with the poetic details of Shakespeare's plays? In this digital movie project, students explore close reading and thoughtful selection of imagery to create deeper understanding.

The day is hot, the Capulets abroad
And, if we meet, we shall not scape a brawl;
For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring.

—Romeo and Juliet, 3.1.2–4

Boy, boy, crazy boy,
Get cool, boy!

—“Cool,” lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, West Side Story

When we say that Shakespeare's works are timeless, what exactly do we mean? Why did Leonard Bernstein excitedly pencil above a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* that the play was “an out and out plea for racial tolerance”? One answer comes from Arthur Laurents, the scriptwriter of *West Side Story*, who observed that in *Romeo and Juliet* “the nature of the conflict between the two houses is never specified” (Harrod). And yet, Shakespeare's poetic language, in particular his evocative imagery and analogies, makes this conflict resonate with readers today. Bernstein used Shakespeare's poetic language to make a new connection (racial tension) to the timeless theme of hatred and alienation experienced by groups in conflict. The “hot days” and “mad blood boiling” warning given by Romeo's friend, Benvolio, transforms in *West Side Story* to a gang riff to “keep cool” as tensions escalate between a Puerto Rican and a white street gang. Shakespeare's powerful analogies allow us opportunities to reinterpret and build new analogies—new connections—to contemporary issues.

This article will discuss how literacy and literature goals merged in a media project designed to

encourage high school students to build new connections with the poetic elements of Shakespeare's plays *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*. Using the free software Animoto movie maker (Animoto.com), students were challenged to look closely at Shakespeare's words and imagery to dramatize a character through selection of text, imagery, and music. In close collaboration, a high school librarian and two English teachers structured the project to fulfill *literature goals* of close analysis (discovering a character's psychological state and motivation) and also meet *literacy goals* of NCTE/IRA and ALA 21st-century learners: students selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing information to communicate learning while also respecting ethical use of information (American Association of School Librarians; NCTE/IRA).

Why is it so crucial to build these skills at the high school level? A 2002 research report, *Academic Literacy*, revealed alarming observations from California university librarians about incoming first-year students: (1) students lack curiosity; (2) students are reluctant to engage in analysis; and (3) students focus on skills (how to locate information/facts) rather than communication (synthesis of

ideas) (cited in Daly 193). The Shakespeare digital movie project hoped to address some of these literacy concerns and build essential skills for success in college: developing curious minds and an ability to analyze and synthesize ideas to communicate insights with an audience. As the collaborating teachers reflected on the student learning process and the finished digital movies, a surprising revelation surfaced, an ironic twist that Shakespeare would have appreciated: digital media—too often the contributor to our fast-paced lives—was the means of *slowing down* student thinking, thereby encouraging critical thinking and insight as students used Shakespeare's poetic language and imagery to create new analogies and new connections to Shakespeare's plays.



Students work on Shakespeare videos, 2014. Photo by Jordan MacConnell.

Slow Down to Build Meaning

Wisely and slow.

They stumble that run fast.

—Romeo and Juliet, 2.3.94–95

Close reading requires the process of slowing down to encourage critical thinking. Shakespeare's work in particular requires a slower approach, several re-readings, because his text is so rich in word plays, double meanings, and seeming contradictions (Duncan-Jones). Using tools of the digital

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world can be a compelling way to engage students in analysis. Before beginning the movie project, the English teachers practice close reading with

students. Devin Lintzenich, who taught the play *Romeo and Juliet* with first-year students, describes two activities that use students' familiarity with the digital world to examine Shakespeare's text.

2.2 Text Convo

The balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* is both memorable and universal. At the end, when they exchange redundant complaints about parting, one hears the

“You hang up.” “No, you hang up first.” of teenagers from the modern era. I asked my students to paraphrase the conversation in text speak for three reasons. First, our English Department focuses on close-reading exercises. We want students to grapple with text and really understand it (not just glance at SparkNotes), so we often pick one page or one speech and spend a lot of time breaking it down. Second, I want my students to be able to paraphrase text (especially text that they find complex and intimidating, like Shakespeare's). Students' natural tendency is to skip over things they don't understand, but, when forced to paraphrase each line, they really cannot skip. I wrote out the line numbers for this purpose, so as I walked around the room, I could see which parts they struggled with and have a dialogue with them about diction and tone. In addition, I wanted to see quickly that they had not skipped anything. Third, I want my students to see that Shakespeare is not all that intimidating and although his text is complex, it is readable. I asked them to put his words into their colloquial diction so that they could identify with it and make the play their own. After students had about 35 minutes to complete the paraphrasing activity with one or two other classmates, we came back together as a class. Then I asked a student to read the “Shakespearean update” for the first group of lines, and then moved on to the next student and the next group of lines. A few of the students oversimplified the text or misread the tone, so we

discussed those missteps. We also laughed a lot because they enjoyed this activity and came up with creative text.

Facebook Profile of Men of *Romeo and Juliet*

As we read *Romeo and Juliet*, I ask my students to consider what Shakespeare is trying to say about men. What characteristics do these men consider valuable and “manly”? How does life end up for them? Who are Shakespeare’s examples of “good men”? What characteristics do they embody? Any time after act 3, I give students the Facebook template (a Word document), assign them a male character, and ask them to become that character while they create his profile. This exercise challenges students to emulate tone and diction associated with a character and to apply Shakespeare’s characterization to new things like “Favorite Band.” They have to think about why Romeo might “like” pop artist Jason Mraz, but Tybalt would prefer metal music. The “Bio” section to me is the most important because that is where they determine the essential traits and perspectives that Shakespeare is attributing to that character. I found this a helpful prewriting activity for their major essay question: “What is one of Shakespeare’s major implied messages about men?”

Slow Down to Build Empathy

It’s not only deep thinking that requires a calm, attentive mind. It’s also empathy and compassion.

—Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*

In the first step of the digital movie project, students focused on dialogue of a single character in the play to enter into the heart and mind of that character and build empathy. Once they had practiced close reading to build meaning of text and had finished reading the play, each student selected a character for their essay and the digital movie project. Students were asked to dramatize a character through text, images, and music and link the movie to the theme of their essay—the theme of “leadership” for the *Julius Caesar* essay or the theme of “qualities of manhood” for the *Romeo and Juliet* essay. Students worked three days in the library computer lab to develop their Animoto

movies. Once again, the technique of *slowing down* was emphasized as students selected limited text (seven to ten lines from the play) and typed the text into the Animoto movie slides. A planning chart helped students to identify lines, images, and emotional/psychological states suggested by the text.

Just as slowing down encouraged critical thinking, slowing down the text visually in the individual movie slides helped students to build empathy with their selected character. Billy Collins, US Poet Laureate from 2001 to 2003, describes in his article “The Companionship of a Poem” how poetry is the perfect medium for connecting to the “human pulse” because “the formal arrangement of a poem checks our haste.” Cicely Berry, director of voice and text for the Royal Shakespeare Company, agrees that you must “honor the rhythm,” and she encourages performers to find the “poise,” slight pauses within the lines of Shakespeare’s plays; these pauses allow us to take in the emotional meaning of the words and help us to relate to the “psychological dilemma of the character” (*Working Arts Library*). For instance, in our student movie project, one student chose to dramatize Calpurnia’s fearful warnings to Caesar that danger awaits him. Rather than typing all the below lines on a single slide,

O Caesar, these things are beyond all use
And I do fear them. (2.2.25–26)

the student found a dramatic pause in the first line to suggest the almost moaning apprehension of Calpurnia (O Caesar). The student typed the phrases on separate slides:

O Caesar
these things are beyond all use
and I do fear them.

Similarly, students might separate a single word on a slide for emphasis. One student stressed the word *purgers* on a single text slide to emphasize Brutus’s denial that he and his fellow senators were “murderers.” Text can also be displayed in a way to build suspense and to surprise the reader with a shocking

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TABLE 1. Building Connections to Shakespeare with Movie Images: *Julius Caesar*

<i>Julius Caesar</i> : Character speaking	Shakespeare imagery in bold	Student selected image	Student explanation (new analogy)
Antony (3.1.265–268)	Blood and destruction shall be so in use; And dreadful objects so familiar, that mothers shall but smile when they behold their infants quartered with the hands of war . . .	glowing Jack-o-lantern face with fiendish smile	Crazy smile matches the grief of the mothers.
Portia pleading with Brutus to be truthful with her (2.1.279–287)	I should not need, if you were gentle , Brutus . . . dwell I but in the suburbs of your good pleasure? If it be no more, Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife.	Butterfly hovering over a flower	Portia wants a close relationship where they rely on each other (like the butterfly and the flower).
Calpurnia begs Caesar to heed the warnings of her dream (2.2.19–22)	Fierce fiery warrior fought upon the clouds . . . Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol; The noise of battle hurtled in the air . . .	Atom bomb blast, cloud mushrooming in the air	Calpurnia fears something really bad will happen. Caesar and their life together will be destroyed. The atom bomb shows total destruction.
Brutus speaks to crowd after killing Caesar (3.2.12–33)	. . . I slew my best lover for the good of Rome, I have the same dagger for myself, when it shall please my country to need my death. (The crowd replies) Live Brutus, live, live!	Crowd surfing image (single man handed across the top of a jubilant crowd)	Crowd becomes a mob—unthinking and caught up in the emotions of the moment. They now totally support Brutus.

statement. In Marc Antony's speech calling for revenge of Caesar's murder, one student designed slides as follows. Student-selected images are shown in parentheses:

Chaos . . . (abstract image of dripping blood)
 Blood and destruction shall be so in use
 Mothers shall but smile when they behold their
 (leering image of Jack-o-lantern)
 Infants quartered with the hands of war.
 (Greek vase battle scene of soldiers attacking with
 swords) (3.1.265–68)

The dramatic isolation of the word *chaos* on one slide and the suspenseful pause in the text slides describing the hysterically smiling mothers are both effective uses of text to build tension and reinforce the feeling of horror. Selective decision-making at this first stage of the movie project helps students to determine tone and emphasis in preparation for selecting imagery.

Slow Down to Build New Connections with Imagery

(Shakespeare's imagery) takes us into the world of the play and the world of the character and takes it into a very deep part of ourselves.

—Cicely Berry, "Perspectives: Performing *Shakespeare Today*"

As Berry's quote suggests, Shakespeare's imagery powerfully reveals both themes of the play and motivations of the characters. More importantly, *it is often through Shakespeare's imagery and analogies that we find connections within ourselves.* Day two of the digital movie project challenges students to go beyond the habit of Google-image searching and, instead, to search for images in a way that reflects thoughtfulness, new insights, and a respect for intellectual property. The librarian preselected appropriate sources to provide access to a variety of images: primary source images of art (to lend

Table 2. Building Connections to Shakespeare with Movie Images: *Romeo and Juliet*

Play <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>: Character speaking	Shakespeare imagery in bold	Student selected image	Student explanation (new analogy)
Romeo (3.3.13–14)	Say death, not exile for exile hath more terror in its looks.	Dark silhouette of stalking, solitary panther	Romeo's exile from Juliet has changed him into a stalking, lonely animal.
Romeo (2.2.67–69)	For stony limits cannot hold love out, and what love can do, that dares love attempt. Therefore thy kinsmen are no stop to me.	Hands of young boy and girl, linked by a single red ribbon tied to a finger of each hand	Young hands show the young love and the red rib- bon shows the danger ahead (blood/death).
Romeo (5.3.119–120)	O true Apothecary , thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die.	Bottle labeled "Aphrodi- siac" that is also labeled "poison"	Love kills.
Romeo: responsibility blinded by love (5.3.27–28, 115)	Do not interrupt me in my course . . . I descend into this bed of death . . . A dateless bargain to engrossing death.	Figure stepping off a cliff with other symbols of sui- cide, such as a gallows (1600s painting entitled <i>Satire of a Suicide</i>)	Romeo does not see any other way out. He will kill himself for love.
Friar Lawrence (intuitive) counsels patience to Romeo (not rash action) (2.3.94–95)	Wisely and slow. They stumble that run fast	Twin towers Twin towers engulfed in flames	It's fate—two lovers head- ing for destruction.

authenticity to the time period of play); rights-cleared images from museum and educational digital collections (database *Britannica Image Quest*); and Creative Commons licensed images through *Flickr*. For the play *Julius Caesar*, students used *Perseus Digital Library* (www.perseus.tufts.edu), and for *Romeo and Juliet*, students used *Web Gallery of Art* (www.wga.hu), limiting the image searches to Shakespeare's time period for art images. Students were required to use some primary source images to connect in an authentic way to emotions/attitudes of the time period, for instance, attitudes toward war in the time of Ancient Greece and Rome or attitudes toward love or beauty during Shakespeare's time period. One student chose dialogue from Romeo that showed his reckless attitude and sacrifice of responsibility in the pursuit of love. She paired Romeo's pleas of "let me be put to death" and "come death and welcome" with a "vanitas" still life of a skull on a table and another painting of Death leering over the shoulder of man calmly looking at viewers of the painting. Both paintings reflected the attitude during Shakespeare's day that all beauty, all material things, are fleeting and

will end in death. Examples of the *Romeo and Juliet* videos can be viewed on a digital poster (<http://chesterlange.edu.glogster.com/romeo-and-juliet-videos>) and examples of *Julius Caesar* videos can be viewed on a digital poster (<http://chesterlange.edu.glogster.com/julius-caesar>).

In addition to primary source images, students also explored contemporary photos through *Image Quest* and *Flickr* to find imagery to match abstract ideas and emotions. Tables 1 and 2 show examples of surprising new connections that students made with contemporary photos, from an atomic bomb blast to reflect the widespread devastation of war to match the line "the noise of battle hurtled in the air" (*Julius Caesar*, 2.2.22); to a Twin Towers image before and after being engulfed in flames on 9/11 to symbolize how Romeo and Juliet, though linked in spirit, were destined for calamity, "they stumble that run fast" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.3.95); to a crowd-surfing image to represent the Roman citizens' unthinking acceptance of Brutus after his persuasive speech over Caesar's slain body (*Julius Caesar*, 3.2.12–33). These contemporary photos sometimes formed a new connection, deepening students' understanding of

Shakespeare's imagery and analogies. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that this image-making creates "metaphoric concepts" that help us to understand different viewpoints toward an abstract idea, such as Love is madness, "I'm *crazy* about her," or Love is war, "He is known for his many rapid *conquests*" (49). In a similar way, the student who chose a crowd-surfing image to represent the frenzied, unthinking acceptance of the crowd made a new metaphoric connection to Shakespeare's description of the crowd, a group that Shakespeare described as having the contagious "falling sickness," suffering from a type of malady that affected their judgment (*Julius Caesar*, 3.2.255–58).

Transformative Digital Creations

The final class period of the digital movie project introduces students to a resource for uploading music to match the mood of their character's speech and complement the imagery. Just as *Flickr* Creative Commons was used for image selection, the music resource used, Jamendo.com, provides a Creative Commons search feature to locate music that students can use with permission of the musician. Students use the "attribution, non-commercial" Creative Commons search, knowing that they will provide credit to the creator and agree not to make money from their digital movie. Librarian Joan Lange, who collaborates on the Shakespeare Digital Movie project, describes this process of respecting the creator's rights as an important part of any media project:

Whether students are selecting text, images, or music, we need to respect the creator's rights; however, we also need to realize that alternative licensing, such as Creative Commons, and the Fair Use section of the Copyright law allow flexibility for students as they are creating works that can be shared digitally. The good news is that if educators structure a project to focus on critical thinking, not just a "topic report," student creations can often transform the original work, add value to the original work, by adding new insights and connections in their media creation. Students then become knowledge creators, which is a hallmark skill of 21st century learners.

During the discussion of copyright, fair use, and Creative Commons, resources from Renee

Hobbs and the Media Education Lab (<http://mediaeducationlab.com>) clarify these sometimes confusing concepts. The *Users' Rights, Section 107* video presents information in a fun and engaging way (<http://mediaeducationlab.com/2-user-rights-section-107-music-video>).

Reflections on the Shakespeare Digital Movies

Patrick Connolly, English teacher of sophomores, sets aside one class period as a "screening day." The following reflection discusses reactions to the movie project:

The viewing day brings home many components of the project, in my opinion. Many times students do reports of one kind or another and never see what their peers have produced—it's a one-on-one correspondence between teacher and student. With this project, we all get to see every finished product. I believe knowing they will have their own showing adds to the creative tension that produces memorable projects. On many of the self-assessments I also realize that students are judging their own product in relation to their peers—a good motivator, almost always, for down the road. In addition, I am amazed at the insights students see in the text. Many students who take a back seat in class discussions shine in this project. And even more of the students do not realize they have essentially completed a very close reading of a crucial part of the text—when this is pointed out to them, it's fun to see their dawning realization that they actually "got" Shakespeare.

One student commented on the role of images and music: "Seeing the images and hearing the music help me to hear the character's voice when I read the movie text slides. Images and music help me understand the emotion of the character." Teachers observed that students who are not in the advanced classes "really shine" in this media project. One reason that less proficient readers experience success may be that this media project becomes a reading strategy to connect to Shakespeare's complex text. As Cris Tovani states in *I Read It, but I Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*, creating mental images and connecting these images to the text can make

meaning for readers, allowing them to connect to their inner voice (51–53). The Shakespeare Digital Movie project continues to be an exciting way to engage students in slowing down, to take time with Shakespeare, and to create new meanings as students build connections to Shakespeare's poetic language and imagery. 

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