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**“You can understand what the words actually are”:  
a critical investigation into how far film and drama can be  
effective in developing Year 8 students’ understanding  
of Shakespeare’s ‘Romeo and Juliet’**

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**Abstract**

*This study explores the efficacy of different strategies for teaching Shakespeare through student responses to watching ‘Romeo and Juliet’ on stage and screen, and through their own participation in drama-based activities both in the classroom and at the Globe Theatre. Case study students were selected from a Year 8 class at a mixed, 11-16 comprehensive school in East Anglia. The teaching strategies used were strongly influenced by the Globe Education and Rex Gibson’s ‘Teaching Shakespeare’ (1998), and this research highlights the importance of teaching students about adaptation and interpretation of Shakespeare’s plays.*

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# **“You can understand what the words actually are”: a critical investigation into how far film and drama can be effective in developing Year 8 students’ understanding of Shakespeare’s ‘Romeo and Juliet’**

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## **Introduction and Contextual Information**

This assignment seeks to investigate how students’ understanding and engagement with Shakespeare can be influenced or enhanced by the use of film and drama. I have used a small-scale case study approach which will focus on a group of students in Year 8, using a range of evidence leading to inductive theorising on a range of teaching strategies. The students are in a Year 8, Set 2 class which I selected as they are lively but often disengaged with their work, and I was particularly interested to see which approaches might foster their interest in Shakespeare and specifically ‘Romeo and Juliet’. I have been working with this group for the entirety of my second school placement at a rural, mixed 11-16 comprehensive in Cambridgeshire. The student demographic is predominantly White British, with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) student numbers below the national average.

As my undergraduate degree was in English and Drama, I wanted to research how drama strategies can enhance the study of Shakespeare’s plays in schools. As Rex Gibson (1998) writes, “Drama-trained teachers, and those experienced in acting and performance bring uniquely valuable qualities to the Shakespeare classroom” (p. 154). However, at my placement school there seems to be a strong leaning towards the use of film and very little, if any, use of drama. I was intrigued to see how far films can be beneficial in the teaching of Shakespeare in comparison to involving the students in drama activities, and in addition to this, to what extent students’ learning would be benefitted by watching the play on stage in comparison to on screen. The school runs an annual trip to the Globe Theatre for some of the Year 8 students – although places are limited – and therefore it was ideal to integrate this as part of my research alongside the use of video clips from the recorded production of ‘Romeo and Juliet’ at the Globe.

This topic reflects my interest in Shakespearean adaptation and how different productions can influence students' perception of the play's context and also the form of the text. In their previous unit on writing a persuasive speech, a number of students seemed to relish the opportunity to read their work aloud, and I was keen to utilise this enthusiasm for performance in my teaching of 'Romeo and Juliet'. However, the emphasis is on preparing students for the requirements of their assessment, namely essay-style analysis of language, structure, form and context, and so it was clear that drama activities would need to be limited and clearly integrated with analytical skills. Above all, I hoped that my lessons would instil in the students the same curiosity that I experienced when studying Shakespeare at school, and that their motivation and engagement would be positively influenced by their experience of the play as text and as performance.

### **Case Study Students**

In addition to gathering initial responses from the class as a whole, I selected four students on whom to focus my research. I am not using their real names in this assignment in order to keep their contributions anonymous. Aleksander is an EAL student originally from Poland, but he has a solid grasp of written and spoken English. He makes thoughtful and mature contributions in lessons and seems to be interested in Shakespeare. Charlie is a lower attaining member of this group and is often quiet and reluctant to contribute in lessons. Laura is hardworking and higher achieving but again is one of the quieter students in the group. Both Charlie and Laura are from White British backgrounds. Sienna moved to England from Australia quite recently and has noticeably gained confidence in this academic year. She is a lively contributor in the group who is excited by Shakespeare and theatre as a whole.

### **Teaching Sequence**

For the unit of work on 'Romeo and Juliet', I was able to take full responsibility for creating a medium-term plan outlining a series of lessons which would provide evidence for my research, taking place once a week over the half term. This allowed them to have some lessons every week which focussed more on textual analysis and improving their academic writing skills, which are required in order to prepare them for their assessment.

I began by assessing what, if any, prior knowledge they had of Shakespeare plays. I collected this evidence at the start of a lesson on adaptation, which I had prepared in order to make them aware

that Shakespeare is not defined by one version or one director, and that part of the plays' appeal is that they are open to personal responses, which I will discuss in more depth later. I showed them clips of the Prologue being read from the Baz Luhrmann adaptation, the Franco Zeffirelli adaptation, 'Shakespeare in Love', and an American university production which utilised choral reading. Students noted the differences between them and then formed their own mind-map of adaptation ideas for the Prologue. Having considered adaptation as a concept, we then spent two lessons watching the 2013 film adaptation of 'Romeo and Juliet', which is the approved version teachers are instructed to use in the school. I was then able to collect the whole class's responses to watching the film.

My next research lesson was on Act 1 Scene 3, in which I utilised the Globe Theatre's recording of their performance of the play. Having watched the clip, the students answered questions which considered how comedy is used in this scene through the character of the Nurse and compared the portrayal of Lady Capulet in this version to the film version they had watched. They also wrote about the differences between performance on stage and on screen. They then compared the language used in this scene to the previous scene.

The following week was the trip to the Globe Theatre, at which some students from my class viewed the Exhibition, then participated in a drama workshop with one of the Globe's Education Practitioners. This was a valuable insight into the Globe's education programme for me, and the students were lucky enough to watch some of the company's fight choreography rehearsals for their production of 'Taming of the Shrew', which seemed to fascinate them. The drama workshop was based on Act 1 Scene 5, which is the extract students will be assessed on at the end of the unit.

In my final research lesson, I wanted all of the students who were not at the Globe to experience some of the drama activities used, so I appointed the students who were on the trip as 'experts', and asked them to demonstrate the activity they were familiar with to the rest of the class. I then used some additional activities from the second day of the trip which none of the students had attended. We were then able to reflect on how participating in drama activities can affect our understanding of the language used in the scene, converging on persuasive language used by Romeo as this will be the focus for the students' assessment.

## Literature Review

### Why Teach Shakespeare?

Before examining justifications for different teaching strategies, I felt that it was important to consider the place Shakespeare has within the English curriculum. As Martin Blocksidge (2005) writes, “When the National Curriculum in English came into existence in 1990, Shakespeare was the only author compulsorily prescribed for study by all the nation’s children” (p. 2). This poses the question: why Shakespeare? This is something that I was keen to ask the students themselves, the results of which can be seen later in this assignment. Some might say that we study Shakespeare because he is “the supreme figure of our literature” (The English Association (1908) as cited in Blocksidge, 2005 p.3), but I think the real reason the Bard’s plays stay so firmly on the National Curriculum is due to their ability to facilitate a wide range of classroom experiences. This view is reinforced by historical notions of Shakespeare’s place in the classroom; the English Association’s 1908 pamphlet on teaching Shakespeare states the following:

“The suggestion is worth considering whether it would be feasible for pupils to act in class one or more scenes from every play they study [...] In London and in large provincial centres it is possible to let school-children see a performance at the theatre; this plan should be encouraged wherever it is practicable. There is a serious danger in the class-room [...] of forgetting what drama really means, and burying the poet beneath a mass of comments, conundrums, and morals.”

(English Association (1908) as cited in Blocksidge, 2005, p.4)

This advice, given over a century ago when there were no drama spaces in schools, still seems completely relevant today. As teachers, we must therefore embody this interdisciplinary approach to the teaching of Shakespeare’s plays, as this seems to be one of the fundamental reasons why they remain on the curriculum.

Rex Gibson writes that the teacher’s role is to “make ‘studying Shakespeare’ equate with ‘enjoying Shakespeare’” (Gibson, 1998, p.25). It seems that Shakespeare’s steadfast place in schools is at risk of seeming mundane to students; something that is studied because it is compulsory rather than because it is chosen by teachers. It is therefore important to transmit a sense of enjoyment, as supported by Gibson who states, “Students learn much from hearing the language spoken well, and seeing their teacher’s evident enjoyment of Shakespeare” (ibid., p.154). If the teacher makes it clear that they are only teaching Shakespeare because they have to, rather than because they want to, this is likely to hinder students’ ability to enjoy the content of their lessons. However, taught *with*

enjoyment, Shakespearean drama has the potential to open students' eyes to a vast range of cultural, emotional and social issues which shape the way they see the world, in addition to aiding their personal development, as Gibson writes: "the active study of Shakespeare generates more personal development. Many teachers have seen the growth of confidence and self-esteem that comes from learning a part, however small, and taking part in a performance [...]" (ibid., p.4). Shakespeare, and the performative experience of a play, can enhance many aspects of students' learning, not just academic knowledge. I will discuss Gibson's "active" approach to Shakespeare further, however, a key part of my research stemmed from working in a school which has mostly replaced the use of drama with film, and therefore I wanted to examine literature on the place of film adaptations in teaching Shakespeare.

### **Shakespeare on Film in the English Classroom**

Writing about teaching 'Much Ado About Nothing', Elaine Harris states the following about the Kenneth Branagh film adaptation: "Branagh reminds us that, nowadays, more people are encountering Shakespeare on film – as neither quite performance nor text – than either in the theatre or in print. He [...] sets out to give his audiences instant access to the play" (Harris, 2005, p.57). Generally speaking, fewer students are going to the theatre, and increasingly films are the form which they are most familiar with.

Sarah Martindale (2008) surveyed 138 secondary English teachers and found that 98.5% thought that film adaptations of Shakespeare can either "definitely play a useful role" or "play some role" in teaching his works (p.19). As she writes, "All of the participants have used filmed Shakespeare in some form in their teaching" (ibid.). This would suggest that film has become an essential resource in the teaching of Shakespeare's plays. Martindale states that this is due to films providing "a cheap and easily available way to introduce Shakespeare in performance, when compared to trips to see theatrical productions" (ibid.). It is this "instant access", as Harris put it, that seems to make films appealing to English teachers as a way of encouraging students to understand Shakespeare as performance. Martindale found that teachers recognised that "their students respond positively to filmed Shakespeare [...] because it has a powerful visual impact and can make the material seem relevant and comprehensible" (ibid.). The students' attitude to filmed Shakespeare is something I researched fairly extensively and my findings seemed to agree with this, as seen later in this assignment.

Martindale's research found that the Baz Luhrmann adaptation of 'Romeo and Juliet' was the most frequently used film; 88% of the participants had used it in their teaching. What I found interesting was that the teacher survey found that "while students often enjoy and connect with film versions of Shakespeare, this does not necessarily give them a better understanding of the text they are studying, if they do not appreciate the differences between source and adaptation" (ibid., p.20). It is important to note that this research took place before the 2013 adaptation of 'Romeo and Juliet' was created, but nevertheless there is still a sense that the film must be largely faithful to the text in order to allow the students to understand the play fully. This also provided additional justification for my first lesson being solely on the idea of adaptation; I think that this could provide a solution to the school's concerns about using the Luhrmann film, which are discussed later. As Sue Gregory (2005) writes, "this contemporary version speaks for itself, not least because it is so powerful visually. The music too relieves and helps to cue in the ear" (p.28). The use of contemporary images and music has the potential to engage students, but not only this, it demonstrates to them that Shakespeare is not rigid; "the plays are capable of and invite diverse interpretations" (Gibson, 1998, p. 24). This is one justification for using a modern adaptation on film, as it can lead into the students' developing imaginative and personal interpretations of the film in their own exploration of the play. However, if the film is used independently, without any focus on adaptation, there is, as Martindale's teacher participants suggest, a risk that the understanding of the text will be lost. We could therefore conclude that films are best used in conjunction with drama activities, rather than independently.

### **Teaching Shakespeare through Drama in English**

My teaching of 'Romeo and Juliet' has been strongly influenced by the Globe Education and their workshop-style activities. In her discussion of their project *Playing Shakespeare* which allowed thousands of students to see a play at the Globe Theatre for free, Fiona Banks writes that "the idea of coming to a theatre, to be part of a theatre audience, remains for many an alien concept" (Banks, 2008, p.15). This is something that was reflected in my research, as the large majority of students in my class had never seen a Shakespeare play in the theatre before. Banks writes, "That Shakespeare should be taught actively is central to our ethos" (ibid.). This is intrinsically linked to Rex Gibson's "active methods" for teaching Shakespeare (Gibson, 1998, p.150). Gibson believes that allowing the students to "develop a genuine sense of ownership of the play" through "actively [making] meaning" is the most successful Shakespeare teaching (ibid., p.9). This "learner-centred" approach

is a way of encouraging the students to justify their own decisions, which therefore leads to a deeper understanding of the play (ibid.).

There is, as Gibson writes, an attitude which is “deeply suspicious of enjoyment, that finds it hard to accept that pleasure and learning can go hand-in-hand. It sees literature as ‘serious’ and ‘work’, and drama as merely ‘play’” (ibid., p.7). This is something which emerged in two of my case study students’ responses to drama activities, and which is present to some extent in the English department at my placement school. However, Gibson advocates treating the play as a script rather than a literary text, which “implies a desk-bound student who passively reads” (ibid.), therefore declaring that “it is to be played with, explored, actively and imaginatively brought to life by acting out” (ibid., p.8). It is clear that Gibson believes that handing over responsibility for shaping the meaning of the script to the students is the best way to foster engagement with Shakespeare, but also to enhance their understanding of the play. The teacher’s role is therefore to lead by example, having an open mind to new perspectives on the play. Gibson states that teachers must have “an awareness that fresh insights can come from active work on the play in the classroom – the students can teach the teacher” (ibid., p.153). He also asserts that “Each student brings his or her own culture to every lesson” (ibid., p.9). If this is the case then teaching Shakespeare in this active way, particularly in a comprehensive school where students are from a wide range of backgrounds, can only open doors and provoke enlightening and unique discussions for both teacher and students.

Ken Watson agrees with Gibson’s work, writing the following:

“They must come to see that what they have in front of them is not *the play*, but simply a *blueprint* for a play, and that the play created by one set of actors from that blueprint might well be markedly different from the play created from the same script by a different set of actors. In other words, teachers must forge an **active pedagogy**, one designed to develop in students the ability to imagine performances.”

(Watson, 2008, p.70)

This again relates back to the importance of teaching students about adaptation, whether they are working on the play themselves through performative activities or watching different versions of the play on stage or screen. It is interesting that Watson mentions this idea of developing students’ “ability to imagine performances” (ibid.), as that is something that becomes considerably more difficult if, as Banks conjectures, they may never have been to the theatre. This is where recordings or screenings of theatre productions are extremely helpful if a trip to the theatre is not viable, however, I believe that students have the creative potential to imagine their own adaptation of the

play through drama activities without having seen a film or theatre production as an example. Watson even goes so far as to say that he would “argue strongly against” revealing the story of the play beforehand by watching it, which is a contrast to Gregory’s suggestion that “we want everybody to know the whole play by seeing the film, but sustained reading is not for all” (Gregory, 2005, p. 34). Gregory’s concern is with the accessibility of the play, and it seems that a sustained active approach to studying the play through drama can be more challenging for lower attaining students, which is where films are perhaps more beneficial.

Another warning about the use of drama comes from Harris, who reminds us that:

“[Students] should, as Gibson recommends, see ‘the plays as plays’, but they should also have the confidence to write knowledgably and eloquently, grasping a play’s richness and potential for aesthetic power as well as its dramatic or narrative impact. Drama [...] is a means to an end, not an end in itself.”

(Harris, 2005, p.45)

I agree with Harris that it is important to remember that a performance of the play, or sections from it, is not the final product; students need to be able to write about Shakespeare, applying the understanding they have gained through their active experience of the script. In this way, Key Stage 3 is an essential time in which we can prepare students for the demands of their future study of Shakespeare using this active approach, making sure that their early experiences of the plays allow them to enjoy and engage with something which has the potential to be even more challenging for students if approached purely as a stagnant text to be analysed on the page.

## Research Questions

I have developed the following research questions (RQs) in order to reflect the three forms I have used in the teaching of the play: film, stage productions, and student drama activities. In addition to understanding of the play, I have also considered the students’ experience of, and engagement with, ‘Romeo and Juliet’, as I feel that these are important factors in assessing to what extent they are *enjoying* the study of Shakespeare; something which I think is equally important.

RQ1: To what extent does watching a film adaptation of ‘Romeo and Juliet’ influence students’ understanding of historical context?

RQ2: To what extent can experiencing Shakespeare on stage enhance students’ understanding of the play and Shakespearean drama as a form?

RQ3: How do drama activities affect students’ engagement with and understanding of ‘Romeo and Juliet’?

## **Ethical Issues**

Having completed the ethics checklist for this assignment which considered any issues that might arise, I ensured full cooperation from the school in collecting the evidence required for my research. The class teacher for the group in question was fully aware of my process in choosing a research topic from the start of the placement and approved my chosen title. As I was given responsibility for the medium term planning for the entire unit of work on ‘Romeo and Juliet’, I was able to allocate specific lessons within the scheme of work which would allow me to collect evidence and then ensure this planning was approved in advance of beginning the unit. Before commencing my research I read the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011) and particularly noted the section on working with children which states that “children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity. Children should therefore be facilitated to give fully informed consent” (p. 6). I consequently ensured that the students were aware of the research I was undertaking and made it clear that they could express themselves freely and honestly during research activities. Denscombe (2010) also states that “As a general rule, social researchers are expected to be honest and open about who they are and what they are doing, and not rely on misrepresentation or deception as a means of getting the necessary information” (p. 62). Throughout my lessons, I made a conscious effort to be consistently open about my research processes with the students in order to maintain my “researcher integrity” (ibid.). They were all aware that this research was part of my teacher training and that their responses would be anonymised.

## **Methodology**

For this investigation, I used approaches drawn from case study. As Bill Gillham (2000) writes, “Sometimes an insight into people’s lives is what is required for better understanding and an improved response or attitude” (p. 102). Case study methods would allow me to gain this valuable, detailed insight into individual students’ thoughts and attitudes towards the study of ‘Romeo and Juliet’ and from this, evaluate how different methods for teaching Shakespeare can influence students. However, the one drawback of this approach would be, as Thomas (2011) writes: “The choice of one case (or a small number) is made with a trade-off in mind [...] You choose your very restricted sample so that you can gain greater detail, but this is at the expense of being able to make generalisations about your findings” (p. 11). With this in mind, I began my research by gathering whole-class data, before ‘zooming in’ on my smaller group of case study students. I believed that this would allow me to gain a larger general perspective on how Year 8 students initially perceive Shakespeare, before examining individual students’ responses to more specific learning experiences, which would provide the “greater detail” that Thomas writes is the benefit of the case study approach. However, I have been careful in my analysis of this class not to make generalisations about all Year 8 students in the country, for instance, as my findings are specific to this particular group of students and I have not repeated the research in multiple schools in order to gain a wider range of responses across this age group.

## **Questionnaires**

My primary research method was a series of questionnaires. The entire class completed a questionnaire at the beginning of the unit of work on Shakespeare so that I could understand their pre-existing knowledge (see Appendix 1), and then a subsequent questionnaire after watching the film so that I could compare their responses from before and after watching (see Appendix 2). From this I was also able to select the students who would become my case studies, primarily due to the quality of their reflections on their initial lessons on ‘Romeo and Juliet’. The four case study students also completed a final, concluding questionnaire (see Appendix 3) about the trip to the Globe, their experiences of drama and their feelings about ‘Romeo and Juliet’ at the end of the term. I chose to use questionnaires as my main research method due to their ability to contain both closed and open questions; as Thomas writes, “You may be collecting facts or [...] assessing people’s attitudes on a topic” (2011, p. 165). This was key in my investigation as I wanted to

accumulate comparative data across the scheme of work, which would be mostly quantitative, and yet also collect the qualitative, personal responses given by students in order to gain a greater amount of insight into their individual experiences of the play. I also felt that this group would benefit more from a “written form of questioning” (ibid.) due to their tendency to become overexcited in groups; I felt that they would be more articulate and provide more detailed answers when given the time to think and reflect in silence before writing their answer down.

## **Interview**

After selecting my case study students, I interviewed them in pairs. As Gillham (2000) writes, “*some* interviews will almost certainly be worth their place provided you can identify a small number who are key or representative” (p. 61). I felt that it was important to speak to the students verbally in order to gain further qualitative responses from them using more open questioning than in the questionnaires. I was aiming to utilise Gillham’s “semi-structured interview” technique, which he writes is “the most important form of interviewing in case study research”, in which the interviewer must “seem almost ‘natural’: there is a pace, a fluency, a responsiveness that seems to have nothing of ‘technique’ about it” (Gillham, 2000, p. 65). I felt that this sense of a natural conversation would reduce the pressure on the students to give ‘correct’ answers. However, Gillham suggests recording the interview and then transcribing it, whereas I chose not to record the interview and instead to write the students’ answers down as they spoke. This decision was in part due to my ethics research; I felt that I was being more open about collecting responses by allowing the students to see me writing what they had said down on paper. In addition to this, the short pauses while I finished writing allowed the students a greater amount of thinking time, which I felt would allow them to formulate their responses more thoughtfully.

## **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

This section will begin with a discussion of the students’ prior knowledge and experiences of studying Shakespeare before Year 8, which was assessed on a whole-class basis. Following this, I will address, in turn, my findings in response to each of my research questions.

### Prior experiences and knowledge of Shakespeare

At the beginning of the class's study of 'Romeo and Juliet', I wanted to undertake a form of baseline assessment in order to understand what, if any, prior knowledge students had of Shakespeare, and what kind of experiences they might have already had with Shakespeare's plays. The results of this initial questionnaire were enlightening, as seen below in Figure 1.

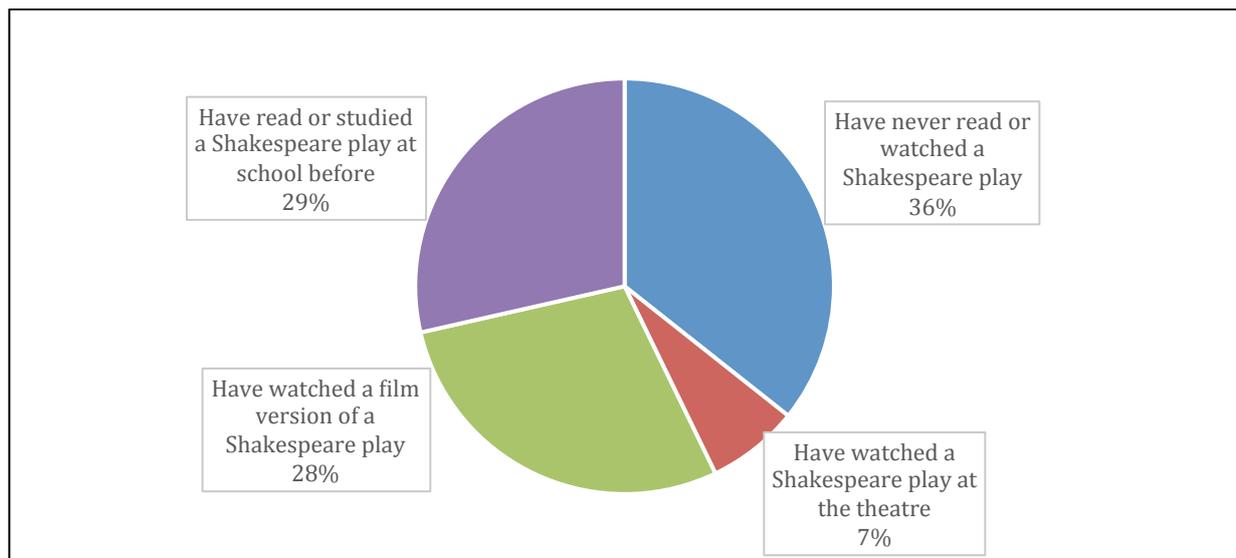
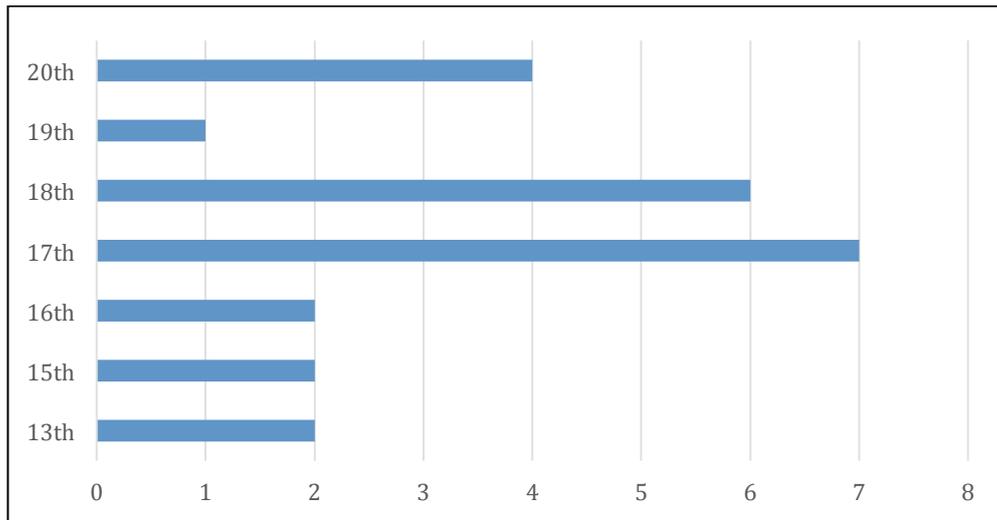


Figure 1: How familiar would you say that you are with Shakespeare's plays?

A significant amount of the group (36%) said that they had never read or watched a Shakespeare play before. This was not entirely surprising to me as few students I have encountered have studied Shakespeare prior to Key Stage 3, and I, perhaps presumptuously, had guessed that most parents would not have encouraged their children to read or watch Shakespeare at home. Only two students had watched a Shakespeare play at the theatre, and one student wrote an additional note on the side of her questionnaire to say that she had read plays at home as well as at school. However, I was pleased to see that 29% of the students had read or studied a Shakespeare play in primary school, and all of the students had heard of a number of plays even if they had not seen or read them (see Appendix 1 for list of plays). I had purposefully left Othello off the tick list to see if any students would write it under 'others', and one student did, with another adding "Taming of the Shrew" to the list. This was a promising introduction to their study of Shakespeare as I felt that it was not completely foreign to them. Having established students' prior experiences of Shakespeare, I then wanted to assess their knowledge by asking what century he was writing in. The results are presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: What century was Shakespeare writing in?**

As seen here, the students produced a wide range of guesses, from “1200s” to “1960s”. The large number of students who were completely unaware of the time period Shakespeare was writing in did not seem to align with the quantity of students who had previously experienced Shakespeare in some form, that is to say, 64% of the group (Figure 1). I was, therefore, very interested to see how watching the 2013 film, which is set during the late Middle Ages, would affect their understanding of historical context.

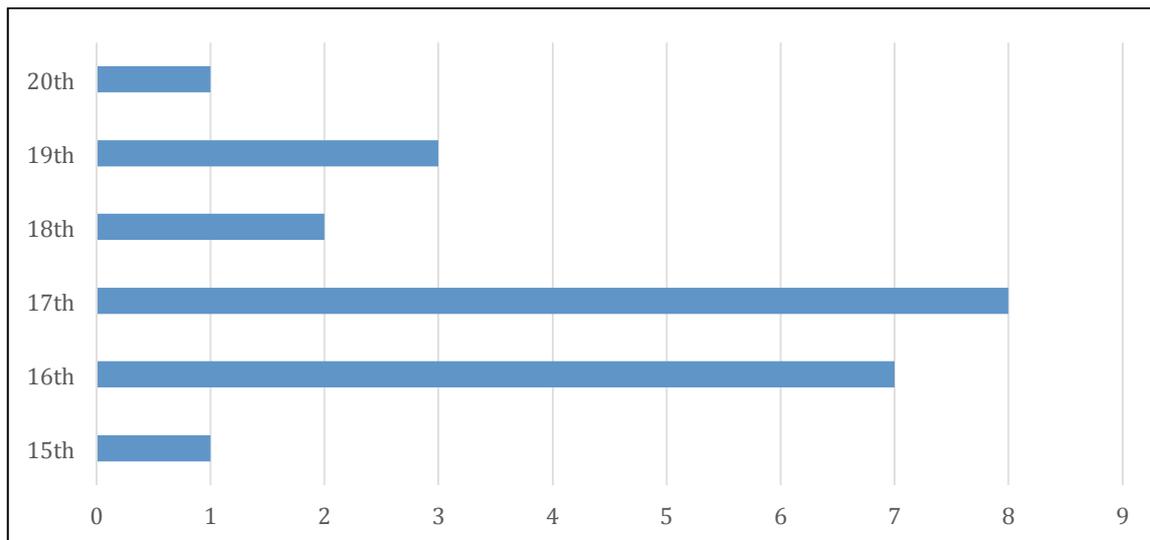
One of the questions asked here which produced some interesting responses was ‘Why do you think we study Shakespeare in school?’. I had no idea how students would answer this question and expected most of them to write ‘I don’t know’. Despite my concerns, students responded thoughtfully. Charlie’s answer was gratifying: “Because he was a great writer”. This response acknowledges that Shakespeare is studied due to the quality of his writing. Sienna answered: “to analyse and learn about literature that he wrote”. This answer struck me due to the Learning Objective-style vocabulary she used, particularly the words “analyse” and “literature”, which create the sense of a more text-based approach to Shakespeare. Another student wrote: “Because his writing is motivating”. His use of the word “motivating” is particularly interesting to me; I would infer that he means Shakespeare is inspiring or perhaps relatable. Laura’s response was the most similar to the majority of the class: “Because it’s a big part of British history and it is very famous”. Seven of the students mentioned the words “British”, “English” or “our country”, which suggests to me that they see Shakespeare as a representation of British or English culture, or an important part of our national history. I would speculate that this reasoning was given to them in primary school,

or perhaps by parents. From all of the class's answers I concluded that they had a generally positive attitude towards Shakespeare, which formed a good foundation for their study of 'Romeo and Juliet'.

**RQ1: To what extent does watching a film adaptation of 'Romeo and Juliet' influence students' understanding of historical context?**

As mentioned previously, the English department at the school have selected the 2013 adaptation of 'Romeo and Juliet' to be shown to students. They expressly state that the Baz Luhrmann film must not be used. When I questioned this, having read about its popularity in Martindale's research discussed earlier, I was informed that it had caused confusion in previous years, with students writing about the adaptation rather than the original play in their assessments. The teachers in the department therefore felt that, particularly as the students are assessed on their knowledge of historical context, it would be more appropriate to show them a traditional adaptation. Reflecting on this, I was intrigued to ask the students if they would have preferred to see a modern adaptation, in response to which the class was split almost exactly in half: 11 said they would have preferred a modern adaptation; 12 said they would rather watch an adaptation set in Shakespeare's time. What interested me most about these responses was that, when asked for their reasons for this preference, nearly all the students said it would help their *understanding*. Those who had expressed a preference for a modern adaptation felt that it would help them to understand the language better, where the others stated that it would prevent them from understanding the time the play was set in. As one student wrote, "Watching the old version helped us to understand the language and helped us understand what life was like in Shakespeare's time", another stated, "I prefer the normal one in Shakespeare's time because then you get to see how he wanted it to be interpreted". One could conclude from this that it would be beneficial to show multiple adaptations where possible, but in terms of helping students to understand historical context, using a modern adaptation is less advantageous.

With regard to comparative data, I asked the students what century they thought the film was set in to see if watching it had affected their understanding of the historical context of Shakespeare; they were aware that this film was accurate to the time in which Shakespeare would have set the play (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3: What century do you think the film was set in?**

The film seems to have had a positive effect on the students' understanding of the play's historical context, with the majority now answering 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century without my having mentioned any dates in their lessons. The number of students who thought Shakespeare was writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has reduced, which I think is a direct effect of watching the film. It would be interesting to perform the same research with different students, but using the Baz Luhrmann adaptation, in order to see if their understanding of historical context is, as this school's teachers suggest, negatively impacted by watching a modern adaptation.

Another question I asked the students at this point was whether it would be better or worse to see 'Romeo and Juliet' in the theatre rather than on film. I was fascinated to see that 82% of the class said it would be worse to see the play in the theatre. As my parents took me to the theatre regularly throughout my childhood, I found it very difficult to relate to this view; I would have assumed that going to the theatre would always be more exciting and appealing than watching a film. However, the majority of these students are not taken to the theatre; some will never have been at all. This could perhaps be the reason for this response, or it could be a generational issue with screens becoming more predominant in children's lives. Of the four students who said they *would* prefer to see the play in the theatre, one wrote: "Better: more of an experience because they interact with the crowd". This response is interesting because there is a clear sense that he has personally experienced the actors interacting with the "crowd". This particular student also responded to one of my questions in a lesson about the differences between stage and screen, saying that actors on the stage have to express themselves more physically so that they can be seen. It is evident that he has

been to the theatre and understands the form of drama, which has perhaps influenced his choice here.

The majority of the students who had said they would rather watch a film were primarily concerned with the setting of the play; they felt that a film allowed them to see the location more accurately and fully than on stage, which is true: the adaptation they had watched was filmed entirely in Verona and other locations in Italy, and is therefore very vivid and realistic in terms of setting. From this, I was intrigued to see whether experiencing the play in different forms, namely stage productions and through drama activities, would affect the students' enthusiasm for watching the play at the theatre rather than on screen.

**RQ2: To what extent can experiencing Shakespeare on stage enhance students' understanding of the play and Shakespearean drama as a form?**

Due to the inability to take the entire year group to the theatre, the school recommends using the Globe's DVD recording of 'Romeo and Juliet' as an additional resource. I decided to use a clip from this recording when teaching Act 1 Scene 3. I decided that watching this particular scene would be beneficial for the students because of the comedic role created by the Nurse; the Globe's production uses more obvious comedy than the film and I felt that it would be interesting to examine this contrast with the students.

After the lesson, I interviewed my four case study students about their experiences of studying the play so far before focussing on the Globe clip. I interviewed Aleksander and Laura together, and then Sienna and Charlie.

*OS: Do you feel like you understand the scenes we have studied?*

*Sienna: Fully. I understand most of the language.*

*Charlie: Yes, because we're going through each scene each lesson.*

\*\*\*

*Aleksander: Fairly, I find the language a bit hard to understand.*

*Laura: I think the film helped to understand the language.*

*Aleksander: When it comes to reading it, I don't really understand any of it.*

Aleksander's response was particularly surprising here, as he seems to understand the scenes we are studying in lessons. However, it became clear that he is constantly using the film, which we watched before studying the text of the play, as a reference point to clarify the events, as shown below:

*OS: What particularly has helped you the most?*

*Aleksander: The film has helped the most.*

*Laura: Yeah.*

*Aleksander: You can visually see what's going on. It's cool to see how it differs.*

*Laura: You can understand what the words actually are.*

*Aleksander: Most of the time I think about the film to refer back.*

Laura's statement here seems to suggest that the visual representation of the script is essential in allowing her to access the text and the meanings of the unfamiliar Shakespearean vocabulary. Aleksander, as an EAL student, is evidently relying on his visual memories of the film in order to understand what is going on in each scene we are studying. The word "understand" has appeared numerous times, prompted by my initial question, but it is interesting that Laura repeats it again here.

What was particularly noticeable about interviewing the students in pairs was that neither Sienna nor Charlie brought up the film, and their responses focussed on the study of the text:

*OS: What particularly has helped you the most?*

*Sienna: Definitely when we answer the questions together as a class.*

*Charlie: Answering different questions about the scene does help.*

I wonder if Charlie would have answered differently if he had been interviewed individually: Sienna enjoys studying the text – which links back to her initial statement that we study Shakespeare to "analyse and learn about literature" – and so her enthusiastic response may have led him to echo her answer as he is the less confident of the two.

As neither pair had mentioned the clip from the Globe, I was keen to ask them about it due to the class's excited reaction to watching it during the lesson:

*OS: How did you find watching the clip from the Globe?*

*Sienna: It was enjoyable. I liked the way they represented the Nurse, it was more funny than serious.*

\*\*\*

*Laura: I preferred watching the film but it was a lot easier to understand because they were being more natural. The words were clearer but they didn't act as much.*

This idea of enjoyment which Sienna mentions is, in my opinion, a key aspect of the Globe's appeal; comedic elements are included wherever possible to entertain the audience, just as it probably would have been in Shakespeare's day. Laura's response was slightly confusing because she said that in the Globe version, the actors were "being more natural" and therefore the "words were clearer". I'm not quite sure whether I would agree that the actors were more natural on stage than on screen, but I do agree that the words were clearer in the Globe version due to their need to be heard by the entire audience without microphones, and Laura has again mentioned *understanding*: the language does become "easier to understand", whereas in the film the focus is on the visual rather than on the clarity of the speech. Laura elaborated further in her next response:

*OS: Was it more or less helpful than the film?*

*Laura: I think more because they spoke a lot more like we do... it was easier to understand what they were saying. The Nurse's accent was easier to understand and Lady Capulet was less posh which was a lot easier to understand.*

The word "understand" appears yet again, three times here. Laura was the only interviewee who was consistently talking about understanding throughout our conversation, and I would infer that she is fixating on this idea slightly as I'm not sure that the actors' accents actually influenced their understanding that significantly. Sienna, by contrast, still felt that the film was more helpful:

*OS: Was it more or less helpful than the film?*

*Sienna: Less helpful because when we watched the film the outfits really matched what time it was and it set the scene.*

Again, there is potentially some confusion here as the Globe's production is equally historically accurate in terms of costume; however, she is right that the film "set[s] the scene" more accurately and visually this is more helpful. I had wanted to ascertain whether their understanding of the play is enhanced by watching the Globe's production on stage, and I do think they gained a wider view

of the form of Shakespearean drama, having discussed in the lesson why comedy might have been included to entertain the Groundlings, and other aspects of form.

Finally, I asked the students if they had any other comments or suggestions about our study of *Romeo and Juliet*. Sienna's response was in line with her previous answers:

*Sienna: I would like to read the script more – it would really help us to see the point of view of different characters.*

*Charlie: Maybe reading the script instead of watching it.*

Again, Charlie seems to have been influenced by Sienna here but it was certainly instructive to me that students are interested in focussing on the text; they wanted to take on different parts and work through bigger chunks of the text themselves, which relates to Gibson's (1998) active approach. Due to this, in our subsequent lessons I gave them whole scenes rather than extracts and assigned the parts to students to read aloud, which was met with a great deal of enthusiasm. Where Aleksander's final response remained focussed on how "the film was cool", Laura said that she "enjoyed that we watched two different versions"; evidently both the film and the Globe recording offered different benefits for her in terms of enhancing understanding.

From this interview, I was not entirely satisfied that I had gained an answer to my question about whether experiencing Shakespeare on stage can enhance students' understanding of the play. I felt that they themselves were unclear about whether the film or the Globe clip had been more helpful, and the intended open nature of my questions prevented me from gaining more precise answers. However, I maintain that watching the Globe production reminded the whole class that '*Romeo and Juliet*' is a play, not a film, and that the film they watched is one of many adaptations.

### **RQ3: How do drama activities affect students' engagement with and understanding of '*Romeo and Juliet*'?**

Three of my four case study students attended the trip to the Globe Theatre mentioned previously. Although Charlie had not attended, he answered the final questionnaire questions which were about the drama activities we had done in the subsequent lesson, as mentioned earlier in my teaching sequence. Unsurprisingly, Aleksander, Sienna and Laura were all very enthusiastic in their praise for the trip, with two of them saying that the Q&A session with the Education Practitioner was the most helpful part of the day, and Laura saying that the drama workshop was most helpful "because

we got to read and act out the words and language they used”. As Aleksander wrote, the trip to the Globe helped him to understand the idea of Shakespearean plays because “we met an actor who played in Shakespeare’s plays so we got good answers from questions”. Seeing the theatre firsthand seemed to have inspired the students and definitely increased their engagement with the form of drama. Interestingly, when I asked all four students if they think it is important to see the Globe Theatre in order to understand Shakespeare’s plays, the three students who had been on the trip all said yes:

*Sienna: Yes, it showed us the environment of where these plays took place.*

*Aleksander: Yes, to see how they did stuff and how they acted it out.*

*Laura: Yes because it gives you an idea of why he set some of the scenes in his plays the way he did.*

However, Charlie said “I think it would help but you can still understand it without going”. This was positive for me as he obviously did not feel that not going on the trip had deprived him from being able to access Shakespeare: it had not demoralised him or led to disengagement.

Many of the English teachers I have spoken to avoid using drama due to the tendency for students to presume it is a ‘fun lesson’ and therefore not important for them to work hard or take the tasks seriously, leading to behaviour management issues. Although the class were very over-excited in my drama lesson, the threat of stopping and doing written work instead was enough of an incentive to keep them on task. However, this sense of the work not being as important was somewhat evident in the students’ responses:

*Q. Did you enjoy the drama activities we did in class? Give your reasons why/why not.*

*Sienna: Yes, it showed us a new point of view.*

*Aleksander: Yes because they were fun.*

*Laura: Yes because it was helpful and helped me to understand things I didn’t before and I was more confident as I was at school.*

*Charlie: Yes because it gave us a small break to have some fun.*

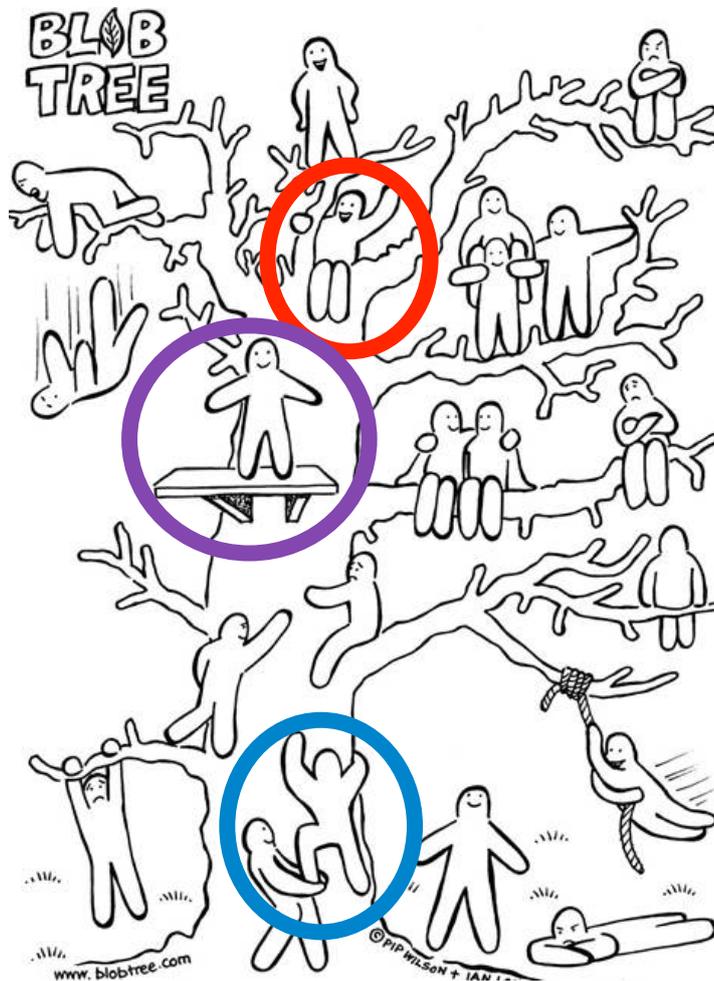
The girls have obviously taken the activity more seriously than the boys, with both Aleksander and Charlie mentioning that they were “fun” activities, and Charlie even going so far as to say it was a “break”, suggesting that they do not fully associate these activities with learning. However, they are

unaccustomed to doing any drama at all in English, and I would hope that the learning is subconscious. In addition to this, all of the students said it was good that the activities were linked to what they had done at the Globe, either because it was beneficial for the students who were not there or because the ones who had been on the trip were able to show the others what to do; as Charlie wrote, “the people that did go could help us out”. This idea of students helping each other to understand is extremely positive and an effective way of creating a sense of equality in the classroom.

In my final question, I asked them how they would rather experience the play. This produced perhaps the most concrete results from all of my research: the three students who had been to the Globe Theatre all now said they would rather watch the play live in the theatre. Comparing this to my second questionnaire in which 82% of the class said they would rather watch a film version of the play, these students included, it was evident that going to the Globe and experiencing the drama workshops run by professional actors had strongly influenced their engagement with Shakespeare on stage in a positive way. Charlie, on the other hand, wrote that he would still rather watch a film adaptation of the play. The students completed these questionnaires independently and so there was no way they could have influenced each other, therefore I can conclude that it was the trip to the Globe in particular which had swayed students towards an increased interest in the performance of ‘Romeo and Juliet’ in an authentic theatre environment. This reinforced my strong belief that taking students to the theatre is the best way to increase their engagement with Shakespeare if it is at all viable for schools.

Finally, I asked the students to circle a character on the ‘Blob Tree’ which best represented how they feel about studying ‘Romeo and Juliet’. The results were as shown below. As Aleksander circled his character, he said aloud “I’m getting there”. As an EAL student it is understandable that he finds Shakespearean language difficult to understand, but his confidence is growing and he is not afraid to ask questions about meaning. I like to think of myself as the character who is giving him a leg up, but maybe that is overly optimistic! Laura’s character is standing on a wooden platform which seemed to echo her enjoyment of performing the script herself both at the Globe and then in the classroom during drama activities, when she felt “more confident”. As she was initially a more shy member of the class, it is lovely to see how her perception of the play has been developed through performance, even though she was initially more focussed on the film as her main source of understanding. Both Sienna and Charlie chose the sitting and waving character, which I think

reflects that they feel comfortable with the play. Perhaps the waving hand could also reflect that they are happy to give answers about the text, reflecting a good level of understanding. From this, I could see a noticeable increase in confidence in all the students compared to their initial study of the play, which I think stemmed from experiencing the play in a range of forms: these students had considered adaptation and had a heightened awareness of the importance of interpretation. I feel that this not only enhanced their engagement with 'Romeo and Juliet', but also gave them a sense of self-assurance in their analysis of the text due to their knowledge that there is no one 'right way' to interpret the play.



**Sienna and  
Charlie**

**Laura**

**Aleksander**

**Blob Tree Diagram**

## **Concluding Remarks**

In this assignment, I wanted to investigate how effective film and drama are in the teaching of 'Romeo and Juliet' to Year 8 students. I have been careful to avoid generalisations about this age

group as a whole, as I have only carried out research with one class. However, from my investigation I can draw the conclusion that going to the theatre is an effective way of engaging students with the form of drama, and allowing them to be more open to the idea of live performances. The Globe Theatre is particularly valuable to students' learning as it allows them to understand the historical context of the plays, but I think taking the students to any theatre is the best possibility.

However, I understand that it is not always financially or practically viable for schools to take students to the theatre, and so I have also examined classroom strategies for teaching 'Romeo and Juliet'. My most significant finding is that it is tremendously important to teach students about adaptation when teaching Shakespeare's plays. If students have an awareness that the play is open to multiple interpretations, and that it is a flexible and malleable script, this does not only enhance their engagement as they know they can shape their own meaning from the complex language, but it also means teachers can use film or drama without any risk of confusion about the 'right' version. Students become more individually responsible for their understanding of the play as they must justify how they interpret the text, which in turn gives them skills which can be applied to their writing.

In terms of film and drama, I have found that students do enjoy watching film adaptations of 'Romeo and Juliet', and watching a version which is set in the correct time period can have a positive impact on their understanding of setting and historical context. Films are an instant way of allowing students to see the play in performance, and I do think that hearing the script read by professional actors can enhance their understanding of the language. However, in accordance with Rex Gibson, I maintain that an active approach to teaching 'Romeo and Juliet' would be the ideal way to deepen students' understanding. Treating the script as a "blueprint", to borrow Watson's term (2008, p.70), which allows the students to take ownership of the play using workshop-style drama activities, not only assists with academic knowledge about the text, but also offers further potential for learning.

All four of the case study students visibly grew in confidence throughout our study of the play, and had become more excited about investigating the meaning behind the text through reading it aloud. Seeing the Globe Theatre in person or on the recording had not just allowed students to gain knowledge but also a genuine interest in Shakespeare and what his dramatic intentions might have

been. If we teach 'Romeo and Juliet' with the intention of allowing students to *enjoy* Shakespeare, not just understand it, then experiencing it practically and immersively seems to be the best approach.

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## Appendix 1

### Students' pre-existing knowledge of Shakespeare

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_



# Shakespeare

Please tick any boxes that apply to you (can be more than one). Answer as fully and honestly as you can.

1. How familiar would you say that you are with Shakespeare's plays?  
 I have never read or watched a Shakespeare play  
 I have watched a Shakespeare play at the theatre  
 I have watched a film version of a Shakespeare play  
 I have read or studied a Shakespeare play at school before  
If you have ticked the last box, what year of school was this? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Which of these plays have you heard of?  
 Hamlet  
 Much Ado About Nothing  
 Macbeth  
 The Tempest  
 Twelfth Night  
 Romeo and Juliet  
 A Midsummer Night's Dream  
 Richard III  
 Any others? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Have you read or watched any of the above plays before? If yes, which one(s)?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. What **century** was Shakespeare writing in? Have a guess! \_\_\_\_\_

5. What do you know about Shakespeare?

(E.g. Did he only write plays? What genre/types of plays did he write? Where were they performed?)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Why do you think we study Shakespeare in school?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2

### Questionnaire – given after watching the film

1. How helpful do you think the film was in helping you to understand the **plot** of *Romeo and Juliet*? (tick one)

- Very helpful
- Quite helpful
- A little helpful
- Not helpful at all

2. Can you explain *why* it was helpful or not helpful?

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3. Do you think this film has helped you to understand the **historical period and setting** of *Romeo and Juliet*? Why?

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4. What century do you think the film was set in?

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5. What country do you think the film was set in?

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6. Would you rather have watched a **modern** adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*? Explain your reason why.

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7. Do you think it would be better or worse to see *Romeo and Juliet* in the theatre rather than on film? Explain your reason why.

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## Appendix 3

### Final, concluding questionnaire for case study students

- 1) What did you find **most helpful** from the Globe trip in helping you to understand Romeo and Juliet?
- The exhibition
  - The Q+A session in the Globe Theatre
  - The drama workshop

**Why** was your chosen part the most helpful?

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- 2) Has the trip to the Globe affected how much you understand the idea of Shakespearean plays? If so how?

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- 3) Write two adjectives to describe the drama activities at the Globe, e.g. interesting, fun

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- 4) Did you find the drama workshop helpful? Give your reason why/why not.

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- 5) Do you think it is important to see the Globe Theatre in order to understand Shakespeare's plays? Why/why not?

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6) Did you enjoy the drama activities we did **in class**? Give your reasons why/why not.

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7) Did you think it was good that the activities were linked to what students had done at the Globe? Why/why not?

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8) Would you rather: (tick one)

- Watch a film adaptation of the play
- Watch the Globe recording of the play on DVD
- Watch a play live in the theatre
- Perform the play yourself in drama activities?

Finally, please circle the blob on the blob tree below which you think best represents how you feel about Romeo and Juliet.

