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Citation: Hansen, Adam and Prince, Tony (2019) Shakespeare Reading Groups: Education Without the "Academy"? Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy, 29 (1). pp. 4-29. ISSN 1052-5017

Published by: Penn State University Press

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tnf.2019.0001> <<https://doi.org/10.1353/tnf.2019.0001>>

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Shakespeare Reading Groups: Education Without the ‘Academy’?

Might we not ask the question, in the end, ‘What is an economy *for*?’ (Massey 2013, 4)

Introduction

This paper grows from a contention the authors developed independently of each other, but that they shared (and which is shared and informed by others); namely that the neo-liberal marketization of education, including higher education, is a disaster for students, scholars, and the communities they are part of and serve. In a world of crisis capitalism where we are told ‘there is no alternative’, we seek to critically evaluate whether one of the alternatives we were trying to build – Shakespeare reading groups beyond the academy – really was or could be alternative, or whether our efforts simply reproduced the corrosive contradictions of current hegemonic models. So this paper considers the ways our reading groups focussed on Shakespeare might or might not offer a way to find common ground, and break down distinctions, between always contingent, problematic and provisional categorisations of ‘teacher’ and ‘learner’, ‘educator’ and ‘educated’, ‘client’ and ‘provider’. In so doing, we hope our practice, and how we theorize it here, can present a way to reflect on a context of which higher education is, or should be, an integral part.

Ground-breaking studies show that groups of people have been getting together to read Shakespeare for a long time, more or less informally, outside of institutional educational settings like universities (see Thompson and Roberts 1997; Murphy 2008; Forsyth 2011; and Scheil 2012). This paper tells the story of two relatively new groups doing just this in the UK: Shakespeare Club, based at the Library of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle Upon Tyne (the ‘Lit and Phil’); and Sheff’s

Shakespeare, who meet at a local café in Sheffield city centre. We consider these two reading groups together and apart, and explore their significance in relation to current social, cultural and educational contexts: these include the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) and its attendant 'impact' agenda; the spread of entrepreneurialism, instrumentalism and marketization in UK higher education (HE); and the UK Government's 2015 Green Paper on higher education. As workers in UK higher education, and as Shakespeareans, we want to ask: given these contexts, is it possible or desirable to do Shakespeare without the academy, that is, both beyond it and without it? Asking this question using our experiences of Shakespeare Club and Sheff's Shakespeare can give us the opportunity to *rethink* what we do in higher education and why we do it.

Part of this rethinking involves reflecting on the locations where we do our work. Sheffield (in South Yorkshire) and Newcastle upon Tyne (in the North East of England) are some 130-miles apart, yet are very similar post-industrial cities, with all the challenges and opportunities that description implies. In terms of population, with just over half a million inhabitants, Sheffield is twice the size of Newcastle, but with Sheffield being close to other Northern English cities such as Leeds and Derby, and the nearest conurbations to Newcastle being around Edinburgh and in West Yorkshire, Newcastle has a comparable sphere of influence and 'threshold population'. Both cities were built on the back of people working in key manufacturing or heavy industries (crudely put, steel and coal in Sheffield, ships and coal in Newcastle). When the writer Edward Carpenter observed the dire environmental and social impacts of industrialisation on the people of Sheffield in the late 1800s, he responded in terms that prefigure the epigraph that commenced this paper: "– all for what? To make a few people rich!" (cited in Morley 200). Such "staple industries", however, "suffered more severely ...from loss of world

markets and weak domestic demand”, especially after “the oil crisis of 1973 and...the election of Margaret Thatcher’s free market Conservative government in 1979” (Russell, 27, 29). Despite comparable attempts at urban regeneration through ‘heritage’ tourism and cultural developments in the 1990s and 2000s, parts of both cities continue to suffer levels of unemployment and deprivation significantly higher than the national average. Nonetheless, as Carpenter’s comments intimate, and whatever their inhabitants have endured, both cities were and are part of a greater North that was “a forcing ground of radical working-class political culture” (Russell 23), and so sustain an often unionised sense of civic pride. This means that despite – or perhaps because of – what both cities have endured, they have, for the large part, a cohesive sense of identity. There are perhaps other material reasons for this. As of 2011, in the North East of England around 21% of the population were in the poorest fifth of the population by income, while around 14% were in the richest fifth; in Yorkshire and Humberside the figures were almost exactly the same. This means that most people in both areas (around 65%) are in the middle three-fifths; in turn, this means the gap between the richest and the poorest in these areas is amongst the smallest for any regions in England (see Poverty.org).

Indeed, when their common history is linked to the fact that both cities have two universities (one, in each, a former polytechnic), we can see that both Sheffield and Newcastle combine highly-skilled working populations *and* those without or with low-paid work, in a context founded on a culture of political association and education, and on the local institutions of civil societies and municipal life. In both cities, then, we felt there was a demand for, and some infrastructure to support, the kinds of inclusive and informal community activities we were attempting in our reading groups.

Shakespeare Club – convened by [REDACTED] – began on 2 October 2014, while Sheff’s Shakespeare’s first session – organised by [REDACTED] – was on 22 May 2014. Both groups were set up independently of each other, but have adopted similar approaches. The aim was for members of the self-selecting public to meet for an hour each month at a free session to discuss Shakespeare’s plays in an informal, inclusive and friendly way. For the Newcastle group this followed the order set out in the 1623 Folio, while Sheff’s Shakespeare followed a consensus chronology, both approaches being no more or less valid or arbitrary than any other. There would be no lectures, and no leader, just the convenor as chair, fielding the discussions. There would be no obligation to come every month, and participants could drop in and out of sessions on plays they wanted to know more about. Both groups offer spaces, therefore, in which to juxtapose or integrate academic assumptions about Shakespeare with non-academic, public understandings of his work, in order to unsettle the distinctions upon which these kinds of separations are made. In part, this was what initially motivated us to set up our reading groups, independently but at more or less the same time.

Unlike our work in universities, at the Shakespeare reading sessions, there are no learning outcomes, module guides, or assessments, and no-one pays to come and hear the convenor lecture or present. But thinking about the differences (and similarities) between reading within and beyond the ‘academy’ can challenge what we think these signifiers of modern university work are for. In turn, this challenge helps us think about what has happened to universities as pedagogic spaces, and what may happen in the future, as universities implement policy proposals such as those contained in the UK government’s

2015 Green Paper on Higher Education *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*.¹

As we operate both within and beyond the ‘academy’, we are able to ask: do Shakespeare Club and Sheff’s Shakespeare offer a potential context for academics and the public to learn from each other as Shakespeareans, a context resistant and extrinsic to the market, industry or institutional ‘Key Performance Indicators’, “the language of instrumentality,” (Brooks 5) and the UK’s Research Excellence Framework? This question is all the more important because teaching and learning about Shakespeare is one of the places where these factors and forces come to bear: as Sarah Olive observes, since at least the Thatcher era in the UK “Shakespeare has become inextricably linked with...instrumental values” (24). Asking such questions could be conceived as offering some of the “further articulation” demanded by Denise Albanese with regard to “Shakespeare as a public object – extramural Shakespeare” (3). Whether our reading groups, and our discussions of them, meet Albanese’s challenge for us to find “new uses for Shakespeare in public” (142) is not for us to say. But as Albanese notes, discussing Shakespeare ‘beyond the academy’ necessarily involves reflecting on what happens within universities: “every concern with extramural Shakespeare must also constitute an indirect argument about Shakespeare in the academy” (4). This being so, perhaps contexts like Shakespeare Club and Sheff’s Shakespeare represent a version of the kind of approach to Shakespeare recently recollected (and aspired to) by Marjorie Garber, which she describes as ““Big Shakespeare” or “Town Meeting Shakespeare””, that is, when

¹ Following consultation this became a ‘White Paper’ in 2016, which went on to form UK government policy and legislation. Whatever amendments occurred to the Green Paper during Parliamentary processes, it thus represented the government’s aspirations or ideals for what they would like that policy to do at that time.

people “experience together...an exhilarating and provocative collective hour of Shakespeare” (51).

We might compare Garber’s insight with Paul Yachnin’s suggestion that students and teachers alike have much to learn from Shakespeare’s “practice of translating and mobilizing bookish knowledge on a large scale”. However, for Yachnin, it is clear that “books made within the world of the university don’t travel well outside that world.” To counter this, Yachnin calls for something we would endorse, and public Shakespeare reading sessions might bring about; that is, the “strategic de-institutionalization of the university, the fashioning of multiple windows and doors in the outer shell of the academy” (1-6).

However, adopting such strategies raises further questions. Has the language of neoliberalism so infected pedagogy, including Shakespearean pedagogy, that contexts like Shakespeare Club and Sheff’s Shakespeare are inevitably, hopelessly, dependent on and compromised by the ideological and material conditions of higher education in the UK? These conditions include the ‘impact agenda’: the Higher Education Funding Council for England demands academics show how their work has had “an effect on, change to or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life, beyond academia” (HEFCE). Can we work in and with the world without merely complying with such requirements?

In exploring the issues and challenges brought into being by looking at Shakespeare within and beyond the academy, we are not at all trying to romanticise or idealise groups like Shakespeare Club. Members – including ourselves – may not experience it as a resistant space, extrinsic to institutional drivers; if anything, it is perhaps facilitated by our authority as academics. Nor should we seek to assume or reinforce false,

disingenuous and dangerous oppositions between the ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’, or between teaching and social or political action. As Frank Lentricchia observed: “That inside/outside distinction is killing us” (7). Lentricchia wrote this in the early 1980s. Do his words ring even more true now? We can begin to explore answers to that question, and those outlined above, by considering how the two clubs function.

Within Shakespeare Club ██████████

I began Shakespeare Club in Newcastle with 16 people and *The Tempest*. The way we approached that play in that first session is comparable to what we have done with others since, though later sessions have differed. It is worth considering what and how we discussed then, to appreciate how the character of the sessions has evolved since.

That first session began with lots of questions about the play from participants; this is understandable given that everyone was finding their feet. How would the opening scene play with Shakespeare’s audience? How familiar would the audience have been with the realities of the sea? Though these questions were not explicitly directed at me, as chair or facilitator, eyes did turn to me to answer them – or perhaps I felt a responsibility to answer them, perhaps reflecting a perception – my own and others’ – of a residual authority based on my role within the academy. But after these initial considerations, people found their confidence and the questions changed, from fact-finding to interpretative and evaluative. My notes taken at the time indicate that all members were animated by the implications about class conflict they saw as self-evident in the exchanges between the Boatswain and the aristocrats. Yet one member wondered what happened to this kind of gritty, conflicted “reality” in the play, and the reality of the hardships of seafaring, after that first scene. Whatever the risks posed to Ferdinand, or by

Caliban, Trinculo and Stephano, an audience would have seen “the rest of the play” as “safe:” under Prospero’s aegis there would be no real “danger,” or “drama” (or “plot,” as one person complained). As discussion progressed I reacted to this and tried to re-inject some “danger,” asking a provocative question of my own: was the powerful Prospero keeping Caliban close as a warning to himself not to commit incest with Miranda? After a short silence, half the room was intrigued, but half was unconvinced, not to say downright sceptical. We also focused on Gonzalo’s speech about his perfect commonwealth (in 2.1), and the silence that resounds after it. We ended with the ending, and a discussion based on another fact-finding question from a member, but one, again, that licensed interpretation: how common were epilogues in the period? This prompted another: were epilogues a bridge to “reality” offstage, or a form of “closure” making safe whatever challenges might have been evident onstage? One member suggested that the play’s last word – ‘free’ – resisted closure and resolution.

This brief account suggests where our discussions did (or did not) accord with what has become orthodox academic criticism on the play, regarding issues of power, sexuality, social conflict, ideological ‘containment’ and so on. There was no unbridgeable gulf between those concerns and the concerns of members, but, equally, some topics engaged more than others, and members needed some pertinent questions addressing before they were confident to embark on their own analyses.

We have now gone through the comedies, and moved onto the histories. These sessions started as most of the sessions since *The Tempest* have started: I say a few words about probable dates of composition, first performance, and chronology, mention what scholars think is the distribution of lines (that is, who speaks most or least), and invite anyone who has seen it or performed in it to share their experiences. When we met to

discuss *King John* (in March 2016), I brought in a review of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production from 2012 (Billington), and I prefaced discussions with a choice fact cribbed from an edition of the *Complete Works*: in 1811 Jane Austen chose to see it instead of *Hamlet*, because Sarah Siddons was playing Constance (Bate and Rasmussen 768). This was my cack-handed way of trying to stimulate enthusiasm for what I thought would be an unpopular play. I need not have bothered: everyone loved it. During the course of the discussion, members laughed at the “bombast and bathos” of the nobles’ speeches, and all returned to the humour of the “calf”s-skin” scene (3.1.). Some cast Austria as “camp,” and one member offered a close analysis of some particularly knotty lines in 3.1. We debated the presentation of Englishness, and the role of the citizens, for whom all had great sympathy. Women’s voices were also in focus, with one participant making a connection to Ford and Page in *Merry Wives* (which we discussed in December 2014), observing what they saw as the “maternal power” embodied in characters like Elinor and Constance. Members also asserted that words like “Right” and matters of legitimacy seemed to be “used more in this play than in any other.” One member arrived very late having got the time wrong and then offered a brilliant observation about the use of hendiadys and repetition in the play, as if the play is showing us that no-one is absolutely sure what they are doing so need to do it twice or more. I followed up the session by sharing via email a weblink to a video of a performance, sent to me by a member.

In April 2016, covering *Richard II*, some of the themes from our *King John* discussions carried over. The member previously interested in repetition developed that theme, and articulated their sense of the circularity of the play, a circularity that meant that, despite regime change, the status quo of a social order that exploited and did not give

voice to the people was sustained. This related to others' observations about the similarities between Henry and Richard ("actor following actor"), and thoughts about the motivation and consistency of both main characters. In turn, one member recognised how "dangerous" a play like this could have been in the period, pointing to the Essex circle's use of it, and the contexts of Irish rebellion and an ageing Queen. This informed a long discussion about the "febrile" Richard's perceived weaknesses (was Henry any better?), which developed into comments on the play's fluidity, both in terms of characterisation and its repeated sea imagery, and in Henry's arrival in Ravenspurgh.

Hopefully, this indicates how the Club has taken on a life of its own, and I am merely a happy conduit for information. I might ask the odd question, and I chip into discussions, but people are mostly content to bounce amenably off each other, or ask their own questions (not, now, of me, but of the group). I am also delighted to report that, as they do, people bring much of themselves to the sessions. In other words, members understand Shakespeare and their own lives through interacting with each other, and through the interactions of Shakespeare and their lives: a teacher spoke about the challenges of covering *The Taming of the Shrew* (October 2015) with girls in school; a Canadian member discussed how and why *The Merchant of Venice* (July 2015) was banned when she was a student; a member whose mother had just died commented poignantly on Aemilia's maternal role in *The Comedy of Errors* (March 2015).

Because there are sometimes sensitive aspects to certain topics, I have to chair a little more carefully when these come up. Equally, on occasions I have to chair more firmly where arguments become heated. One regular member would introduce their personal observations about a play with terms that made them seem universally appreciated ("We feel... We think..."), and had a tendency to denigrate female characters.

For better or worse, he has stopped coming. And despite my hopes (if not claims) that people use the Club as a way to connect Shakespeare to the realities of their lives, when we discussed John of Gaunt's speech from *Richard II*, I felt we were getting into potentially divisive territory. We all noted how the lines of that speech still have power now, not least because of the way Gaunt repeats "now." But after the lines "That England, that was wont to conquer others, / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself" (2.1), and mindful as we all were at that time of the build-up to the 2016 EU Referendum, one member suggested that this was "like us with Europe now." I could not work out if this meant some of British society's obsessions with what are seen as bad aspects of Europe meant we had lost sight of who 'we' were, or whether 'we' were in a post-Imperial decline exacerbated by Europe. Discussion moved on quickly, but later I reflected that I needed to be braver and have more faith in the members and not shy away from discussing contentious topics – that is what the shared space of Shakespeare might allow. I describe these discussions not to validate members' ideas – they don't need it – or detail my extramural pedagogy here – which is hands-off, to say the least. I am also conscious that such accounts do not do justice to all the contributions. But I am trying to show how the Club sees people developing individual interests collectively, without much steer from someone like me, invested as I am with the supposed authority of academia.

Amongst Sheff's Shakespeare Readers ██████████

As convenor of Sheff's Shakespeare, I felt initially responsible for meeting participants' needs for background information about the plays. I produced handouts to summarise plots and give historical context. However, though a number of the members found these materials useful, the start of each session felt too much like a seminar, so I limited the

material supplied. More importantly, it quickly became clear that the group did not need such material, as once we had established acquaintance it transpired that all members of the group had knowledge which they were able to share. Now, members regularly send me links to various performances of, information about or reviews on the play and on Shakespeare in general, which I disseminate to all members.

Thus, within about five months of inaugurating the group it began to develop its own dynamic, and my role changed accordingly. I became the person who ensured that the sessions took place every week at the appointed time, that members were kept informed and that sessions ran smoothly. I now have more of a hybrid role, being at once the organiser; a key group member; an enthusiastic reader-performer; and the ultimate arbiter as to how much time is spent reading or discussing. Even here, though, the distinction is not fixed but fluid, since any member can suggest we return to reading the play at any time, and the decision is often more of a tacit consensus than the convenor's own.

It can be seen from this description that the idea that we 'do' Shakespeare was very quickly superseded by a belief that the group makes use of Shakespeare for its own ends. The sessions are partly a social event, many of us having a meal or drinks while the reading takes place; partly a spontaneous performance, with almost all members playing roles in a more or less actor-like way; and partly a therapeutic experience, where people find something healing and awakening about such activities. Of course, we also discuss many aspects of the plays, the period and the author's life. Equally, members frequently refer to productions they have seen, and what the Shakespeare experience was like for them at school (or, for teachers and ex-teachers, how they engage children and young people in it), and we all enjoy such contributions. Nevertheless, there is something which

binds the group together and motivates members, which means that, in a very real sense, the group has taken on a life of its own, and my role shifts seamlessly between group member and group leader.

Such circumstances are not entirely without risk. At one stage we had an unfortunate situation where an individual member began insulting others via email. As the convenor, I tightened up procedures, including sending emails using 'bcc' and drawing up an agreed set of ground rules which I now pass on to all new group members. I also had to deal with the process of ejecting this individual from the group without inflaming the situation further. There is always the chance that emotions can get the better of people in intense group activities, or that an individual might undermine the group through inappropriate behaviour. Sometimes differences of opinion can go beyond lively debate and become personal. Clearly, the convenor can never be entirely neutral and detached. Though I aim to be open-minded and tolerant of a range of opinions, and seek to encourage this among group members, any approach to running a group of this kind will be more attractive to some people than others.

Individuals have a range of ways of relating to the group, but my interventions and suggestions sometimes animate individuals who may not otherwise have the confidence to speak up. For instance, when we read *Julius Caesar*, a relatively new member, who had not heard of the play before, picked up on a suggestion I made concerning the kinds of manipulative verbal techniques the Roman politicians are shown to use in the play, and drew some persuasive parallels with modern day political debate. This sparked a lively group discussion and served to implicitly confirm the member's arrival in the group, as a key participant. Many 'breakthrough' moments and shared

realisations have occurred during the course of the group, with and without my direct involvement.

This account is not meant therefore in any way to present a template for Shakespeare reading groups. In fact, I feel strongly that groups need to develop their own identity and processes, and that each group grows out of particular circumstances, which always involve limitations as well as opportunities.

Shakespeare Club and Sheff's Shakespeare: The Members' Views

We realise that what we have said so far is descriptive, anecdotal and impressionistic. Anticipating this, we have tried to gather more evidence about what happens in the two reading groups, and what members think about them. We will now discuss this, prior to then considering what the functions, effects, or implications of Shakespeare Club might be in broader cultural, social and educational contexts. As we will see, the evidence from the two reading groups discussed here suggests that significant learning and personal development occurs within them, and such development may be more significant where or because more formal constraints, hierarchies and requirements are suspended.

Early in 2016, we conducted a hard-copy, informed consent questionnaire survey of participants present at one session of Sheff's Shakespeare or Shakespeare Club. We are aware of the limitations of such methods of data-gathering (ethical concerns, bias, there are always more questions to ask, it is only a snapshot of attendees at that session, and so on), but we were also eager for members to reflect and record their reflections.¹ In order

¹ To accommodate ethical concerns, the questionnaire was prefaced with the following text: 'I am currently doing research into reading groups with a focus on Shakespeare, looking at who goes and why, and what people get from the experience. I also have to provide information to my employers about the sort of public engagement activities I facilitate outside the university. As part of this, I'd be very grateful if you could take 5

to get a rounded view, we distributed questionnaires to the Newcastle Club and to Sheff's Shakespeare. In that single snap-shot session, 16 people completed questionnaires in Newcastle, and 9 in Sheffield, providing quantitative and qualitative data (though not everyone answered every question in each location). Notwithstanding the aforementioned limitations of such data-gathering, the results were fascinating. Several questions tried to establish some demographic data about members. When asked how many sessions they had attended, 7 Newcastle respondents had attended less than five, 3 had attended six to ten sessions, and 6 had come to more than ten sessions. In Sheffield, there was an equal split (7 in each) between those who had attended less than five sessions and those who had come to more than ten. In terms of employment status, in Newcastle there was a fairly equal distribution of employment types, with 4 respondents working full time, 3 part-time, and 6 retired. The same was true in Sheffield (2 in each of these categories) with the difference that one respondent identified as unemployed. Both sets of respondents indicated a mix of older and newer members, and while both groups showed a spread over various age ranges, Newcastle's members tended to be in the older categories, confirming the higher proportion of retired participants there: in Newcastle, 3 respondents were aged between fifteen and thirty years old, 1 was between thirty-one and forty, 5 between forty-one and fifty-five, and 7 identified as over sixty. In Sheffield, the distribution was much more even across those age ranges. In Sheffield, too, the gender

minutes to complete this questionnaire. I would like to collate some quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (personal comments) data using the responses here, and use this data in conference papers and publications. All responses are anonymous, and all questionnaires will be held securely in a locked office at Northumbria University. If you would NOT like your responses to be included in any conference papers and/or publications please tick here: [].' No-one did tick the box.

split (of those who identified) was even (three male, three female); in Newcastle, more women than men responded (9 to 6). Katherine West Scheil explains in *She Hath Been Reading* (2012) how large numbers of women joined Shakespeare reading groups in mid-nineteenth century America, and how this often meant also getting involved in political and community activities, as well as seeking personal development. Despite the snap-shot data, in Sheff's Shakespeare, over the longer term, females currently outnumber males by a ratio of 2:1, and have consistently done so, perhaps suggesting that these women are looking for similar experiences to those Scheil describes, albeit in a different context. However, participation for individual and collective self-development is not limited to gender. In Sheffield, members in general tend to belong to one or more marginalised social category, whether related to ethnicity, disability, sexuality or other factors, and the group (and Shakespeare) offer members the chance to express and explore their own identities in a safe environment, where open-endedness, non-compulsion and a lack of financial and pedagogic constraints play a significant part.

Moving away from demographic data, we tried to gather more qualitative information, sought through other questions:

Why did you choose to **attend**?

Newcastle: "Intellectual stimulation;" "Love of S;" "Interest in Shakespeare and to participate in regular discussion – appeal of studying all Shakespeare's plays;" "Because I have an interest in Shakespeare, and would like an outlet where I can discuss my ideas;" "Love of Shakespeare – desire to learn more;" "I wanted to use my brain and enjoy literature in a more informal setting;" "Enjoyment and for a better appreciation;" "the chance to go through the whole corpus;" "To enable me to discuss Shakespeare's plays having a lack of interest among my peers;" "Learn something!"

Sheffield: “Curiosity;” “Because I love Shakespeare and, for me, it’s best read aloud/enacted with a group of like-minded people than read privately on your own;” “A personal need to take on the Shakespeare challenge;” “To broaden my knowledge of Shakespeare;” “Because it sounded fun and a friend wanted to try too;” “I liked the idea that you could drop in and it was not formal or a course, as that fits in with my health needs. I wanted to know more about Shakespeare;” “Because I love Shakespeare and wanted to explore language and ideas of plays;” “Intense interest in Shakespeare;” “Pleasure/fun/recovery.”

What do these comments suggest? Well, words like “fun,” “love” for and “interest” in Shakespeare, occur a lot. This suggests self-selecting participants already liked Shakespeare (and that reading groups focusing on Shakespeare are ‘preaching to converted’). But what people seem to get out of coming to a group is the chance to do something there that they couldn’t do elsewhere, not least enjoy some kind of therapeutic benefits. Indeed, just being part of a group is a big factor in people attending. The next question tried to push people to be specific about what they enjoyed in their experiences:

Can you think of a session you attended that you really **enjoyed**, and why?

Newcastle: “*Taming of the Shrew* – so many opinions;” “I have enjoyed them all, *The Tempest* and *Merchant of Venice* particularly in introducing new perspectives. Also *Merry Wives* for introducing wider political aspects;” “I’ve enjoyed all sessions, hearing different viewpoints, relating Shakespeare to other works of literature, looking at themes, characters and specific passages;” “I have enjoyed them all enormously – interchange of ideas;” “*Two Gentlemen of*

Verona – as I had just seen the play as well;” “*2 Gentlemen of Verona*. Because I hadn’t looked thoroughly at it before;” “*Tempest* – didn’t enjoy it until we discussed it;” “Sensitive leadership; participation good. No ‘undercurrents’.”

Sheffield: “*Julius Caesar* (the murder);” “I enjoy most of them, but particularly the ones where there’s lots of discussion about characterisation, language, and how the plays relate to Early Modern England, and the world today;” “Every session is unique. I enjoy all of them;” “*Hamlet*, because it’s a familiar and excellent play;” “Plays I know – gave me fresh insight;” “*Twelfth Night* – Malvolio’s comedy. Making comparisons between Shakespeare’s texts;” “Shared reading brings out more from the texts. Also reading together builds confidence.”

These comments show that what is enjoyable and stimulating about being part of a reading group is encountering and sharing diverse viewpoints and perspectives. People like having the opportunity (or necessity) to learn more about literary and historical contexts. Lastly, while members appreciate covering texts they already have some familiarity with, respondents also reported that they liked covering unfamiliar texts. Accordingly, we tried to solicit responses about what kinds of new knowledge people felt they were generating:

How has your view of Shakespeare **changed** as a result of coming to the group?

Newcastle: “because of the re-reading;” “Attending regularly and studying deepens and broadens appreciation of Shakespeare. The plays become more accessible but also raise more questions with increasing knowledge and understanding;” “I have a

new respect for Shakespeare;” “Less scary – much more fun and not as purely academic as it was in university and school;” “Good to hear that there are so many diverging opinions on so many parts of the play;” “A better appreciation of those plays I hadn’t previously enjoyed so much;” “I have a better view of the range and interrelationships of the plays. I can see WS more as a journeyman playwright;” “My understanding of his methods is growing;” “Already understanding more – also of his historical context.”

Sheffield: “Yes, more perception;” “Increased appreciation for the language of some of the plays which I may not have previously particularly enjoyed in performance;” “It reinforced my view on Shakespeare. As Ben Jonson says in his eulogy about him: ‘He was not of an age, but for all time!’;” “It seems easier, more accessible, hearing it in unprofessional and professional voices;” “More insights into the ideas and themes which has enhanced enjoyment. Have discussed how Shakespeare developed as a writer and wrote more complex characterisation and challenging themes;” “Learning more about literary devices and historical contexts.”

These comments show people feel their understanding and appreciation of and pleasure in Shakespeare and literary analysis in general have been expanded and enhanced.

Further questions invited respondents to identify what they enjoyed even more directly:

What do you **enjoy** about coming to the reading group? (**Please tick as many as apply**)

I like to hear the views of others

Newcastle 16 Sheffield 8

I like to share my ideas with others N12 S9

I like to learn new things about Shakespeare N15 S9

I like to socialise and meet with people with similar interests N10 S9

Other (please say here):

Newcastle: “It encourages me to read and study more widely and thoroughly explore new things;” “It makes me think about things I wouldn’t normally and look at things from another viewpoint;” “Better understanding of structure.”

Sheffield: “Discussing RSC performances as there are other group members who go to Stratford or see the cinema performances;” “Setting up a group where we see plays/go to events together.”

These responses reinforce the idea that for members other views are crucial, followed by learning new things. For Sheffield members in particular, the social aspects of attending are significant. These responses were reinforced again in the final question:

Do you have any **further comments** about your experiences at the reading group?

Newcastle: “Standard of discussion is exceptionally high (in my experience) but also always great fun;” “Pleased this group exists and it is a relaxing and welcoming environment;” “It’s really fun and everyone is really nice!;” “very open and egalitarian;” “Good atmosphere;” “I like the wide mix of attendees.”

Sheffield: “It’s usually the highlight of my week. I always look forward to it;” “I like the lack of pressure;” “The group is small and friendly. I like that its [sic]

people of all different levels of understanding. It seems democratic and open, supportive;” “I’ve been involved from the beginning and have seen a lot of people come and go, but there has been a constant core group too.”

As we will see, the comment from a Sheff’s Shakespeare participant about the “lack of pressure” in the group is a critical point of difference between what goes on in the groups and what goes on within the academy. Moreover, the groups fulfil various functions but these depend on key features, namely their diverse and democratic nature. This is borne out by comment on a blog by one of the Newcastle members: “I’ve participated in fascinating and rewarding sessions... It’s free, stimulating and utterly democratic. Come along if you can” (Cusack). In this regard, Shakespeare Club is sustaining a long tradition of approaching Shakespeare outside of traditional educational contexts. As Scheil notes, women’s Shakespeare reading groups in the US in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries emphasised “self-education” and “democratized Shakespeare as reading material for women;” this “helped spread the idea that Shakespeare was for everyone, not just cultural elites in metropolitan areas” (xi, 30). The contexts may differ, but Sheff’s Shakespeare and Shakespeare Club aspired to these aims as well.

Shakespeare Club and Book Clubs

Having compared Shakespeare groups, it is also worth asking: is what happens in these reading groups devoted to Shakespeare any different to what happens in other forms of book club or reading group more generally? Addressing this question will help establish what, if anything, specific and special happens in the pedagogy of Shakespeare reading groups, ‘without’ the academy.

Shakespeare Club and Sheff's Shakespeare can be seen as similar to other reading public groups in the sense that, as Jenny Hartley has suggested, if there is a "minimal definition" of a reading group it is "a group of people who meet on a regular basis to discuss books" (2). But there are other more substantial common elements. Members of reading groups enjoy devoting time, energy and space to an activity for a time away from everyday demands and pressures: "*A valid excuse for actually sitting down and reading. ... We love 'having to read' so don't feel guilty. ... Allows me a legitimate few hours to myself away from the kids*" (Hartley 126). Scheil's study of women's Shakespeare clubs in America evinced that, historically, participants attributed the same qualities to their groups: "In the home, "Shakespeare" signalled material that was safe and culturally valorizing for women to read and study, allowing them to take time away from their domestic duties and devote their energies to self-education" (xiii). However, in reading groups, people enjoying this space away from everyday life and ordinary duties also simultaneously situate their ideas and others' in *both* these personal experiences *and* wider social contexts: "the relationship between book and world is open; the book is expected to speak about the world, and the world (reading-group observation and experience) is brought to bear upon the book" (Hartley 135). This corroborates the way discussions in our groups respond to and reflect the participants' backgrounds, lives and interests.

In her influential work, Hartley affirmed: "reading in groups has been around for as long as there has been reading. ... We may think of reading as something solitary and private...but the impulse to share can be powerful" (1-2). What Hartley's respondents said about what they enjoyed about their book groups is strongly echoed in the data

presented in this paper: “*I enjoy the stimulation of so many different views on one book*” (80). One of her respondents put it like this:

[F]or most people the point of the group is the talk, and they talk not in order to coerce each other into a common reading of the text, but rather to enjoy the diversity, the jolt of looking through another’s eyes. (98)

As with Shakespeare Club and Sheff’s Shakespeare, this ‘jolt’ depends on a diversity of members and participants.

Historically, and at present, then, Shakespeare reading groups have cultivated or encouraged a tendency towards “cooperative appreciation” (Scheil, 3). DeNel Rehberg Sedo elaborated on the importance of precisely this kind of shared endeavour embodied in reading groups in general. Since “shared reading is both a *social process* and a *social formation*,” then, to Sedo, the study of “book clubs, reading groups or literary societies” is “a study of interdependencies” (1-2). Sedo goes on to suggest that “new knowledge is a key reason for joining” (10). Taken together, these observations indicate that modern reading groups – focused on Shakespeare or otherwise – allow the shared construction and dissemination of knowledge: “Reading may begin in a room of one’s own, but it rarely ends there” (Berg 151).

How do such observations and studies relate to our concerns here? Evidently, this collectivity and inclusivity has the potential to outdo, outweigh, or bypass established hierarchies of cultural and interpretive authority, even when the authority is the author of the book. The broadcaster James Naughtie described the BBC Radio Four bookclub (set up in 1998) as “a readers’ ...not a critics’ conversation,” noting “there is an unexpected democracy about the studio as the author becomes one of the discussion group” (cited in Hartley 5). Hartley’s respondents said something similar: “*We enjoy the lack of authority;*”

“*Free for all – all encouraged to speak*” (85). Again, there are strong echoes of this in the ways members of both the Sheffield and Newcastle Shakespeare reading groups described how they engaged with discussions.

Some commentators on reading groups have observed how democracy *can* become “dissident practice;” that is, a way of reading the world, the text and the self that conflicts with prior models:

Participants in the book group study reveal how finding their voice and articulating ideas, changing values and opinions, and experiencing lingering reflections on discussions that broaden or subvert prevailing attitudes and beliefs are testament to the relevance of speaking at book group to changing subjectivities.

(Howie 154-55)

Sedo also suggests that, in the past, such groups had a vital function in terms of social inclusion and social mobility: reading communities “exposed their members to learning opportunities that were not available within the institutionalized education system” (5). This was particularly true of *Shakespeare* reading groups in the past: Scheil’s study of American Shakespeare clubs offers ample evidence to corroborate this idea of the group being an “alternative education” for those otherwise denied formal tuition (13). Comparably, Hartley references an account of shared Shakespeare reading from Richard Altick’s *The English Common Reader*:

In a [British] milltown in the late 1840s, a group of girl operatives met at five o’clock in the morning to read Shakespeare together for an hour before going to work. (Cited in Hartley 243)

And yet, as Hartley reflects, “These days it’s probably after work, and not Shakespeare” (243). This is likely: Hartley asserted “very few groups read only plays” (57).

In this regard, we start to see how modern reading groups, especially ones like ours focused on Shakespeare, differ from those of the past: study fees and student debt notwithstanding, with the expansion of higher education in the Anglo-American world, surely the educational opportunities afforded by a Shakespeare Club are available elsewhere now? Arguably yes. So what motivates people to attend a Shakespeare reading group? Respondents' comments give us some ideas, and emphasise that contemporary book clubs fulfil very different roles to nineteenth-century groups; they are *not* necessarily a means to an alternative education, but “give members opportunities for enjoyment, personal insight, and collective support in dealing with the stresses of everyday life” (Berg 146).

While it is useful to see what might be special about a Shakespeare reading group in relation to other sorts of reading group, it is, for our purposes as university workers, more significant to consider whether what happens in a ‘non-academic’ Shakespeare reading group is comparable to what happens in an ‘academic’ context. Only by doing this comparing can we see what agency and significance, if any, might be attached to doing Shakespeare ‘beyond’ the academy in current educational contexts.

Shakespeare Clubs and the ‘Academy’

We both set out on our separate reading group projects thinking there would be big differences between our academic approach to texts and how members of a public reading group would get to grips with Shakespeare. We were motivated to confront and overcome these anticipated differences, but had our assumptions challenged as we did so.

For example, Hartley’s survey suggested to her that empathy was “the core reading-group value,” with respondents saying their discussions focused on “*which*

character did we like, hate, empathize with, etc.?” (Hartley 132-33). This emphasis on both character and empathy is perhaps at significant odds with the tone and topic adopted by some contemporary Shakespeare academic scholarship, which ostensibly aims for an objective, theorised, historicising approach. But Shakespeare teaching at universities is now nothing if not diverse and eclectic, as Kate McLuskie has emphasised, reflecting on Neill Thew’s 2006 survey of teaching Shakespeare in UK higher education (McLuskie 138, citing Thew 2006; see also Olive 53-90). For every renowned commentator affirming that “questions” about Shakespeare “begin with characters” (Gilbert 92), another suggests “Shakespeare might be enjoyed in terms of developments in approaches to gender and theory” (Wray 142). Yet theory and character study (and gender) are not mutually exclusive, of course. Nonetheless, it may be true, as Elaine Scarry suggests, that academic and non-academic readers read books differently:

When you talk to ordinary readers outside the discipline – and I mean serious, intelligent readers – they are often reading primarily for this act of sympathetic or empathetic identification. (Cited in Brooks and Jewett 68)

Our experiences of convening Shakespeare reading groups as described above endorse this perspective, to an extent; but as the descriptions of discussions also indicate, character is not all members want to talk about. As Temma Berg suggests, despite (or perhaps because of) the presence of “theoretical perspectives” in the classroom, what happens when people read outside it is not always so different: “Students often express their feelings, would rather discuss characters than symbolism, and enjoy connecting the literature they read to their lives” (147).

Arguably, given the importance participants in and commentators on reading groups place on ‘democracy’, a more powerful distinction relates to the issue of authority.

Berg asks the question: “What is the role of the teacher in the classroom, of the academic in a non-academic space, of the “literary authority” in a book club?” (131) Such questions become even more pressing as we recognise that Shakespeare possesses – or has been endowed with – a particularly potent kind of cultural authority. This means that even while groups devoted to him have historically given voice to individuals and identities otherwise excluded from ‘institutionalized education’, sometimes the individuality, integrity and autonomy of those voices is pressured or compromised. In other words, Shakespeare’s authority can make people want more not less guidance – or authority – in their interpretations. Hence, as Hartley notes, in the 1800s, “an early ‘how to’ literature” to assist in people’s apprehensions of Shakespeare (Hartley 49).

Again, though, we might wonder whether the same is true now. As both an academic and a book-club member, Berg relates that, in one group discussion, “I did not edit myself or feel inhibited in any way; I just felt freer to remain silent. I was not responsible, any more than anyone else, for what happened or did not happen. I was not an authority” (139). Comparably, when convening our Shakespeare groups we make no claims to authority, though we do feel responsibility. This can create dilemmas which are not easily resolved.

According to Berg though, authority aside, the big difference between academic and non-academic reading is structural: a book club is “non-academic,” meaning “no grades, voluntary attendance, casual setting” (130). Moreover, “members do not want the book club to become a classroom” (Berg, 141). To discover what the opposite view would be like, Berg asked her academic students how they found attending a reading group, and one responded in ways that clearly divided the different contexts (and are worth quoting at length):

Class discussion is to enhance our education and critical thinking skills, whereas a group meeting caters more toward simple enjoyment of the book. We are less likely in a group to really delve into particular features of a topic and discuss how it relates to literary theories. Both of these have their advantages – and bringing in theories enhances the motives behind the book, while a simpler discussion can be more enjoyable without the added factor of academic pressure. (Cited in Berg 143-44)

This is an honest, balanced and valuable response, which raises some vital questions, and reveals some key discriminations. Are enjoyment and education exclusive? Are enjoyment and critical thinking, too? From this student's analysis it would seem so, and who can blame them for thinking like this, given the 'pressure' they identify? If we remember the comment from a Sheff's Shakespeare participant about enjoying the "lack of pressure" in their group, we might perceive that one effect of comparing (however partially) methods, motivations and outcomes of Shakespeare teaching within and beyond the academy is that we see these 'pressures' – immanent within the academy, yet still evident beyond it – more starkly.

Education Without the Market?

In England and North America, this pressure is 'academic', but for staff and students alike the pressures are partly structural, partly financial and partly political. Nothing encapsulates this better, yet does so little to reduce these pressures, than the UK Conservative government's 2015 Green Paper *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. As with many policy documents, this purported to be driven by altruistic and unarguable motives aimed at fostering inclusivity:

“More choice” means “better value for money” and more provision for “hard-to-reach communities” (Department for Business Innovation & Skills 13). No-one wants to limit the opportunities offered by higher education; on the contrary, enfranchising everyone to make the most of higher education is vital for a critically-conscious and creative democracy. Likewise, no-one wants students to be exploited in taking those opportunities. But the ideology and methods encapsulated in the proposals in the Green Paper make inclusivity, opportunities, criticality, and democracy harder, not easier, to achieve. How can universities operate as agents of social mobility and inclusivity within a wider “structure of inequality” in society, when “universities themselves are part of the reproduction of inequality,” even if inadvertently; and is not any “contribution” universities might make to “economic growth” a contribution to a socio-economic system “that is allowed to be an engine of inequality” (Holmwood “Introduction,” 10-11)? People from poorer backgrounds graduate with “the highest levels of debt;” “aversion to debt reduces the propensity to attend university;” and “working part-time [to service debts] whilst studying may be associated with a lower level of attainment” (McKay and Rowlington 97). Relating these contradictions to increasing access to higher education in the UK, David Holmwood suggests the sector has deflected attention from “the problem of poverty” itself to “support for children from poor backgrounds,” and a faith that such support will be enough to fix an unequal society (“Introduction,” 10-11). Thinking about Shakespeare reading groups will not fix social immobility or inequality (nor will the groups themselves, even diverse ones like ours); but perhaps doing so will make us see where the academy fails to either.

The Green Paper continues determined efforts by successive governments since at least the late 1980s to deploy neoliberal thinking to “reduce unit costs to the public

purse” of higher education in the UK, passing the cost of education from the “state” to individual students (““Manpower Planning” in Higher Education,” cited in Collini 131). Accordingly, in roughly 70-odd pages, this document uses the phrase “value for money” twenty-five times, and refers to the “taxpayer” who wants this value for money twenty-six times. In such documents, then, taxpayers and students alike are cast as “rational robots exclusively concerned to maximize economic prosperity” (Collini 97). This is because, whatever its aspirations for helping social mobility, the Green Paper is driven by neoliberal economic ideology.

In a nutshell, neoliberalism propagates the view “that, in the end, individual interests are the only reality that matters; that those interests are purely monetary; and that so-called values are only a means of pursuing selfish ends by other means” (Massey 4). Documents like the Green Paper show that this model is set to govern what universities must do, and therefore what students attending university must do too. This means that if, in general society, “commodification appears in a very real sense to overshadow contemporary social life,” then this also affects universities: “higher education, now reinvented as a finely tuned skills processor to serve the economy, becomes a key performer in the realization of competing human capital” (Holborow 14, 16).

As an independent review by the Higher Education Policy Institute concluded, regarding the Green Paper’s predecessor, the 2010 Browne Report: “the idea of the withdrawal of the state from the direct funding of universities is deeply ideological;” it is an ideology “driven by the belief that the market – and in particular student choice as the manifestation of the market at work – is the best way of ordering things” (Thompson and Bekhradnia para. 52). Any number of studies will show that, when it comes to markets

for education, not to mention many other aspects of human life, this belief is as misplaced as this ideology is misguided (see Lauder and Hughes).

Nonetheless, in addition to explicating a fundamental neo-liberal imperative to deregulate and marketize higher education, and to “open up the sector to greater competition,” the Green Paper also embeds an instrumental approach to education, for “providers” and “consumers” alike. In this model, education provides “lasting value” by equipping students with “the transferrable work readiness skills that businesses need” which will in turn “contribute more effectively to our efforts to boost the productivity of the UK economy” (Department for Business Innovation & Skills 8, 11). This ideology privileges only learning that is “useful” for students and those who may go on to pay them: “employers need access to a pipeline of graduates with the skills they need” (Department for Business Innovation & Skills 19). This ideological regime dictates that the greatest skill we can promote or cultivate – as academics or as students – is entrepreneurialism, “a neoliberal view of radical individualism...making it seem that we, as individuals, are all responsible for whether we are employed or not, and how much we get paid;” such an ideology in turn “deflects the crisis in jobs away from social causes to individual ones” (Holborow 111-114).

This model insists that instead of asking ‘What can an economy do for us all?’ or, (to recollect our epigraph) ‘What is an economy *for*?’, we must ask ‘What can I do for *me*, and the economy?’ This model also insists that we must see “‘education as a function of society’” rather than “‘society as a function of education’” (Lentricchia 1). As embodied in plans like those in the Green Paper, this results in a reductive and enervating approach to learning:

If we find ourselves saying that what is valuable about learning to play the violin well is that it helps us develop the manual dexterity that will be useful for typing, then we are stuck in a traffic-jam of carts before horses. (Collini, 91)

Where the Browne Report was unbalanced in its emphasis on students acquiring instrumental, transferrable employability skills over critical and challenging thinking and curiosity about the world and a student and their discipline's place in it, the Green Paper stopped even the pretence of recognising let alone valuing these things. The balance has tipped too far: "*reflexive knowledge*...concerned with dialogue about values themselves" is being "sacrificed" by the "instrumentalization of the university" (Burawoy 32). Put another way, school-leavers "often have little reliable idea of what they will turn out to be interested in," but marketized, instrumentalized higher education "means they will be far less likely ever to find out" (Miller and Sabapathy 48). Even putting these significant concerns aside, this approach also fails in its own terms, since those with a consumer mindset have been shown to receive lower grades because they do not exhibit what the psychologist Louise Bunce has termed "effortful engagement" intrinsic to scholarship (cited in Morgan 2016). A different perspective – and one we and many others share – cherishes just such engagement. This perspective is held by and comes from those "not at home in society...who believe that our society is mainly unreasonable and that education should be one of the places where we can get involved in the process of transforming it" (Lentricchia, 1-2). What role, if any, can something like Shakespeare Club and Sheff's Shakespeare play in such a process?

Conclusion

Long ago, Paulo Freire critiqued the political and pedagogic limitations of education as “an act of depositing,” known as the “banking” concept of education, where students are tasked merely with “receiving, filing, and storing” the knowledge they acquire. Because this model assumes reality and what we can know about it is “motionless, static, compartmentalized and predictable,” Freire affirmed, it impedes “critical consciousness,” and mirrors and consolidates an “oppressive society,” where no alternative to the present condition is conceivable (52-54). Freire advocated a different view:

Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality. (65)

Yet as an updated version of the “banking” model becomes enshrined in UK higher education, is a Shakespeare reading group really a space ‘beyond the academy’ where “*becoming*” can be realised, and where these ideological pressures, demands and dictates are minimised, if not overcome? Perhaps not. The current socio-economic climate makes it hard simply to find a place for a group to exist, especially given the dominant ownership of space in city centres by corporate companies who have little or no interest in accommodating local groups. Moreover, marketization and instrumentalism *are* present in some book groups, especially now, in groups equipped with professional consultants or aligned with celebrity readers, such as Richard and Judy (in the UK), or Oprah Winfrey (in the US) (see Hartley 117-18; Rooney 2005; Fuller, Sedo and Squires 2011; and Garthwaite 2014). This marketization may be seen to affect our role as university workers too: are we academic entrepreneurs, exploiting our intellectual capital, identifying a new socio-cultural seam from which to extract a valuable resource and make a killing in a competitive industry? Just as students in seminars improve their ‘human capital’, and as

book group attendees enhance their cultural capital, we can be seen to be doing both, in terms that tally with the ideologies of entrepreneurialism we have critiqued above:

Individuals can act entrepreneurially within a wide range of roles. ...Moreover, they can do so outside the working environment – in non-work activities, such as voluntary work or the organisation of sports clubs, and in the domestic and social spheres. (OECD *Evaluation of Programmes Concerning Education for Entrepreneurship* 2009; cited in Holborow 109)

This issue is also related to the specific role of the convenor of Sheff's Shakespeare, a PhD student wanting to take on an ambitious project which would not simply be a box-ticking 'public-engagement' exercise aimed at targeting funding and 'impact' criteria, but to see whether a community reading group could function autonomously and improve well-being for local citizens. The convenor of Shakespeare Club, a university lecturer, wanted this too, but to secure institutional workloading and support succumbed to soliciting questionnaire responses couched in the language of an 'impact case study': "Please rate your satisfaction with this event;" "Has this event benefitted the way you think about and enjoy Shakespeare?" Becoming an academic entrepreneur is a risk this convenor has been willing to take, or a contradiction he is resigned to live with. It is one of the costs of an attempt, comparable with others', to build bridges between academia and the world, to challenge the apparent separation of the two, or even to challenge the world in which academia is a part.

Thinking about pedagogy, democracy and dissidence, that is, thinking about Shakespeare Club and Sheff's Shakespeare, can give us the opportunity to *rethink* what we do in higher education and why we do it. The more we promote "the market mechanism in higher education," the more we "reproduce and solidify inequalities, rather

than... dissolve them” (Holmwood “The Idea,” 13). But the less ‘pressure’ and instrumentalism in an educational setting, the more ‘democracy’ and inclusivity, within or beyond the ‘academy’ is generated. Instead, we open up to each other and bring ourselves and our experiences into discussions, as nobody charged with facilitating learning is required or allowed to dominate. We already know – and Shakespeare’s *Lear* realizes – how we can counter the problems associated with the concentration of the power of capital (financial, cultural or otherwise) by and for the benefit of the many not the few, and a similar solution can help us work out how to transform education:

So distribution should undo excess

And each man have enough. (*King Lear*, 4.1.72-73)

It follows then that if we aspire for our universities to develop “a critical conscience and consciousness,” these should “flourish” not only “inside the academy,” but also be fed back “out into society” (Miller and Sabapathy 50). This can work both ways too, as we try to achieve an ideal of “teaching as public engagement,” not only *with* the public, but with our *students*, who, we might remind ourselves, can be seen as “members of a public with their own interests and experiences” that can be “elaborated through pedagogical discourse” (Burawoy 34). In other words, students might be seen as people who seek to learn and develop, rather than just as a segment of society buying education from service suppliers, and this wider understanding thereby includes members of the public as well as those enrolled on formal courses. Creating these connections and breaking down dividing lines amongst learners means universities can manifest “significant public goods” through cultivating “debate and common resources of knowledge,” for those both in and beyond the academy (Holmwood “Introduction,” 9, 2). We may, in the words of *The Tempest*’s Alonso, “talk nothing” when we discourse on or with Shakespeare (or any

other aspect of our cultural and political life), but in that “talk” we can, like Gonzalo, imagine and enact “contraries” (2.1.136-61), however flawed, fleeting or fragile. And contrary to what you may have been told, there is *always* an alternative.

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This work would not have been possible with the gratefully received contributions (in sessions and through the questionnaires) of the groups’ participants. Thanks are also due to Kay Easson, the Head Librarian at the ‘Lit and Phil’, and Monika Smialkowska.

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