

Teaching Shakespeare in Prison

RENFORD REESE

California State Polytechnic University-Pomona, USA

RACHEL TRACIE

Biola University, USA

Abstract: *The Prison Education Project (PEP) offers life skills and academic courses in 30 correctional facilities in California. Founded in 2011, PEP uses university student and faculty volunteers to teach a range of 32 introductory courses during three seven-week semesters: Fall, Spring, Summer. One of PEP's most popular courses is the "Introduction to Shakespeare" course. This article examines the impact of teaching an "Introduction to Shakespeare" course in prison. This course introduces in-custody students to the literary interpretation of Shakespeare in the context of their own lived experience. Students in this course deconstruct the use of language and analyze the social, cultural, and historical context in Shakespeare's writings. The class explores the playwright's use of literary form, metaphor, personification, and genre in his plays. Each course focuses on one Shakespeare play. Students read and performed a scene from this play, which focused on grief, madness, action, and forgiveness. The image of an intellectually curious person who seeks enlightenment belies the stereotypical image of the dangerous prisoner. From the outside, it might be difficult to fathom a group of prisoners flocking to sign up for a course about the work of a 16th Century English playwright, poet, and dramatist. What does their eagerness to sign up for this course say about them? Is it possible for prisoners to deeply connect to Shakespeare's writing? And, does his writing empower and inspire this population in unique ways? In one context, every prisoner is living a Shakespearean tragedy, which is characterized by a tragic flaw or by committing a grave error (hamartia), which leads to their downfall (peripeteia). As one prisoner who is serving a life sentence California stated, "It can take you 50 seconds to get into something and 50 years to get out of it." Indeed, the concept of being free one day and in prison the next day is Shakespearean. The timelessness and universal appeal of Shakespeare suggest that he was able to capture the imperfections of mankind and uniquely grapple with the fundamental challenges of human existence. This article summarizes the impact that the "Introduction to Shakespeare" courses had on the incarcerated students in these courses.*

Keywords: Prison, Shakespeare, Teaching Shakespeare

Introduction

As the founder/director of the Prison Education Project, I am writing this article with the assistance of PEP's Writing Coordinator and primary "Introduction to Shakespeare" instructor. Since PEP's inception in 2011, the program has used 3,000 university student and faculty volunteers to teach a range of 32 courses to approximately 10,000 in-custody students in 39 correctional facilities in California and beyond. PEP is the largest prison education project of its kind in the United States. The implementation strategy of PEP is to use the resources in the backyard of the correctional facilities to make change. There is a college within a 30-mile radius of the majority of the 34 prisons in California. PEP recruits university student and faculty volunteers to teach in correctional facilities in their regions. The goal of PEP is to create a "Prison-to-School Pipeline" and provide in-custody students with the cognitive tools necessary to function as productive citizens. Our multi-layered approach enhances human development, reduces recidivism, saves resources, and allows participants to ultimately contribute to the economic and civic life of their communities.

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From 2018-22, Dr. Tracie taught PEP's "Introduction to Shakespeare" course in eight correctional facilities in California. These courses were taught in adult men, adult women, and juvenile correctional facilities. Since some of these courses were taught in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the instructor employed various delivery platforms to teach her students, which included Zoom and correspondence.

The correspondence process involves a courier process in which there are no in-person interactions. The assignments are mailed to the students and the students return their assignments to the instructor via institutional mail. In the case of the Shakespeare course, however, the instructor created a workbook, which gave students a weekly overview of their assignments. The workbook eliminated the instructor having to send the assignments via mail to her students each week.

Although this course was taught in eight correctional facilities, this paper will focus on the dynamics of this course being taught in two of these facilities: Calipatria State Prison in Calipatria, California and Centinela State Prison in Imperial, California. Instructor Deja Thompson taught two "Introduction to Shakespeare" courses for PEP in 2022.

In 2019, PEP received a two-year *Innovative Programming* grant from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to teach "Forgiveness & Healing" courses at the Centinela State Prison. This course proposed to stimulate introspection and reflection. It would provide a holistic approach to offender re-sponsibility, restorative justice principles, and inspire the in-custody population to accept responsibility for their past actions. We taught the principles of forgiveness and healing by teaching Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at Calipatria State Prison.

In 2020, PEP received a three-year California Reentry and Enrichment (CARE) grant from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. This grant opportunity was opened to organizations that were offering insight-oriented restorative justice, transformative and healing programs in an adult correctional institution setting in California, whose programs demonstrated the approach had produced positive outcomes including but not limited to:

- Increasing Empathy and Mindfulness
- Increasing Resilience and Reducing the Impacts of Stress and Trauma
- Reducing Violence in the form of Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Anger, and Hostility
- Successfully Addressing and Treating Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Victim Impacts and Understanding Victim Impacts and Understanding

For this CARE grant, PEP proposed to teach Composition and Literature courses in a California prison. More specifically, the proposal was to teach "Introduction to Shakespeare" and "Creative Writing" courses through this initiative. The objective of these courses was to increase mindfulness and empathy among the in-custody students. These courses would focus on reducing violence in the form of physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility. As the proposal stated, "There is a need for comprehensive and holistic educational programming in CDCR correctional facilities that fundamentally address an array of criminogenic challenges facing the in-custody population. Our course will address criminogenic challenges by addressing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and victim impacts in California prisons." Below is the graphic of the conceptual framework that we proposed for this initiative.

PEP's CARE grant proposal was selected to teach the "Introduction to Shakespeare" course in the Centinela State Prison in Imperial, CA from 2020-22. We taught Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in this facility. In all, Dr. Tracie taught this course to four cohorts at this facility. Three of these courses were taught using the correspondence process and one course was taught in person. The outcomes section of this article will focus on the in-person class.

Each Shakespeare class focused on one play by Shakespeare and takes students through the following:

Course Themes
Who is Shakespeare? Do we even know?
The Historical Context of Theatre, Politics, and Society
Language: Iambic Pentameter and Playing with Language
Introduction to the Play
Who are the Characters?
What is Soliloquy?
Literary Devices: Metaphor and Personification (each student writes their own)

For the correspondence courses there was an assignment per act of the play that dealt with a specific element e.g. grief, madness, action, forgiveness. For the in-person course, the class read/performed the first scene of the play together and then went through it piece by piece exploring setting, plot, what was learned from the opening, and how language was used.

Each student was given a workbook for this course. The workbook contained all of the assignment for this course. The workbook was an efficient way for students to stay up on all of their weekly assignments.

The in-person class had a performative element. The students wrote and shared their writing through soliloquys, which dealt with a question that they posed to themselves and were trying to work out. The sharing of these always put the students in a very vulnerable situation, but once one person shared and was encouraged in their writing, the others were empowered to share their writing. The support and encouragement that the students gave to each other during the readings was inspirational.

Coupled with the Introduction, this article consists of the following sections: Literature Review, Methods, Outcomes, and Conclusion. This article summarizes the impact that the “Introduction to Shakespeare” course had on the incarcerated students in this course.

Literature Review

The Challenges of Shakespeare

This section explores various pedagogical strategies of teaching Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s plays have transcended time and geography. The timelessness and universal appeal of Shakespeare suggest that the writer was able to capture the imperfections of mankind and uniquely grapple with the fundamental challenges of human existence. However, the universal problem for the teachers of Shakespeare has been getting students engaged and excited about the work of the great dramatist. Teachers of Shakespeare have grappled with the question of how to teach the plays of the dramatist to uninterested students for two centuries. This literature review briefly examines that longstanding challenges of teaching Shakespeare to students, the transformative aspect of teaching Shakespeare through performance, and the dynamics of teaching Shakespeare in a carceral setting.

What is intriguing and paradoxical to me in this overview is that all students, with a few exceptions, seemingly dread reading Shakespeare. These students are reluctant to engage the multiple dimensions of Shakespeare’s writings while those in prison are excited to embrace every aspect of Shakespeare and are passionate about expressing how their own lives reflect the characters in the play. They are eager to share how the lessons learned from Shakespeare’s play are similar to the lessons learned in their own lives. The juxtaposition of the average college student who dreads engaging the writings of the playwright and the incarcerated person who is enthusiastic about consuming every dimension of the playwright is intriguing. It is as if Shakespeare’s most radiant and natural audience are those in prison.

As early as 1893, author Carroll Lewis Maxcy wrote about challenges of getting students enthusiastic about the writings of Shakespeare. In the article “Teaching Shakespeare,” Maxcy discusses how students are not aroused by Shakespeare because of the false methods of teaching his work. She integrates the commentary of a scholar who states that “Teaching literature in schools is for the most part in the hands of men who have been accustomed to study Roman and Greek authors for philological rather than from the literary standpoint” (Maxcy, 1893).

Maxcy is critical of her contemporaries regarding their pedagogical efforts in teaching Shakespeare. The author argues that Shakespeare’s literary contributions are bigger than just the literary dynamics of his writings. She warns teachers that in teaching the work of the great dramatist not be handicapped with the:

preconceived theory that the writings of Shakespeare are either a parade ground for marshaling battalions of complicated syntactical puzzles, brilliant metaphors, epigrams, allusions and rhetorical figures of all kinds, or a magnificent necropolis whence obsolete and antiquated words and expressions are to be dug, that their antecedents and personal history may be analyzed to the finest point of minute detail.

The point that Maxcy is making is that as an introduction to Shakespeare, focusing on the “minutiae” of his plays can be counterproductive. Her term for this is cramming the student with every dimension of the

play, which she says is “absurdly out of place in preparatory courses and even in regular college literature courses” (Maxcy, 1893).

In his article, “Teaching Shakespeare in America,” author Charles Frey discusses scholar Henry W. Simons’ 1932 study, “The Reading of Shakespeare in American Schools and Colleges” in which Simons traces the history of Shakespeare’s presence in the American school system. According to Simons’ account, Shakespeare was minimally present in schools and colleges during the first 200 years of the country’s existence. The first phase of using Shakespeare in the American classroom involved using excerpts of his plays to teach elocution and morality. The phase of reading entire Shakespeare plays did not emerge in the American school system until the latter half of the 19th Century. The first third of the 20th Century saw a shift from rhetorical and philological study toward drama-turgic and interpretative study. According to Simon, Shakespeare did not gain momentum in colleges in the mid-20th Century because College Boards stated that the plays lacked relevance for the issues *du jure* and that “Shakespeare did not appeal to the interests of the modern students” (Frey, 1984).

In 1942, author Ben Renz discusses the challenge of getting students excited about reading Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Renz quotes great German author, Johann Wolfgang van Goethe, “We are so constructed that we hate what we do not understand.” Renz follows this Goethe quote by stating, “Failure to grasp the meaning is, no doubt, the basis for that almost universal hatred expressed by pupils toward the plays of Shakespeare. And it should not be surprising that they fail to understand.” In deconstructing his students’ aversion to reading the play *Macbeth*, he states that his students have given up before the first two scenes of this fast-paced and highly dramatic play. Line after line the play is complete with sentences that the student cannot understand. Renz states, “To comment on all the unintelligible portions of *Macbeth* would be a herculean job” (Renz, 1942).

Author Brandon Shoemaker asks how teachers can use Shakespeare’s works to increase students’ understanding of and interest in the author. The author eloquently states,

For teachers seeking mere comprehension is not sufficient; we must share our passion for language with our students to inspire their own love for English as an art form. Such appreciation cannot be forced on students but it certainly can be encouraged, at least in part through effective teaching methods (Shoemaker, 2013).

Authors Bronwyn Mellor and Annette Patterson comment on how they found it increasingly difficult to teach Shakespeare’s plays such as *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* because their students, at times, interpreted the readings as racist and sexist and colluded with this interpretation or objected to it. The instructors’ primary challenge was trying to find a way to interpret the text with more subtlety but with also a greater consciousness of their own responses (Mellor and Patterson, 2000).

Teaching Shakespeare Through Performance

Author Joseph Haughey scoured the earlier editions of the English Journal, a premiere journal for publishing articles on teaching Shakespeare, and discovered that “the issues that faced Shakespeare teachers today are similar to those issues that faced Shakespeare teachers 100 years ago.” Early contributors to the English Journal complained that more Shakespeare plays were not available to students and that the teaching methods for Shakespeare’s plays left students bored and uninspired. According to Haughey, teaching Shakespeare through performance was recorded 100 years before his article was published. From 1912-1917, journal contributors argued emphatically for pedagogical dramatization of not only the work of Shakespeare but also other literary works (Haughey, 2012).

In the 1970s, there was a burgeoning scholarly interest in performance-oriented scholarship, which generated questions about how Shakespeare could be taught effectively through performance. The idea was that teaching through performance could transcend the traditional textual hermeneutics. It was the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) that spearheaded a movement by allotting funding for programs that embraced new techniques for teaching Shakespeare. In 1995-96, the NEH sponsored an institute for college teachers of Shakespeare. The theme of this new institute was “Shakespeare Examined Through Performance.” This new active learning pedagogy promised to do what two centuries of conventional Shakespeare teaching could not do, which was engage and excite students about the work of the dramatist (Isser and Nelson, 1996).

Miriam Gilbert examines the effectiveness of teaching Shakespeare through performance. Gilbert argues that using performance in the college classroom is an effective way of getting students involved in what the drama is really about. The author has her students choose their own scene and memorize that scene. The author asks the questions: Why is the use of performance in the classroom something that seems constantly new and available for discovery? Is it such an ephemeral or personal technique that it simply does not last? What makes such an approach attractive—and, contrariwise, why does it seem for some people such a waste of time? (Gilbert, 1984).

Teaching Social Justice in Shakespeare

Author Jayme M. Yeo taught Shakespeare in a prison. His pedagogical approach “reframes criminality and justice in Shakespeare, challenging simplistic or stereotypical assumptions.” Yeo discusses the emotional complexity of Shakespeare’s villains and characters’ responses to deviance with his incarcerated students and his college students who sit for the same class. One of his goals in creating the inside-out learning community was to expose this community to common understanding and misunderstanding through uncomfortable dialogue. In this context, the author explores punitive models of incarceration and the tension between advocates of retributive justice vs. advocates of restorative justice in the context of Shakespeare’s plays *Measure for Measure* and *The Merchant of Venice* (Yeo, 2019).

In Yeo’s class syllabus it states, “We aim to discover what Shakespeare says about justice by speaking with and listening to people who experience justice—and injustice—in a variety of ways. In his class experiment, the author realized that a few of his outside students were not comfortable with the personal testimonials of his inside students, which compelled him to summarize:

By foregrounding the value of this struggle for our students, we might help them realize that it is only by confronting their own preconceptions through productive disagreement---through hearing, understanding, assessing, and responding to new and challenging points of view—that they can sharpen their own rhetorical and analytical skills.

The author goes on to state that perhaps “the best response to testimonial oppression may simply be developing the intellectual habit of listening well” (Yeo, 2019).

Ramona Wray states that the performance of the Shakespeare in an incarcerated setting can be a powerful force for change. The scholar examines the impact of prisoners in Northern Ireland’s maximum-security facility performing *Macbeth* for a film production. *Macbeth* is generally regarded as Shakespeare’s most violent play. Thought to be the first feature film produced by prisoners, the film *Mickey B* (2006) ignited controversy. The United Kingdom’s press documented the negative and hostile reactions to this production. The film was overseen by the Educational Shakespeare Company (ESC), a charity with branches in Northern Ireland and the United States that works with socially marginalized groups. The goal of ESC with this production was not only to “to help [prisoners] tell their stories and transform themselves” but to also “update and translate Shakespeare for a new audience.” The filmmaking process for the incarcerated producers of this film was seen as a journey of self-development (Wray, 2011).

Scholar Philippa Kelly discusses the dynamics of teaching Shakespeare in the context of education and dramatherapy in locked facilities. Kelly addresses several questions that her colleagues might ask her regarding this endeavor: What objectives or agendas do you have in mind? Do you believe that education—and specifically the teaching of Shakespeare—empowers this select group of students? Or is the use of Shakespeare in correctional facilities a misguided form of self-interested philanthropy, imposing further constraints on a group that has already been punitively set apart from society? Kelly’s article, “Teaching Shakespeare in locked facilities,” responds to each of these provocative questions. In examining the outcomes of Shakespeare’s plays *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *King Lear* performed in the Broadmoor prison in England, Kelly summarizes the reflections of the incarcerated performers when they state “the performances enabled them to view their past actions and emotions with a developing sense of empathy.” The author concludes that Shakespeare’s plays are uniquely suitable for prisoners and that this type of exercise has deeply transformative rehabilitative value (Kelly, 2001).

One of the oldest and most longstanding Shakespeare prison programs in the U.S. is the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* program in Kentucky. This program was founded in 1992 by Curt L. Tofteland and Curtis Berg-

strand of Bellarmine University. The idea evolved from bringing the works of Shakespeare into Bergstrand's "Books Behind Bars" program, which was created in 1991. theatrical encounters with personal and social issues to incarcerated, post-incarcerated, and at-risk communities, allowing them to develop life skills that will ensure their successful integration into society." This initiative was founded on the belief that all human beings are born inherently good and that inherent goodness lives within in them irrespective of their criminal offense and that this goodness can be brought out in through by establishing a safe and creative space for it to thrive. It is through *Shakespeare Behind Bars* "Circle of Truth" that incarcerated residents are transformed from who they were to who they want to become. The program's vision states, "Participation in the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* program can effectively change our world for the better by influencing one person at a time, awakening him or her to the power and the passion of the goodness that lives within all of us" (*Shakespeare Behind Bars*, 2023).

While *Shakespeare Behind Bars* is one of the most successful Shakespeare in prison programs in the U.S., *Shakespeare UnBard* is one of the most popular and successful Shakespeare in prison programs in the United Kingdom. Rowan Mackenzie is the founder of *Shakespeare UnBard*, which is a program that works with prisoners to produce and perform Shakespeare plays. Mackenzie is the founder of Europe's first in-prison theatre company, which is jointly owned by her and the Gallowfield Players, prisoners at HMP Gartree in Leicestershire, United Kingdom. The success of the HMP Gartree project inspired Mackenzie to develop new projects and theatre companies in prisons throughout the United Kingdom including the Emergency Shakespeare company in HMP Stafford. During the height of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, working as a doctoral researcher at Shakespeare Institute, Mackenzie and fellow Institute scholar at the University of Birmingham, Dr. Laura Nicklin, expanded their program to over 20 prisons to support prisoners during the crisis. In 2020, Mackenzie was honored with the "Inspirational Educator Award for 'Teaching Shakespeare in Challenging Settings'" (University of Birmingham, 2020).

Just as Rowan Mackenzie has been a pioneer for Prison Shakespeare in the UK, University of Queensland professor, Rob Pensalfini, has been a major contributor to this movement in Australia. In 2024, Dr. Pensalfini leads Australia's only ongoing Prison Shakespeare program and is the Artistic Director of the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble. His book *Prison Shakespeare: For These Deep Shames and Great Indignities* (2016), documents the global Prison Shakespeare movement. The book provides a concise history of the evolution of this phenomenon.

Methods

This article focuses on the outcomes of two in-person "Introduction to Shakespeare" courses, which were taught at Calipatria State Prison and Centinela State Prison. These prisons are located 43 miles from each other along the U.S.-Mexico border in southeastern California. The content covered in each of these courses was the same. The courses were seven weeks in duration. There were 18 students enrolled in the in-person course at Calipatria facility and 9 students enrolled in the in-person course at the Centinela facility. The students signed up for the courses voluntarily. PEP made a flyer for the "Introduction to Shakespeare" course and the Community Resource Manager for the prison made copies of the flyer and gave it the Men's Advisory Council representatives on the specific prison yard where the course was being taught for them to advertise the course and allow for sign ups. The in-custody students signed up for the class by putting their name and prisoner identification number on the sign-up form.

From PEP's perspective, there was no specific criteria for who signed up for the classes. Internally, the prison might have only allowed residents who were on good behavior or who had taken a college course, etc. to sign up for these classes but PEP was not privy to the internal screening process if there were any. The instructor for this class sits in two 2-hour mandatory California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation training sessions annually. These sessions discuss the standard operation procedures of teaching in the California prisons. For example, the training discusses the dress code, professionalism, and the concept of over-familiarity. The instructors learn what they can and cannot bring into the prison and that all learning materials must be screen by the facility.

At the end of the course, students were given surveys to complete. This survey contained three closed-ended questions and one open-ended question:

1) Did this course increase your interest in the subject matter? ____ Yes ____ No

- 2) Did this course inspire you to further your education? _____ Yes _____ No
- 3) Will you be able to use the information that you learned in this course when you are paroled? _____ Yes _____ No
- 4) Overall, what your thoughts about this course?

Week One: Who is Shakespeare & Why Hamlet?

Homework: Read the worksheet and the first Act of *Hamlet*. What are your initial reactions? In what way may this writer and his work be relevant or irrelevant based on your own experiences?

Week Two: Character

Homework: Read Act Two. Many plans are hatched in Act Two. Choose ONE relationship (Hamlet & Ophelia; Claudius & Polonius; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) – discuss how they relate to each other, what they want and what they are willing to do to get it and how this affects those around them. Can you relate this to an experience in your own life? What plans did you make? Did they work out or fail? How did that impact those around you?

Week Three: Act Three – Inner Conflict

Homework: Read Act Two, paying special attention to the “To be or not to be” soliloquy. Write down any words that stand out to you. What do you think Hamlet is saying in this speech? Are there any elements that resonate with your own experience? Write a short soliloquy in your own words and language that reflects a question or issue that you struggle with.

Week Four: Act Four – Environment

Homework: Read Act Four. This is the act where all the plans are put in motion. Choose ONE character in this act (Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius, Hamlet) and discuss the action they take. Do you feel their actions are justified? Why or why not? Is there a time in your life when you felt justified in your actions but others around you questioned them? let?

Week Five: Act Five – Tragedy

Homework: What did you think of the ending of the play? Was there any-thing to be gained or learned from the tragedy that occurs? How do you define tragedy based on your own experiences? Can you draw any comparisons between your own life and the life of Hamlet?

Week Six: Soliloquy Revision

Homework: This is an opportunity for you to rewrite your soliloquy based on your understanding of the play and its relationship to your own experiences. Try to bring in imagery, and literary techniques to further the meaning of the piece.

Week Seven: Connections

Homework: After reading the play and engaging with the characters, how do you feel about the work of Shakespeare? Do you see any connections between your own life and the characters or situations that will stay with you? Write a page to expand on these ideas.

Students in each of the classes were given an “Introduction to Shakespeare” workbook. This workbook was an efficient way for students to stay abreast of their weekly assignments. See the cover of the workbook

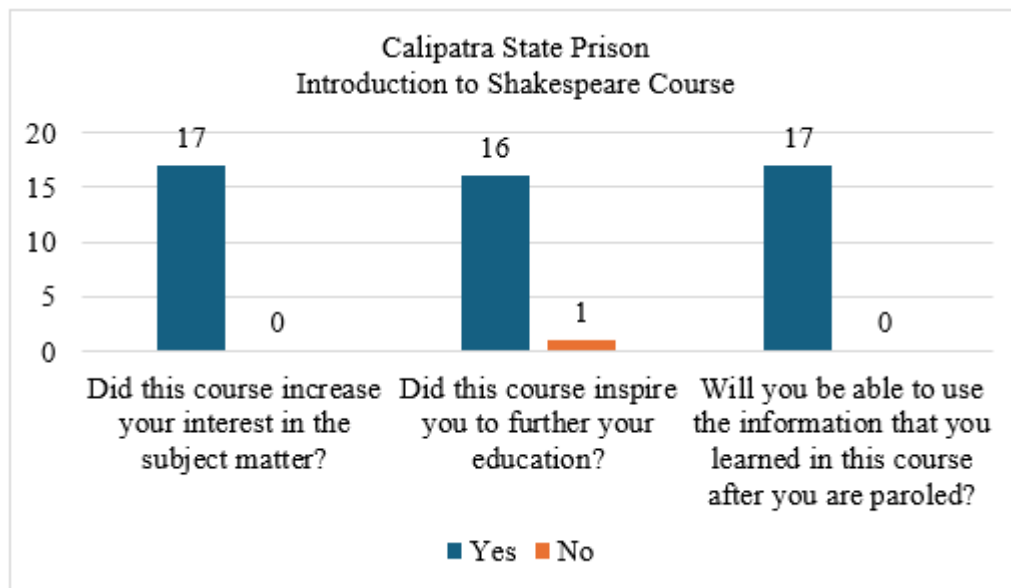
The survey for this course is the standard Prison Education Project survey, which is given to all in-custody students that take a PEP course. There is only so much that we glean from the responses to the close-ended questions but there is so much that we can take away from the open-ended question responses. Indeed, it is through the students’ comments to the open-ended question: “What are your overall comments about this class?” that we can get an understanding that this course had on them in various ways. The following section gives the reader a snapshot on the impact this course had on its students.

Outcomes

The following Prison Education Project survey data are from “Introduction to Shakespeare” courses that were taught by Dr. Rachel Tracie in Calipatria State Prison in 2019 and Centinela State Prison in 2018. At

the completion of the course, in-custody students were given post-course surveys to complete. In 2022, PEP instructor, Deja Thompson taught “Introduction to Shakespeare” in the Calipatria facility. Her reflective summary about this teaching experience is included in this section.

Table 1



Calipatria State Prison
Introduction to Shakespeare
Post-Course Comments

Overall, what are your thoughts about this course?

--This course has opened me up about Shakespeare because I knew nothing about it. I loved the experience. I love the playwright. Now, I wish I used to read Shakespeare. I truly wish this class was not over.

--In the beginning, I didn't know what to think because it was different in a good way. But shortly after, I really started to like the class and wished it did not end.

--I've always wanted to perform live theatre, so the opportunity to read and re-enact Shakespeare was the perfect chance to test my acting skills. I really like it. Thank you.

--It was interesting once I got the hang of it in its entirety.

--It was a great and positive course, but too short. It was interesting to learn that this class brings awareness and self-reflection.

--This was a very good way to expand our mind to a subject matter that we never considered. Now, I feel it is a mandate for my success to familiarize myself with the classics.

--It was too short. After learning the basics of the course, never having studied Shakespeare, it opened new perspectives to my thinking, understanding a different style of writing as well as the way I write.

--I would like to further my knowledge of Shakespeare. I love it!

--I think we need more programs like this. This program helped me so much in communication with other people. Thank you. Thanks for the sponsor that take time to help inmates.

--This course was interesting. It was something new to me. I would like to take this course again if there is a chance. Thank you for the experience.

--Even though, unfortunately this class was very short, I liked it and it was inspirational. I would apply what I have learned, God willing, when I get my freedom. For self-talk, it is a very positive coping skill when it comes to negative, risky thinking.

--I think that this course was inspiring and made us step out of our comfort zone and thrive in positive energy.

--I really enjoyed this course because it opened up a way of thinking that we cannot get in prison.

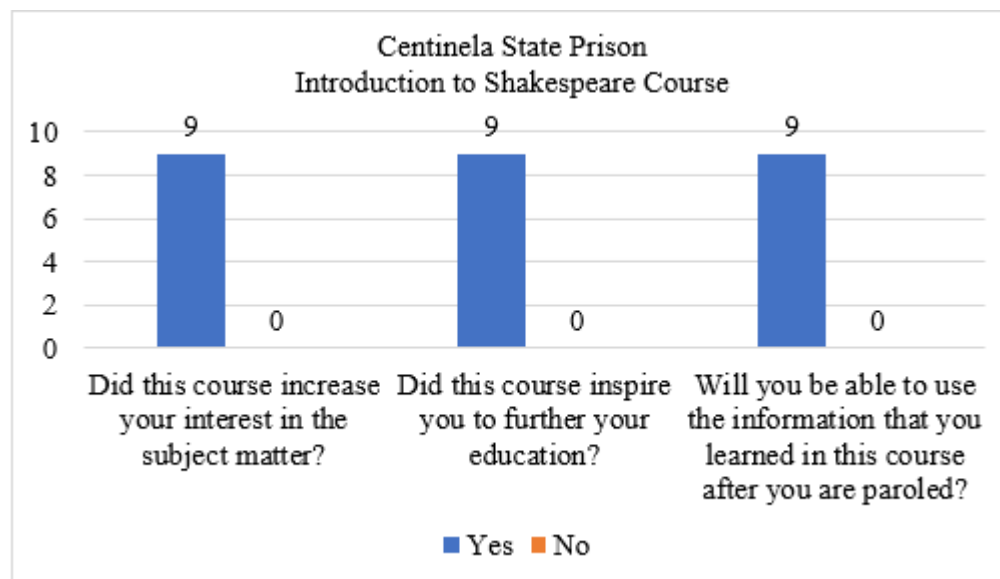
--I want to learn more about it. Longer classes.

--I think it was very positive. It helped me form positive ideas. Also, it helped me work and enjoy group sharing.

--Being a writer, this was a start to me writing a play. And, a help to me writing my books and movie scripts.

--Open communication, the sharing was great. The facilitators that taught this class were phenomenal.

Table 2



Introduction to Shakespeare Centinela State Prison Post-Course Comments
Overall, what are your thoughts about this course?
--I think it was Dope!
--It was great. I really enjoyed the feedback we received when we were doing in-cell courses. However, I truly got so much more from our in-person classes with the instant feedback and brainstorming. It was so great in person. Thank you for everything.
--It gave me a new way to look into writing.
--I think that it is important to learn language and the relationship of culture and history.
--This course was very interesting and new to me. It gave me a new insight when reading and writing.
--It was good!
--Overall, I enjoyed the class.
--I think this course is educational and it inspired me to continue writing.
--It helped open my mind and a new form of expression was learned. Thanks to our skilled and dedicated professor who challenged and inspired this class. God bless you.

Reflections of Introduction to Shakespeare Instructor, Deja Thompson Calipatria State Prison

This was my first time given the opportunity to teach inside of prison with PEP and to my surprise it was beyond what I could have imagined. I taught two different classes, autobiography and Shakespeare. Both classes held 15-20 male students that ranged from 25-50 years old.

I taught “Introduction to Autobiography Writing” alongside my husband Keshad Adeniyi. Every class we had an ice breaker and then a focus topic, helping to guide our students in finding the outline to writing their autobiography. It was inspiring and heartbreaking to hear their stories unfold. Each individual was extremely creative and imaginative paying attention to the small details and taking in every ounce of what was expected of them. The stories were beautiful. It opened my eyes to a different level of understanding when thinking about individuals who happen to be incarcerated. Society paints a picture to the world that prisons are filled with people who have done wrong or people who are unworthy to live amongst everyone else, when in reality it is the exact opposite. This prison in particular was a level four maximum security and when I expressed to my friends and family this information they grew concerned wondering if I would be safe. I was not worried but their fears did fill my mind with questions. However, upon arrival and after teaching my first class, safety did not cross my mind once. The rooms were filled with love and appreciation. They were excited and eager to learn and grow, more than the common person who lives outside of the prison walls. I felt appreciated and seen like I have never felt before.

When I was first told of the opportunity and informed that I would be teaching Shakespeare I was not sure it would be a class that many people would gravitate towards, let alone men. I was concerned with how I would keep grown men’s attention and how I would earn their interest in learning Shakespeare and acting. From my personal experience it took me some time to truly love and admire Shakespeare’s works. It became my mission in teaching the courses to give them what I wish I had learned from the start of my Shakespearean journey. To my surprise they loved the class. They showed up and they showed out. Every class was fun, filled with laughter. They played, they learned, they explored.

Acting can be intimidating and not everyone wants to participate in sharing themselves. Shakespeare is filled with the old English language, using words we do not naturally comprehend. However, every single individual participated when asked, some volunteered eager to share. I was really impressed with their choices when developing their characters. They were all so talented in their own ways. It was beautiful and rewarding. Our last class together we reviewed and reflected on our time spent, some expressed wanting to learn more, others stated that they discovered talents they did not know they possessed. I was honestly thrilled by their dedication and how inquisitive they were to understanding the text. All in all, my experience was delightful and full of pleasant surprises. I am looking forward to the classes to come.

Reflections of Introduction to Shakespeare Instructor, Dr. Rachel Tracie Calipatria State Prison and Centinela State Prison

Exploring Shakespeare alongside the incarcerated men at Centinela and Calipatria prisons was truly transformative and stretching experience. When I have taught Shakespeare in the college classroom, it is often met with groans and frustration – students can see the language as challenging and the characters as distant. In many ways I believe that the distance of Shakespeare historically and culturally is the very thing that can give his work power to be present and relatable. This became so clear to me in the classrooms at Calipatria and Centinela. The words “revenge;” “grief;” “tragedy” take on a different significance to these men who have lived these things firsthand and who are confined in physical space where often their thoughts and the world of the mind take on unique importance.

The assignment that garnered the most interest from the students was exploring the soliloquy. First, we would go through Hamlet’s first soliloquy – where he speaks his thoughts about the swift marriage of his mother to his uncle after his father’s death. Conversation centered around the situation, the language and the larger themes that emerged. Then, the students were tasked with writing their own soliloquy that engaged with something that they think about often and could use the prompt “to ____ or not to ____.”

In the correspondence course, the responses were thoughtful and explored both deep reflections on regret and loss and some were lighter fare, exploring every-day questions that have particular relevance in the prison, such as “to shower or not to shower” – a question that for me, might seem innocuous, but for the men requires a sophisticated set of decisions that can radically affect their day. In the in-person class, these solilo-

guys took on the additional element of performance adding a layer of vulnerability in exposing their thoughts in a place that encourages hiddenness and façade. By the time we get to this assignment, the men have already participated in performing the words of Shakespeare, but now, they are putting themselves forward. Inevitably, no one volunteers to share and many say they have not completed the assignment. Eventually, one brave soul stands up and speaks. The others listen attentively and after they finish, the comments without exception are encouraging and include phrases like, “I totally feel that way” or “that is so true.” This initial sharing encourages the others and even those who “didn’t write one” magically produce a soliloquy and share. What has been fascinating to see is that the class is less about Shakespeare and more about Shakespeare as a tool or way into thinking about and talking about issues with others who they often would not engage with outside of the classroom. I have learned so much from teaching Shakespeare at Centinela and Calipatria and the openness and vulnerability the men show in the classes and look forward to seeing what else they can teach me about Shakespeare in the classes to come.

Discussion

In terms of unpacking the above data, it is clear the Shakespeare courses were impactful for the in-custody students on various dimensions. My first observation is that the course did not teach itself. The fact there were two dynamic instructors teaching these courses motivated and inspired the students to embrace the work in the class. The two correctional facilities that the courses were taught in were similar. Centinela State Prison and Calipatria State Prison are in the Southeastern region of California and are 43 miles (69.2 kilometers) apart. Both facilities house all levels of prisoners in California’s four-level prison housing system. Level 4 is housing for those who committed the most serious crimes and Level 1 is for those who committed least serious crimes. Students who took these courses were housed on Level 1, 2, and 3 yards, which consisted of individuals who were sentenced for nonviolent offenses to offenses such as murder, kidnapping, and armed robbery.

The first correspondence class in the Fall of 2020 had 18 students who signed up. There was much negotiation that was required to initiate this course and the course materials. The course was set up to provide the students with the work-book and the text of *Hamlet* before the course was set to start. Then each week, the in-custody students would send their work to the Community Resource Manager’s (CRM) office and it would then be placed in an envelope, which would be picked up at the guard station. We would then pick up the materials, provide feedback and take that back to the facility and pick up any new work. Because of COVID policies and the uncertainties of the mail/delivery system into and out of the prison, workbooks were delayed, responses weren’t received and there were many challenges along the way. However, despite those challenges, we had 6 students complete this initial course. What was telling about the success of the correspondence course, was when we offered the class in-person at Centinela in the Fall of 2021, we offered the course on two yards (A & B) on yard A, 19 students signed up for the course and the six students who had completed the correspondence course, also enrolled in the in-person course and Yard B had 15 students sign up with four completing the course. It was a lovely continuation of the engagement through correspondence to then be able to discuss more fully with the participants their perspectives on Shakespeare and *Hamlet*, and explore the theatricality of Shakespeare through readings, reenactments and writing inspired by Shakespeare. This course was still hindered by the realities of COVID and lockdowns – one housing unit would be locked down and only a few of the students would be able to attend one week and another housing unit would be locked down the next week.

What became evident in these classes was a deep desire on the part of the students to expand their minds outside of the walls of the prison and engage with material that broadened their perspective and also seemed to create a sense of comradery with those in the class that they may not have even acknowledged outside of the class. This was particularly evident in the soliloquy assignment. This assignment asked the students to write a soliloquy about a question that they have that is on their mind and use Shakespeare’s soliloquy’s as inspiration. By this time in the course (week three), the students had done group analysis, acting and activities together. The responses to sharing their writing were encouraging, respectful and showed an empathy for each other’s experiences.

There was a distinct difference between conducting the correspondence and in-person courses as well as a distinct difference in the types of responses that were received. In the correspondence courses, I worked with 3-5 volunteers and each would be assigned one participant to give feedback to and start a conversation

with. With the challenges of delivery mentioned above, it was difficult to maintain that conversation – often feedback would be received after the next assignment was completed, which interrupted and frustrated both the participants and the instructors. With the in-person classes, there was an energy that came with gathering together, particularly post-COVID – an energy which was channeled into dramatic readings, lively discussions and sharing work with one another. As one participant noted: “I really enjoyed the feedback we received when we were doing in-cell courses. However, I truly got so much more from our in-person classes with the instant feedback and brainstorming. It was so great in person.” So much of prison is waiting and time is controlled by a highly structured system, which is also unpredictable and subject to the control of others. This comment summarizes the way in which this class allowed for the student to be present and engaged.

As well, there was a consistency to the timing of the class, the instructor and the participants. Many of the in-person participants, when posed with the question – “why did you sign up for this course?” say “to get out of my cell.” I was always pleased when those who cited that as their reason for the course became as invested in the class as those who came to learn about Shakespeare. The survey comments revealed this shift in perspective as the class continued, “In the beginning, I didn’t know what to think because it was different in a good way. But shortly after, I really started to like the class and wished it did not end,” and “It was interesting once I got the hang of it in its entirety.”

As some of the participants did both correspondence and in-person, I was able to see how their engagement with the material changed and broadened when they were able to explore Shakespeare as it is meant to be explored – in action, as theatre. Some of the participants had either done some acting or wanted to experience new ways of communicating – the in-person class had the students explore *Hamlet* as scholars, directors, and actors. One activity was to stage the scene where King Claudius gives his first address to the court. Many of the students were surprised to see who all is in the scene but not speaking – what are they communicating through their relationships? The way they are positioned on the stage? These questions coupled with actually stepping into the scene brought awareness to what they might be communicating and how their actions can affect an entire “scene” or group of people. A number of the participants remarked on the positive outcomes of the course, “it was interesting to learn that this class brings awareness and self-reflection,” “It helped me form positive ideas. Also, it helped me work and enjoy group sharing.”

In the Fall of 2022, I was able to return to Calipatria for an in-person Shakespeare course – 23 students signed up and 17 faithfully attended each class. Although there were occasional lockdowns, this course had the most consistent attendance and participation. The participants at Calipatria often mentioned how hungry they were for programming and that desire was palpable each time I stepped into the classroom. They were open and curious from day one and were quick to make connections between Hamlet’s desire for revenge and grappling with the possible effects of following through with it. They took the material seriously, and it was clear at the end of the course that their engagement had lasting effect, “I loved the story of Hamlet. I hope I can further my knowledge of Shakespeare,” “It helped me get a better understanding overall about different Shakespeare plays and the impact he has in the world.”

At the beginning of this class, there was a very clear division between students both physical (sitting in groups apart from one another) and through negative and underhanded comments. I always start each class with a theatre game, which has the students say their names and do a movement and sound which everyone else in the class then repeats. The first time we do this, very few want to participate or feel silly – but this type of play (something they rarely have the chance to do) does something to both level the group – everyone does it and everyone repeats each other’s names and actions and provide an opportunity for laughter and lightness. Although those divisions didn’t magically disappear by the end of the class – a couple of the groups sat next to each other and even encouraged one another in the reading of the soliloquys. One participant’s soliloquy was so personal – about the death of his wife, that he felt he couldn’t read it so asked another participant to read it for him. This moment was one that seemed to draw the group together in a shared sense of loss and the release of being able to voice it through writing and sharing, as one student wrote, “I learned to open up. And be honest with myself. To see empathy in all the situations around me. And to pursue more educational goals. The power of Shakespeare, and I would say any good theatre, is to “put a mirror up to nature” and show us ourselves, as one student wrote: “This play showed me that life is heavy for us all. But it’s how we see it that determines our outcome.”

This was seen so clearly in one of the comments from this course: This course was a portal into a dif-

ferent ME... Shakespeare tapped a part of my soul I didn't know existed. *Hamlet* was such a great experience and left a thirst for more Shakespeare. It certainly changed my LIFE and for sure made me a better individual. I am a Shakespearean now and IDGAF who knows it! SHAKESPEARE, SHAKESPEARE, SHAKESPEARE!

Conclusion

Many of the in-custody students in these courses attended public schools in cities throughout California. Many urban schools that are predominantly populated by African American and Latino students do not offer Shakespeare courses. Consequently, many of the minority prisoners were introduced to Shakespeare for the first time. The following response in particular captures the impact of this unique experience for the in-custody students.

"I think that this course was inspiring and made us step out of our comfort zone and thrive in positive energy."

In the context of the literature review and the global Prison Shakespeare movement, the common denominator regarding the impact of Shakespeare pedagogy and performance in prisons is succinctly summarized in the quote above.

The students were inspired by this experience and it compelled them to step out of their comfort. Stepping out of their comfort zone is perhaps the most intriguing phenomenon to deconstruct. What is their comfort zone? Their comfort zone consists of a unique bravado and machismo that is manifested in violence and never showing weakness or vulnerabilities. Many of the students in these courses were former gang members. Their entire lives have revolved around being the ultimate tough guys. Because of the complexities of Shakespeare's writings everyone that reads or performs Shakespeare has to become vulnerable in order to learn and to fully embrace the content. Indeed, we learn the most when we are the most vulnerable and this is reflected in the transformative impact that these courses had on the prisoners. In the quote above, the student uses the words "thrive in positive energy," which suggests the Shakespeare course motivated him because of its positivity. And, even though they were in prison while taking this course, the Shakespeare experience seems to be liberating for them all. The CDCR grants that we received to teach the Shakespeare course focused on the two-year Innovative Programming grant that PEP received from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to teach "Forgiveness & Healing" courses at the Centinela State Prison. This course proposed to stimulate introspection and reflection and increase empathy and mindfulness. The course helped with communicating with other people, it provided a coping skill in mitigating negative and risky thinking and it increased self-awareness and self-reflection. The comments above demonstrate that the course stimulated introspection and reflection and increased empathy and mindfulness.

The most intriguing aspect of the impact of Shakespeare in general, and the global Prison Shakespeare movement in particular, is the power of Shakespeare's plays to transcend time, geography, and demographics. For those in prison, his plays have had a universal way of compelling introspection and inspiring individuals to be a better version of themselves. It is this type of enlightenment that ultimately benefits our society as these individuals are discharged back into their communities with new and refreshing perspectives regarding their lived experience.

As the founder/director of the Prison Education Project, I have found it extremely rewarding to coordinate a curriculum for the in-custody population that inspires, empowers, and transforms this population. The fact is that many of these individuals invisibly meandered through our public school system. Their teachers rarely saw or invested in their potential. They rarely stimulated or fed their intellectual curiosity. In the prisons, the students identify so deeply with the characters and content of Shakespeare's tragedies because they fundamentally see themselves in these characters and their own stories in the content. The Shakespearean tragedy is characterized by a tragic flaw or by committing a grave error, which leads to their downfall. As one prisoner who is serving a life sentence California stated, "It can take you 50 seconds to get into something and 50 years to get out of it." The concept of being free one day and in prison the next day is Shakespearean.

The outcomes of teaching these "Introduction to Shakespeare" courses suggest that the in-custody students deeply connected with Shakespeare's writings. The courses challenged the students in unique ways and compelled them to be vulnerable. Their vulnerability made the students humble and their humility allowed them to grasp the full range of lessons learned from Shakespeare's writing. The students were inspired and

empowered by the characters and content in Shakespeare's plays. Reading, writing, and acting in these courses seemed to have a transformative impact on the students' communication skills, soft skills, and overall confidence.

The timelessness of Shakespeare suggest that he was able to capture the imperfections of mankind and uniquely grapple with the fundamental challenges of human existence. It is Shakespeare successful experiment with words that marks his brilliance and his legacy. Whether it is the written word or the spoken word, Shakespeare's words deeply resonate.

Words are the most powerful way in which we can transform the internal human condition. The internal human condition is the way we feel about ourselves e.g., our self-esteem and confidence. It takes money and resources to transform the external human condition. But, in the absence of money and resources, we still have the agency to educate, empower, enlighten, and inspire through the simple use of words. Shakespeare's universal appeal is in his power to transcend our differences and connect with our common humanity through his words. Whether it is the most elite boarding schools, the most prestigious universities, or the most notorious prisons, Shakespeare's words have had a transformative impact on those who have read them.

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