

All the School's a Stage: Implementing a Shakespeare Festival in School

Lesson by Althea Terenzi

Last year, during the accreditation process and in the midst of major school restructuring initiatives, I was crazy enough to attempt to organize my school's first Shakespeare Festival, which took place the week of the bard's birthday. I had been feeling for years an overwhelming focus in school on science, math, and technology—and on literacy, but mostly as it served these other disciplines. It seemed to me that literature, with the arts, had become irrelevant, extraneous to high school education. I think Shakespeare Festival was my soft cry—no, a desperate plea—to bring attention back to these. Our school has science fairs, math tournaments, but how will these show students how to be human, how to love and grieve and play and grow? Can science show us how to empathize? Are feelings best communicated through numbers? We need literature for that. We need Shakespeare.

Despite (or maybe because of) the stress staff and students were under that year of the accreditation, the festival was a hit. This year, with a newly founded Shakespeare Club behind me, our festival is going to include all our former successes, and bring in some great additional events. I didn't keep a written account of last year's festival, and our second annual ShakesFest is yet to happen, but what follows is a past-future journal both of how our first run went and how we expect this year's to be. I hope it will be a helpful guide for anyone else seeking to show that the arts are far from stale, but are alive, exciting, and important.

Monday: ShakesFest Kickoff

- 7 AM I enter the school under a hand-drawn banner, welcoming me hither to Shakespeare Festival. Those kids in the Art Club are the best! April must be a slow month for them, because they were more than willing to design flyers, too, to publicize the week's events.
- 8 AM I watch students and teachers notice the signs with Shakespeare quotes that we strategically plastered everywhere over the weekend. I got this idea [here](#). On the inside door of the faculty lounge is "Once more unto the breach, dear friends," over the principal's office is "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." "He draweth out the thread of his verbosity finer than the staple of his argument" hangs above a certain history teacher's room. It's beginning to dawn on everyone that the quotes are not placed randomly, that they say something about their whereabouts. It's a great prank.
- 8:15 A sonnet is read during the morning announcements. Forsooth, every student will have a good dose of Shakespeare by the end of the week!
- 10:30 Shakespeare can be applied to any subject! In a biology class right now, for example, a student works on her Warm Up: *Which organs would Macbeth's sword have gone through when he "unseam'd" Macdonwald "from the nave to the chaps"?* The student is puzzled, but works at the problem anyway. By the end of the week she'll have encountered many such activators in many of her classes. That's because I compiled about a dozen Shakespeare-related activators for each discipline with input from colleagues and put them in user-friendly documents. I tried to hand-deliver as many as possible so I could talk up the festival and get more teachers on board.

- 11 AM Shakespeare & Co. are performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the auditorium for about 400 students. For many students, this is their first live play. The performance was made possible with two grants. One came from the [NEA](#), the other came from our [Local Cultural Council](#) here in Massachusetts. I applied for these at the start of the school year.
- 1 PM Acting workshops begin! Like many touring companies, Shakespeare & Co. offers student workshops to accompany their performance. Students are “milling and seething” and doing other common drama exercises. I don’t think they realize they’re memorizing lines at the same time. They’re too busy having fun. It’s great to see kids play like kids!

Tuesday: Day 2 of Shakesfest

- 7 AM Shakespeare Club has been working overtime. “Happy Birthday, Shakespeare” and some of his most well-known quotations are scrawled in chalk on the sidewalks outside school and read by everyone as they travel from the parking lot to the main entrances. I took this idea from this [New York Times blog](#), which also has other cool ideas for celebrating National Poetry Month.
- 8 AM Passed by the poster contest entries in the front lobby. This year we were funded through [DonorsChoose.org](#) to run a unique anti-bullying campaign. I call it Shakespeare’s Bullies. Contestants had to use the bard’s words or characters in a poster that sends an anti-bullying message. Entries include an elaborate depiction of Maria’s prank on Malvolio, and an obligatory “To Bully, or Not To Bully” poster. We will choose a different theme each year.
- 9 AM I bring my ELA class down to the library to visit the art exhibit there. Current and former students have loaned their Shakespeare-inspired artwork for display. One alum, Jennifer Sao, has more than six pieces. Her manga-style drawings really pull the students in. We’ve been studying ekphrastic poetry, so my students will choose a piece of art to observe and write their own poem about.
- 10 AM Hit & Run Shakespeare is in full swing. Part flashmob, part guerilla theater, Hit & Run is small student acting troupes running into unsuspecting classrooms, (well, the teachers signed up for this, so they were in on it), performing one-minute scenes, and running back out before the class knows what’s going on. Right now, for example, Juliet is staring out a window and asking, “Wherefore art thou Romeo?” while her love is crouching behind the teacher’s desk, hearing everything. The faces of the students at their desks say it all: *Who are these two, and why are they talking funny? Wait, I’ve heard this speech before...*
- Noon Mustaches are so trendy right now. Students are lined up in the cafeteria for free Shakespeare Mustaches because today is Will’s birthday, after all. My student volunteers use face paint to make curlicues under hundreds of noses in a matter of two hours. For the rest of the day, everyone will try their best to take one another seriously. In fact, this was such a successful event, next year we will accept donations for a [The](#)

[African Library Project](#). I learned about this non-profit on a [list](#) of charities devoted to literacy.

- 1 PM In a math classroom somewhere, a student is working on his Warm Up: *The Shakespeare family spent 13 pounds on shoes in 1614. This was 2 less than twice what they spent on shoes in 1612. How much did they spend in 1612?* This is really just a word problem I found in an algebra book and modified for some Shakespearean flair.
- 3 PM Lured in by the extra credit offered by their teachers, students attend one of many after-school movie screenings that are happening this week. Teachers have kindly volunteered to host. Today the PBS Masterpiece *Macbeth* with Patrick Stewart is playing in Ms. Rice's room, and *She's the Man* is being screened in Mr. Hannah's room. Students will get tickets on their way out that they will give to their teachers in order to receive credit.

Wednesday: Day 3 of ShakesFest

- 8 AM Students vote on their favorite Shakespeare's Bullies poster during advisory period, where their teacher reviews the posters on a PowerPoint I emailed. My inbox begins blowing up with each class's picks. Next year I will designate one of my Shakespeare Club students to receive these emails and keep tally.
- 9 AM Ophelia just sauntered into a Psychology class. She's going up and down the aisles of desks, picking invisible flowers from her basket and placing them into the hands of dumbfounded students. The class is silent as she hums a strange tune to herself.
- 10 AM A Photography class is creating [tableau vivant](#) of scenes from Shakespeare.
- 11 AM On my prep period I read the school newspaper. An ambitious student writer has written a nice article about our festival—in iambic pentameter!
- Noon Shakespearean Insult Flashmob. Student actors stand up and begin hurling insults at one another, loudly. This is the nerdiest version of the movie *8 Mile* I've ever seen, and it's awesome. The actors prepared beforehand with [this handout](#) from the Folger Shakespeare Library.
- 1 PM A foreign language student is translating Hamlet's third soliloquy into Italian: *Di essere o non essere...*

Thursday: Day 4 of ShakesFest

- 8 AM Anti-Bullying Poster Contest winners are announced, after the daily sonnet reading. First place is a portrait of Lady Macbeth bringing her husband to his knees, with the slogan, "Don't be a Lady Macbeth." Everyone at RHS knows what that means; *Macbeth* is on our sophomore curriculum and is usually their favorite text. The winning poster will be copied and laminated to be hung at other schools in the district, and the artist receives an Arden *Complete Works of William Shakespeare*.

- 9 AM Performance art continues, as three winged students in t-shirts proclaiming their fairy names (Cobweb, Mustardseed, and Moth) flutter through the crowded halls between bells.
- noon So quick bright things come to confusion. Macbeth and Macduff get carried away with themselves and decide to give a sneak preview of their Hit & Run performance during lunch. I get a call from an administrator. Am I in charge of these two students? Could I please make sure they know impromptu sword fights, even those of the plastic variety, are not allowed in the cafeteria? And, by the way, did I get permission to disrupt classrooms all week with these performances? Woe, alas!
- 2 PM A professor of Shakespeare from a local university gives a talk in the Learning Commons to a few enraptured English classes. Next year we may have a filmmaker or actor visit for a talk. A Skype session with any literary professional would be great, too. For this I turn to social networking, asking friends and colleagues to get me in touch with people who are willing to help us out. Our students really enjoy the change of pace—even if it’s a lecture!

Friday: Final day of ShakesFest

- 9 AM National Poem in Your Pocket Day just happens to coincide with our festival. Students and staff trade poems like coveted baseball cards throughout the day.
- 10 AM Hermia and Helena run shouting at each other into an art classroom, threatening to gouge one another’s eyes. The fight is so realistic, a neighboring teacher hears the commotion through the wall and comes running to break up a fight.
- 11 AM On the TV screens in our front lobby and Learning Commons, we show students’ media productions of Shakespeare. Mr. Depres’ student documentaries, Ms. Dakin’s film trailer project, and many others are on display for the public, as they have been all week.
- Noon The RHS Dance Crew breaks into an Elizabethan volta (hip-hop style) in the middle of the lunchroom. It’s another flashmob. Wait—did I get permission to do that, too? My phone rings again... woe.
- 1 PM Another fairy fly-by.
- 2 PM Polonius plops himself down on a teacher’s desk and lectures a senior class. Something about borrowing and lending, and how to dress. Oh, and “To thine own self be true.” He gets so many eye rolls, it couldn’t have gone more perfectly; his audience has unwittingly become a bunch of Laertes and Ophelias.
- 2:30 Puck’s final speech is read over the intercom to commemorate the end of our festival: “If we shadows have offended, Think but this and all is mended, That you have but slumbered here, While these visions did appear. And this weak and idle theme, No more yielding but a dream...” All involved are exhausted, but triumphant.

Exeunt student body under another sign: "Parting is such sweet sorrow."