Teaching Shakespeare

Introduction

This file serves two purposes: it begins the part of the Shakespeare Project devoted to the teaching of Shakespeare, including sample questions for students wishing to interview current teachers about their methods, research sources for future teachers, and actual student interviews with teachers—which gives future teachers approaches to the plays that are based on use in real classrooms. Secondly, the interviews in this file serve as a database for those wishing to write researched essays on the art of teaching Shakespeare. I intend to add new interviews as they become available (and I encourage both teachers and students to submit interviews or statements of method, experiences, or information on the teaching of Shakespeare; annually, I intend to add to the file those that present new or interesting sidelights to the practice). DC

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Teaching Shakespeare: sample questions

Students doing research on teaching Shakespeare should rely not only on the following texts, but on interviews with former high school teachers and other veteran Shakespeare teachers. Interviews should feature, among other questions you devise, the following: 1. Which plays work best for the age group you teach? Why? 2. What "works" and how do you get them involved with the plays? Do you approach the plays via characters, issues connected to the students' lives, acting scenes, or some other angle? 3. What doesn't "work"—and why? What pitfalls do you foresee for young teachers approaching teaching a play for the first time?

Some Research Sources

Note: See [http://www.folger.edu/education/teaching.htm](http://www.folger.edu/education/teaching.htm) This "Teaching Shakespeare" site is presented by the Folger Library, and contains pages or links to Lesson Plans, Lesson Plan Archives, Teacher's Lounge, Festivals and Workshops, Favorite Links, Shakespeare etc., the Folger Library, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Folger Bookstore also sells a three volume series, Shakespeare Set Free (ed. Peggy O'Brien), which features "essays on recent scholarship, a step-by-step description of just how to help students approach a piece of text actively, and daily curriculum plans" for the plays covered [volume I: Romeo and Juliet and Macbeth; volume II: I Henry IV and Hamlet; volume III: Twelfth Night and Othello]. Other texts useful for teachers are also to be found there.


1. What are the biggest problems students have when learning Shakespeare?

First is the question of why they're there: is this a class in acting or an English class involving interpretation? If acting (with the idea of putting on a show), you'll have to audition parts and go through blocking, character interpretation, and practice; if it's an English class, you'll need to have clearly established writing assignments related to the play (and be aware of what resources your school's library has—and what it lacks).

For high schoolers and freshmen, a character study (tracking the trajectory of a single character and writing about what's significant in that trajectory) is a good basic assignment. You may have to spend time teaching them the basics of writing, documentation, etc., as well—make sure you leave time for that practice and, if possible, reinforce this lesson just before a due date. Also, you can't ask a student to write about something using secondary sources if the library doesn't have a source to help him/her explore that subject.

In class—if they're high schoolers, I'd stay away from—or simplify—more complicated interpretations (such as filling in historical and cultural background to understand how the part resonates with then-current issues), and focus primarily on the text itself—unless you happen to have some precocious students who demand more than in-class interpretation of text.

The second problem is assessing "who your students are" and where their interests lie. Younger students are going to be attracted to those plays that deal with issues pertinent to the young; older, more experienced students may want something entirely different. Related to this is the question of why they're taking the course: if the play is a unit in a 10th grade class, you should expect that for most this will be their first experience of the plays, and they may have to be "walked through" a play to "get it," yet you may find that in an elective class (such as drama or, in some high schools or colleges, a Shakespeare class) you may get students who have experienced several plays on stage or in earlier classes—and who are there because they want more.

Getting to know their interests and and reading levels is pretty easy: start by asking what they've read or seen on stage (and assess the percentage of those who have had those experiences); then, open the text and explore the implications of the opening scenes, asking them to define what's happening and to assess the characters on the basis of what they see. A class which has a high interest level and good reading comprehension will jump right into the text, whereas a less-experienced and interested class may have to be led to the play gently. You have to "read" them as much as they have to read the text. The
play, of course, will usually "get them" once they figure out what the story's about (and if you as teacher are 100% committed to it), and once you have a discussion with 3-5 students actively participating, you should be able to get most of the others on board through a variety of approaches to it: exploring passages, group "acting" with book in hand, group tracking of a character, use of film or going to a show, interpreting or arguing about the issues raised by a handout, etc. Really young classes (as, for example, the group of 6th graders I may work with this summer) may need to make costumes and learn lines, acting out the scene from start to finish and "becoming" the characters.

Films: these are useful to help students "find their way," but make sure that they understand that a film is only one director's vision of what the play "does," and that there may be widely divergent interpretations. The same is true of helping books such as Cliff's or Monarch notes, or even the Boyce (Shakespeare A to Z) or Bloom (Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human) books I have trumpeted in our class.

2. What are the easiest / most difficult plays for students to learn?

Again, this depends on the kind of class you have. Plays that work well with high schoolers include A Midsummer Night's Dream, Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, and plays such as Much Ado About Nothing, Henry V, or Othello. Othello can be a bit more difficult, as it deals with issues of race—and you should have thought about race and cultural issues among your students when you approach this play. The more difficult plays tend to be earlier plays (such as Richard III) which have longer speeches and more stilted poetry; plays which have techniques we now perceive to be "corny" are also troubling—the "caskets" of The Merchant of Venice, or the "bed tricks" of Measure for Measure and All's Well are quite difficult for students to swallow, and some will see these as evidence that Shakespeare's irrelevant to modern life.

Two things to keep in mind: (a) If a play has multiple plots (as in I Henry IV), it's best to point out how those plots work, anticipating where their problems may occur. With our class, for example, I drew a "map of characters" on the board and previewed the three major plot lines and then walked the class through the sequences involving Henry IV and the nobles, while I gave the class more free rein in following Hal and Falstaff (because I knew most of the students would "hook into" the repartee between those two). Really difficult plays for young students include most of the history plays (excepting Henry V), Hamlet (though the films may somewhat mitigate that), Troilus and Cressida, King Lear, Coriolanus, and some of the romances. The Tempest is usually pretty accessible, but you'll have to help them through a couple of rough spots—especially 1.2, where Prospero's long-winded explanations (of how he and Miranda came to the island) can, without help, be pretty deadly to a young group of students. (b) It's best to give students an overview of the plot(s) and who the characters are—what to expect from them—and what kinds of problematic scenes the play may have before they attempt to read it. If a play has some really tough scenes, it's best to walk them through these scenes to help them see what's happening there and how each scene connects with the larger plot.

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3. What technique has worked best when teaching Shakespeare?

I've found there's no single technique: the main thing is to "read" your students, and what "works" is the best technique on a given day. One of the challenges of our class, for example, is to use a variety of approaches each night in order to keep everybody interested (to the extent that a 4 hour class can be interesting). Though some students dislike the group method of "acting with book in hand," I have found that this is the best way to get them physically involved with the play, breaking down the academic stuffiness that sometimes infects a classroom. You may have to point out a few key lines in speeches they read, to reinforce or establish a particularly important point of view or problem in the text. Use of films, guest speakers (especially if they're actors), and a class trip, going to a show, are all important pedagogical tools—but be careful of relying too exclusively on any one of these. Also, in my own case I've found that taking a part and reading with the students can help establish rapport—if you're willing and able to read with feeling and conviction.

4. What technique has worked least?

The standard lecture is the least preferable option. There are times when a teacher has to open with a lecture, developing key points or problems in the text, establishing the issues of a play, etc., but one should use this technique as sparingly as possible—long speeches tend to put people to sleep, as I'm sure you know. Whenever I have to employ this technique, it's generally as a "prompt" for introducing a new play—and notice that I use it at the beginning or end of a class, only employing it until the points have been made or until some students seize on an issue and give us a departure for discussion. If you're in the middle of a discussion and some point a student has raised deserves more explanation, you might resort to that explanation if you can keep it simple, clear, and if you can find a way to lead back to the discussion.

5. What kinds of activities are helpful to students who have difficulties learning the plays?

Again, this depends on the level your students are at: 6th-9th graders might benefit by planning out their own version of the play, making costumes, picking roles, and practicing. 10th graders to college freshmen need a variety of techniques and a teacher who's committed to "going the extra mile" to help them understand the play—and anything from stage performances, films, group work, and all the other techniques I've mentioned can be helpful. You have to mix it up. When it comes to students who are really having problems with the play, you may have to use a combination of Cliff's Notes, film, one-on-one help, etc. to help them "see" it. If there are several such students in a class, group work is especially useful, because you might put all of them into that one group and work directly with them while others figure it out on their own (the key thing here is to break away after some time and make sure you visit every group, so there's no perception of favoritism among the more advanced).
6. Cope on planning.

Be sure that you have the entire project planned out (what you intend to cover, what kinds of issues the play will raise, where the problem passages are and how to help the students through them, what kinds of assignments grow out of the project—and how you'll address those). Now, having said that, you'll need to follow as much as lead, and if a project takes a week or so longer than you'd originally planned—either because your students haven't been able to master the text, or because you've found other issues or complexities you didn't foresee—which does happen, believe me), be flexible enough to make those adjustments. Above all, be flexible on the basis of what your students are capable of: my mother, who was a veteran kindergarten teacher, once summed up all of teaching with a simple maxim: "some students are like babies learning to walk; put out your fingers to help them up, and encourage them with every step. Others have mastered walking and running, and are ready to fly: give them wings and wish them godspeed, giving them a little advice as they may need it."

Julie LeBlanc's Interview with Lynn A. LeBlanc on Teaching Shakespeare at John Glenn High School and at the U of Michigan

16 April, 2000

1. What is the most important thing about teaching a play like this?

I have to prioritize that. If we as teachers do nothing else, we must number one ensure that they read the material. And for us to think that they are upper level high school students and will automatically read the material we assign is ludicrous. As a teacher you have to be an imbecile to think that if students are not tested for comprehension that more than half of them will read it. As a result, it is imperative that we give them daily comprehension quizzes. This is a number one priority. I am not talking Final Jeopardy questions. I am talking your basic "did you read it" questions. It is only that that you can address such issues as symbolism, imagery, juxtaposition, conceits, theme, etc. And if as a teacher you are lucky enough that they can comprehend those issues, then you can move on to the upper level stages of learning such as synthesis, where they relate this work to others in an intelligent manner.

2. How did you introduce Richard III?

You ask them questions. "You guys like Al Pacino?" "Do you like pure evil?" Of course, there is a resounding "yes." Then I say, "You are going to love Richard III." And then I give them a brief historical background so they have some conception of the exposition, such as the War of the Roses and the families involved. Then we dive into Act I, Scene I, and I begin by studying it one scene at a time for the first act, and after
each scene I show them Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard*. And I do not accelerate until I am sure they have all the expository information under their belts. Most importantly, for this play, you must give the students a *simplified* family tree for both families involved because—of all the problems that the students have—the number one problem is who is related to whom and their allegiances. Then, after Act I, the play takes off. At that point, they are fully prepared to appreciate the demonic beauty of Richard and, to a person, the students love it.

3. **How do you approach the final, synthetic level?**

I think the ideal play to compare this to is *Macbeth*, which contains more complex villainy and also can be compared by virtue of the supernatural—and it offers the students a ready-made parallel.

4. **How might you follow this up?**

With a few things: one, impromptu essay exams—which requires them to use the text as proof. Two, an exam where they are asked to identify the speaker of the more pertinent quotes; and finally, by showing them the play in its entirety. Here I recommend the Nazi-esque version of the play, starring Ian McKellen, which the students find both pleasantly amusing and violent. It is a great tie-in.

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**Kevin Thompson's summary of an interview with Julia Reynolds on Teaching Shakespeare at Forest Hills Northern High School**

March-April, 2000

1. **What are the biggest problems that students have when learning Shakespeare?**

Julia felt that the biggest problem that learners have with Shakespeare's plays is their inability to understand a play simply by reading it. She feels that the plays were meant to be seen and not read. Julia believes that it is important for students to read and understand the basic plot of a play before viewing it on film. However, she does not feel that it is effective to view a video of it. After students have viewed the video of a play, she has them read and discuss it in more detail. Julia feels that this approach gives visual learners an equal opportunity to understand the play.

2. **In your opinion, what are the easiest / most difficult plays for students to learn?**

Julia felt that the easiest plays for students to learn were any of the comedies. In her experience, learners have responded the best to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. As far as tragedies are concerned, she feels that *Romeo and Juliet*
and *Macbeth* are the easiest for students at the secondary level to understand. Julia mentioned that high school students really have a way of relating to the love story in *Romeo and Juliet*. Additionally, in *Macbeth*, she said that students usually enjoy reading and discussing the character of Lady Macbeth.

Julia feels that the most difficult plays for students to understand are any of the histories. A few years back, she tried teaching *Richard III* in her English classes at Rogers High School. Apparently, most of the students were confused when they reached the war scene of this play. Julia said that she couldn't really pinpoint a specific reading why the high school students are not very receptive to the histories. However, she has more success with the plays by teaching certain comedies and tragedies.

3. **What technique has worked the best when teaching Shakespeare?**

Julia feels that the best technique involves reading an act with the students, discussing the act, and then viewing it on film. This approach allows students to break a play into smaller pieces so they don't feel so overwhelmed right away. Additionally, she has everyone take turns reading and acting out parts in plays such as *Romeo and Juliet*. The students also do different in-class activities which relate to the play that they are studying. For example, during the unit on *Romeo and Juliet*, each student makes a mask, which is similar to those worn by characters at the Capulet party. Julia then has a Capulet party in her classroom so students can have fun while learning about this classic play. She also feels that it is important to show students both the old and modern film versions of the plays that they are covering. From her experience, students have not scored very high on tests if they view only the traditional video version of a play.

4. **What technique has worked least when teaching Shakespeare?**

Julia said that the least effective technique has been to give a homework assignment which involves reading a play. If this approach is taken, learners become frustrated with the plays because they have questions that can't be answered when they are reading the play at home. Also, students have a tendency to read a play without truly comprehending the material. It is important to read the material in class so that each scene can be explained. Julia said that it is O.K. to have students read a play at home as long as their reading is done in addition to an in-class discussion.

5. **What kinds of activities are helpful for students who have difficulties learning the plays and characters?**

Julia tries to encourage students to rent the video of a play and watch it at home if they are having difficulty with it. Also, notes are often a useful tool for summarizing the entire play.
Kevin Thompson's summary of an interview with Pamela Sellers
on Teaching Shakespeare at Forest Hills Central High School

March-April, 2000

1. What technique works best for you when teaching Shakespeare's plays?

Much to my surprise, the approach that Dr. Sellers feels is most effective simply involves having students read the play in class. While they are reading, she interrupts students and asks them if they know what certain things mean. If they are not able to answer her questions, she helps them to understand. Dr. Sellers said that she is open to the idea of using films to help students understand the plays. However, her decision to show a film depends on the amount of time that is left after the students have read the play.

Quite often the students in Dr. Sellers' classes are offered extra credit points for renting the video of a play and writing a summary about it. She mentioned that almost all of the students are usually interested in any extra credit assignments that she gives out. Dr. Sellers feels that extra credit assignments give students an incentive to learn more about the plays which they are studying.

2. What technique has worked the least when teaching Shakespeare?

Dr. Sellers said that, especially at the high school level, the technique that works the least involves having students read the play for homework. Apparently, they either end up forgetting to bring their books home, lose their books, or do not even read the play. Dr. Sellers mentioned that students at the college level can be more responsible about reading the play for homework and coming to class prepared. However, she truly felt that, at the secondary level, assigning plays for homework is a very ineffective approach.

3. What are the easiest Shakespeare plays for students to learn?

Dr. Sellers felt very strongly about the fact that the first Shakespeare play that a high school student should be exposed to is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This is a very easy play for students to understand and helps to keep them from getting discouraged when they are first introduced to Shakespeare. Additionally, she felt that *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It* are fairly easy plays for students to understand. She is currently teaching *The Merchant of Venice* in her AP class at Forest Hills.

4. What are the most difficult plays for student to learn?

The play that Dr. Sellers felt was the most difficult for high school students to understand is *Richard III*. She recalled a time when her whole class left a live performance of this play because it was so confusing. Apparently, most students at the secondary level have a very difficult time distinguishing between the characters in this play.
5. What kinds of activities are helpful to students who have difficulties learning the plays and characters?

Dr. Sellers tries to encourage students who are struggling to do the extra credit assignments that she gives. She is currently giving students extra credit points if they attend the live performance of *The Comedy of Errors* that will be at Calvin College at the end of this month. Apparently, 70 students have purchased tickets to see this play with her.

Karen Carlson’s Interview with Mike Fountain
on Teaching Shakespeare at Marcellus Middle School

21 November, 2000

1. What are the biggest pitfalls for teachers and problems that arise for students?

The first role is to do no harm, to not alienate students from Shakespeare. At this early age, I want to excite and entertain my students with Shakespeare so that their enthusiasm will carry over into high school and college.

Failure to acknowledge the difference between modern and Elizabethan English is the first pitfall. If you just open up a play and toss the students in, they’re going to drown; if you spend ¾ of your time looking at explanatory notes, they’ll resent it. First, get the action of the play and the emotion of the play. Have them reenact little scenes with the teacher as narrator and give them index cards with famous lines; simple to explain, easier to understand.

The second pitfall is that the teacher should know the play well in order to simplify it; to break it down to essentials. Too many English teachers somehow get a license to teach without having studied a rigorous subject. Death to the “education” degree!

Don’t drown your students in poetry. Make sure they’re ready for it. Give them the juicy stuff, the meaty stuff, the gruesome and the funny stuff—Macbeth’s three witches, Titania doting on Bottom, the reluctant duel between Viola and Sir Andrew, etc. If they like it, they’ll come back for more. Your job is to overcome their resistance, which is the product of their innocence and honest ignorance. *First, do no harm!*
2. **What are the easiest/more difficult plays for students to learn? How should a teacher approach them?**

I prefer to begin with famous, melodramatic scenes. Middle school students will love the mayhem of the last scene of Hamlet, but cannot be expected to tolerate the soliloquies. Action, action, blood and thunder are what they crave! Give them “Shakespeare’s Greatest Hits”.

It also seems to work if you give them short, famous lines for memorization like “out damned spot!” or “double, double, toil and trouble. . .” **Work backwards** from these lines, explaining the context they occur in—Lady Macbeth’s guilt and sleepwalking, the witches’ prophecies, etc. Use this to start telling the story. Have students pantomime the action as you narrate.

The best source for lesson plans I have found is the Folger Library, Washington, D.C. The plays that I would choose to teach to younger groups are *Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, Midsummer Night’s Dream, Twelfth Night,* and excerpts from *Hamlet.*

3. **What technique has worked best?**

**PERFORM THE ACTION!** - The plot (ghost, murder, etc.). It is counter productive at this age to drown them in the text. Stick to famous quotes/scenes. What does work is “acting out” simplified versions of plays, plot lines, etc.; acting out brief, famous scenes with the teacher as director/narrator. This type of storytelling helps them learn a plot.

Folger Library produces the best (and cheapest) reader’s edition, with explanatory notes on the facing page. Other editions are overrated and overpriced!

4. **What technique works least?**

Giving them more than they can chew. Assume that students have very little prior knowledge, background, understanding of classical allusions, etc.

5. **What kinds of activities are helpful for students who have difficulties learning the plays?**

I sometimes start with the “7 ages “ speech, illustrated with cartoons on the board. The last four stages, soldier to oblivion, require too much background knowledge for beginning Shakespearians—skip them for now. Start with the baby-kids love to say “mewling and puking”—and the whining schoolboy. Act out the sighing lover, like an old furnace.
I sometimes start with insults from Shakespeare—a lot of fun, high interest, and it gets them to enjoy the language without drowning them in footnotes. My students are never allowed to insult one another, unless they use something from Shakespeare, such as: “thy lips rot off!” or “More of your conversation would infect my brain,” or “out dunghill!” There are several collections and even flash-card sets of Shakespeare’s insults.

My most popular beginning activity is an introduction to fencing. This is done with light dowel rods that are spray painted silver with black handles—light enough to break, heavy enough to fence with.

First, lay down your fencing safety rules. Work on footwork before they actually get a “sword.” Teach them to count 1-2-3-4 in the attack and parry position. Give them a line to say, such as, “Lay on, MacDuff, and damn'd be he who first cries, ‘hold’, enough!” or perhaps a death scene to recite when they are ‘stabbed’.

Middle school students love the activity and it serves that vital purpose of making Shakespeare fun instead of torturous. The Folger Library has a detailed “how-to” lesson plan for fencing with dowels and middle school-age children.

Paula Witherow's Interview with Tom Gazella on Teaching Shakespeare at Buchanan High School

17 November 2000

1. What background is needed to teach Shakespeare?

The most important element in a teacher's background is a love of Shakespeare and his plays. After all, if the teacher does not want to read the plays, then why should the student? If you can show the students that the plays are important to you, that enthusiasm will eventually rub off on the members of your class.

2. What are the easiest/most difficult plays for students to learn?

Most teachers would probably say that Romeo and Juliet is the easiest play to teach, because of the "star-crossed lovers" and the ages of the protagonists. However, I am not sure about that assessment. I enjoy teaching Othello a great deal, because of the nature of the characters and the themes presented in the play. The hardest plays to teach might be teaching either Hamlet or King Lear, because of the complexity of the characters and plot structure.
3. Do you approach the plays via characters, issues connected to the students' lives, acting scenes or other magic?

Probably the most important thing a teacher can do in teaching Shakespeare is to make the plays connect to the students' lives. His plays cannot live in a vacuum or be taught as museum pieces if the students are to truly love or appreciate them. My students are often amazed that a play that is 400 years old can be fresh and alive even today as it was in Elizabethan England. That is the crucial element. Probably the most important element or question is if the play is real for a student.

4. What approach works best and why?

I like using audio tapes for classroom use. For me, nothing is more dreadful than listening to students doing a bad site reading in class. That will probably kill off the enjoyment of a play quicker than anything else. Professional actors who are performing the play while the students follow along in their texts work for me. The use of movies is also a good idea.

5. How do I get the students involved in the play?

This is hard. I have always tried to show my students that the plays are important to me and that the plays are still alive and real. If I can do that, then the students generally respond. Projects that give students a variety of ways to express their understanding of the plays, through either pictures, collages, artwork or other alternative forms of assessment seem to work, as well.

6. What activities are helpful for students who have difficulty learning the plays?

I suppose the use of audio tapes would be helpful for most students.

7. What pitfalls do you foresee for teachers teaching Shakespeare for the first time?

The biggest mistake for teachers is assuming that students will enjoy or be as enthusiastic as the teacher. This is often not the case, because the foreign nature of Shakespeare's language and the exotic nature of his plays will seem unusual for students. Making the plays real is important.
Paula Witherow's Interview with Michael Bashara
on Teaching Shakespeare at Buchanan High School

17 November 2000

1. What background is needed to teach Shakespeare?

Ideally, someone teaching Shakespeare would have:
   1. Read all of Shakespeare's plays and discussed them with someone.
   2. Taken a good English History class.
   3. Seen several productions of Shakespeare plays live and at the movies.

2. Which are the easiest/most difficult plays for students to learn?

The easiest plays are Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Taming of the Shrew, and The Merchant of Venice. The hardest plays: King Lear, Richard II, and Othello.

3. Do you approach the plays via characters, issues connected to the students' lives, acting scenes or other magic?

I always try to understand characters and their motivation. This relates to student emotion and motivations. I believe all Shakespeare should be read aloud and acted out whenever possible. I believe vocabulary needs to be explained and some historical references, puns, etc. need to be explained. Unfortunately, I believe some people over-analyze Shakespeare. But to read it as words without any understanding is stupid.

4. What approach works best and why?

The thing that works best is interested and motivated mature students. The thing that works least is nonreaders. With enough time everyone can appreciate some Shakespeare. But this involves people performing, use of films, giving outlines and notes.

5. How do you get students involved in a play? What activities are helpful for students who have difficulty learning the plays?

The poorest students enjoy video representation of the plays. They can be given scenes to act. Sometimes you have one person read while someone else acts. This can be done with the death scene in Romeo and Juliet.

6. What pitfalls do you foresee for teachers teaching Shakespeare for the first time?

Not enough understanding of the play itself.
1. Which plays work best for secondary students and/or the age group you teach? Why?

I teach the Shakespeare course (EH 410) at Aquinas. It is an upper division course with mostly junior and senior English majors taking it. They seem to like best the great tragedies, especially Hamlet.

2. Which are the most difficult plays to explore and why?

The history plays are difficult, primarily because of the interplay of history and literature. The many names, the unfamiliar politics, and the fact that Shakespeare's history plays were written in the 1590's about a period some 200-110 years before Shakespeare but still reflect concerns of the later 16th century—all these things make them difficult. But I feel they are essential to an understanding of Shakespeare as a dramatist and writer, so I have students read 3-4 histories in the course.

3. What methods have you most effectively used to get students actively involved with the plays? How do you engage those students who say they "can't stand Shakespeare"?

Because I teach senior level English students, I never seem to get those who can't stand him, but I do have students who are intimidated by the writing, the archaic language, etc. One of the first things to do is to "demythologize" Shakespeare. He was a writer, and some of his writing is pretty bad (Titus Andronicus) while some of it is the best in English. But because students are often introduced to Shakespeare at too young an age by teachers who may not be able to handle it well, they get the idea that Shakespeare is "hard" or even "too hard." You have to teach them that he is readable. I use video segments. I rarely show a whole play, but I will use 15 minute segments to illustrate scenes. I also compare different productions of the same play, so that students see there is not "one right interpretation" of Shakespeare. I also treat the comedies in detail and make it fun by teaching students a dance, doing asides on Elizabethan music, and things like that.

4. Which techniques failed miserably for you?

I've never had miserable failures, but I am constantly refining techniques. Usually straight lecture, which is necessary sometimes, is not as effective as small group work.
combined with lecture. I vary my techniques. The thing that does not work is doing the same thing every week.

5. What pitfalls do you foresee for teachers teaching Shakespeare for the first time?

Depends on what level they are teaching. I think some teachers want to teach *Hamlet* or *Lear* to junior high when maybe the students are only capable of a simpler play. I think the teacher's ambitions to "teach Shakespeare" can get in the way of what students need and what is age-appropriate for the students.