

ISTGZ

Introducing Shakespeare to Gen Z

Kathleen Dass  
Quinie Ong Kooi Loo  
Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Sultan Abdul Halim,  
Sungai Petani, Kedah

### Abstract

This paper describes how a Drama in English course was conducted in a Teacher Education Institute in Malaysia. The course was offered to students of the Semester 2 Bachelor of Education (TESL) Foundation Programme who are deemed to be from the Gen Z category. One of the texts that the students had to study was a Shakespearean play. The juxtaposition of Gen Z and Shakespeare was the new challenge for the teaching team. To enhance the effectiveness and learning of Shakespeare, the teaching team had implemented the blended learning instructional approach. This made the course more learner-centred. To manage and anchor this learning process, the Learning Management System *Edmodo* was used and other online digital tools were incorporated as a part of blended learning. At the end of the course, the feedback given by the students were very encouraging. The result of the online poll on *Edmodo* showed that 74% of the students were able to explicate Shakespeare after attending the course, and 81% of the students found the course effectively organised. The lessons learnt and insights gained, were compelling enough for the teaching team to continue to collaborate and to further explore the use of blended learning in future courses.

*Keywords:* Gen Z, Shakespeare, Blended Learning, digital tools, Edmodo

## **Introducing Shakespeare to Gen Z**

This paper describes the journey and the challenges of the teaching team that was assigned to conduct a *Drama in English* course. It begins with an overview of the profile of the students and the new challenge to the teaching team. Then an overview of the course structure and the constraints and challenges that arose is discussed. This is followed by a description and discussion on how the course was conducted to meet the challenges. It then presents and discusses the students' feedback and evaluation of the course, and ends with some insights gained from the whole process.

### **PROFILE OF THE STUDENTS**

The course *Drama in English* is one of the courses in the Foundation Programme of the Bachelor of Education (TESL) in the Institute of Teacher Education (ITE), Sultan Abdul Halim Campus in Sungai Petani, Kedah, Malaysia. The students referred to in this paper were fresh school-leavers. On completion of the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*, i.e. Malaysian Certificate of Education which is the equivalent of the GCE O-Level, they enrolled for the foundation course in the Bachelor of Education (TESL). There were 27 of them and they were of ages 20 – 26. These students are deemed to be the *Gen Z* category. They can also be referred to as the *iGen* or the *Centennials*. The Center for Generational Kinetics (2016) defines this generation as “cloud natives” and their world is “iEverything (p.1). Some of the prevalent characteristics of this generation are their adeptness at web-based research, the use of technology and the importance of social media in their life. They are “global, social, visual and technological” users who not only “represent the future” but are “creating” it (Gen Z Characteristics, 2016).

The juxtaposition of Gen Z of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and William Shakespeare of the 16<sup>th</sup> century had created a new challenge for the teaching team of the course *Drama in English*. Not one of these students has ever been acquainted to or studied Shakespeare before this course. These students were second language learners of English and none of them had taken the subject *Literature in English* while in school. The only literary experience they had were the few poems, short stories and a contemporary novel which were done as part of the school English language syllabus. At best, to them, Shakespeare was a name or a writer of the English language. Unfortunately, it was a name to be feared. This was evident by the responses given by the students in Edmodo, the learning management used during the course, when they were asked to state their first thoughts about learning Shakespeare. Their apprehension was justified because they were expected to study, analyse and critique his work. Just how would they do that when they could not even understand his language?

### **COURSE STRUCTURE: THE CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES**

In the requirements of the *Drama in English* course, it is stipulated that the students study two plays in one semester, followed by the staging of the chosen Shakespeare's play and finally, sit for an end-of-semester examination. The first was the short play *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell and the second, a Shakespearean play, *King Lear*. The study and analysis of this five-act play was to be done in sixteen hours. This might seem to be a fair amount of time for the study of the play, however, for these Gen Z students, it was not. To these students, Shakespeare's Early Modern English was almost akin to a secret code for these students. They were more attuned to cloud and digital language than to Shakespeare's that was archaic to them. When students could not even understand the language, they would not be able to progress any

further in studying or analyzing the text. This constraint of language is further compounded by the rather “poetic” style employed by the playwright that alluded to imageries and figures of speech which were totally alien to the students.

The second constraint was the lack of prior knowledge of Shakespeare’s plays. Students began the course by spending four hours on the general introduction to Shakespeare’s life and historical background. Following this, was the study of the chosen text *King Lear*. In the first hour of the study of the play, the learning outcome stipulated that the students were to “critically appraise”, “analyse” and “discuss setting, themes, characters, issues and development of plot, style and language” (Teacher Education Institute, 2013). This was a very tall order. After the initial introduction to Shakespeare, the students were expected to be adept in the study of *King Lear*. It was like throwing them into the deep end. Although this method might have its strengths, it would intensify the stress level and kill the tiniest spark of interest in Shakespeare. Their interest in Shakespeare could be prematurely distinguished and worse, turned into fear and hostility.

The teaching team was aware that there were many websites that supply complete analysis and resources for the play. However, the indiscriminate use of these ready-made answers and resources would deprive the students of enriching experiences and learning of new skills would be too much a cost to pay. They would have been robbed of the experience of ‘breaking the code’ and discovering the meaning behind those lines. If students were expected to come to the first class ready to discuss the issues as stated in the course outline, the students would only read the online notes and contemporary translation. They would skip reading the original text because they would not understand it, hence defeating the purpose of the course which was to help them gain the skills and confidence so that they can understand Shakespeare.

According to Mabillard (2000, p. 1), many “students of English literature dread studying Shakespeare”, what more these students who were second language learners. Hence it was our immediate concern to alleviate and dispel the fear in them.

The research questions are:

- (i) How can we effectively help Gen Z to understand and explicate a Shakespeare’s play?
- (ii) How can this be done without making them fearful and bored, or leaving a bad impression of Shakespeare?

The use of the traditional, conventional method would be boring and create a threatening and fearful learning environment. The students’ rising affective filter (Krashen, 1982) would be another stumbling block. This was the students’ first and most likely the only one opportunity to do Shakespeare’s plays. It was essential to provide a positive experience and appreciation of Shakespeare. It was a window of opportunity. If we did not conduct this course well, our students would spurn Shakespeare forever. It should be the start of their adventure into the world of Shakespeare and not the torments of a nightmare.

## **MEETING THE CHALLENGE**

Pooling together and tapping into the different expertise and strengths of the teaching team, we decided on a new approach to this course. To be engaging and effective, the approach had to cater to these Gen Z’s distinctive characteristics. Hence, the teaching team took the challenge to implement Blended Learning in conducting the course. Gogos (2014, p. 1) states that blended learning “appeals to all learning styles, circumstances, needs and demands.”

Through the use of technology-based instructions, motivation and student-engagement is sustained, resulting in a more effective learning experience for the students (Gogos, 2014).

The course was conducted through three different phases. This first stage focused in helping students understand Shakespeare's language. The students were fully guided with lots of support and scaffolding. The lecturer modeled the reading aloud of the play, and then with the guidance of thinking aloud questions their meanings were explored and discussed. Students learnt how to rephrase and understand Shakespeare's language and style. The online contemporary English translation version of the play was also used as a learning tool. The students compared the translation to their understanding and how the actual translation was derived, and what it meant. This phase was the laying of the strong foundation for future readings of Shakespeare. It was necessary to train and equip the students with these strategies so that they could utilise them in other Shakespeare's texts independently and confidently. Besides knowing and understanding Shakespeare's language, they also learnt to make connections to the background of the text, and the images and beliefs of the people of that era. Common Shakespearean metaphor and imagery were introduced and students began to make sense of the text.

Besides laying the foundation of understanding Shakespeare, the first phase was very important in helping students to navigate, select and use the overwhelming pool of information that they obtained from online sources. It was also vital that the students did not become over-dependent on online literature notes as this would compromise the students' self-regulated learning (Woolfolk, 2010). Woolfolk cautions that "students need metacognitive and self-regulatory skills so they won't get lost in a sea of information" (p. 362). She cites a study by Azevedo, (2005), of undergraduate students who used hypermedia encyclopedia. The result of

the study revealed that the group of students who had the support of a self-regulation coach exhibited better development and learning (p.363). Hence she advocates that some form of “scaffolding is needed to support” student learning.

After much scaffolding and laying of the foundation, the students were ready for the next phase. At this stage, the lecturer was no longer playing the central role. The students were expected to utilise the skills in understanding the text with the help of online resources. Students were encouraged to use them as a means to explore the text and not as an end to learning. Deeper understanding and clarification were done in class through discussion and analysis. Questions and quizzes were given and students worked on them in groups and also individually. This stage was the bridge from the building of the foundation of skills to the independent utilisation of those skills.

In the third phase, the reading of the text is no longer done in class. Students were expected to go to class for face-to-face interaction ready for in-depth discussion of the text with their peers and tutors. They were expected to be ready to critique, analyse and discuss the elements of the play. It was in this phase too that another form of blended learning was incorporated, i.e. the Flipped Classroom. According to Panopca (2014), the flipped classroom is where students are introduced to materials before the face-to-face classroom interaction time. The time in class is then used for further discussion and problem-solving. In addition, the flipped classroom provides an avenue for students to apply and explore ideas using the knowledge that they had gathered before the class (Institute of Teaching and Learning Innovations, 2016).

To facilitate blended learning, the Learning Management System (LMS) Edmodo was used. Edmodo was the platform for the teaching team to manage and facilitate learning. It allowed communication and monitoring between the lecturers and students, paving the way for a more effective and efficient way of collaboration. Learning went beyond the boundaries of space and time yet there was complete control over the digital classroom. It also fostered a 21st century learning environment which suited the characteristics of Gen Z very well. Taking cognizance of these Gen Z's technological skills, the teaching team also incorporated various digital tools to enhance their learning and sustain their motivation through Edmodo as it supports both Google Apps for Education and Microsoft OneNote and Office (Edmodo, 2017). Other digital tools used included Kahoot, Voki and Word Search Maker. The use of these applications provided more flexibility of blended learning (Gogos, 2014). In addition, these tools helped to make the understanding of the text more comprehensible and less daunting. Through Edmodo, the teaching team was able to organise and utilise these tools in a more systematic way.

Although there were many features in Edmodo, only four features were utilised for this course. They were *the posts, the small groups, assignment tool, and polling tool*. These features helped the teaching team to facilitate and organise various contents and communications according to their purposes and functions. Announcements, communication and collaboration between the lecturers and students were done via the *posts* in Edmodo. Altogether, there were ten *small groups* which were created for this course *Drama in English*. The *small groups* created were *Let's Twit Shakespeare, Let's Watch Shakespeare, Online Tasks, Photo Gallery and Groups1-6*.

At the beginning of the course, the teaching team had uploaded videos of Shakespeare's plays of various adaptations that students could relate to, into the first small group in Edmodo,

*Let's Watch Shakespeare.* Some of the videos used original Shakespearean language while others were more contemporary and current in nature. The teaching team decided that an early viewing of Shakespeare's plays before the study of them would lower the students' affective filter, and at the same time drum up their motivation. These videos opened the way to the introduction to Shakespeare. This was followed by discussions of characters, themes, symbols and issues. All the students were eager to give their views; even the quiet ones in class participated in the activity.

Besides watching the uploaded videos, the students had the opportunity to watch Shakespeare's play life and attend a drama workshop at the Performing Arts Centre, Penang. After the theatre visit, they commented on the play in this small group. It was evident that they had gained a lot of experience and insight as they reviewed the play individually and honestly.

Another small group that was created was *Let's Twit Shakespeare.* The idea here was to create an activity which was more familiar and current to the Gen Z. In this small group, students expressed their first thoughts and feelings about learning Shakespeare. This activity was well-received by the students and they were very excited to twit to Shakespeare. *Let's Twit Shakespeare* paved the way for our students to be more confident. Students who were reluctant to respond in class felt more comfortable responding here.

As for the third small group, *Online Tasks*, students got the opportunity to participate in online activities such as quizzes, word search and crossword puzzles. As Gen Z students, these online activities appealed to them and this enhanced their engagement with the text. The *Assignment Tool* is another feature of Edmodo that was utilized in this small group where students sent in their responses on discussion of characters, themes and symbols in the play.

They also submitted the posters they created to promote the play they were going to stage here.

The fourth small group, *Photo Gallery*, was a place to store a variety of photographs taken throughout the course such as during class, workshops, theatre visits and the staging of the play, which was part of the coursework evaluation. The students staged the play *King Lear* for the English Carnival and these pictures and videos were also stored here. This small group *Photo Gallery* was linked to Google Photos, and this facilitated the retrieval of photos and videos.

Finally, Groups 1 to 6 were created to cater for the tutorial tasks that the students had to do. The group members interacted and collaborated with each other in their own small groups and the lecturers could communicate with the different groups at their own pace and time. This small group provided the place for the students to submit their tutorial tasks. It facilitated the monitoring and giving of personal feedback to individual students and groups on their tutorial work. This was especially useful when some of the students' posts needed correction, either in content, spelling or grammar. The lecturers had the opportunity to inform and help the students in a more personal and private way without causing embarrassment or shame to the students.

The next feature of Edmodo used was the polling tool in Edmodo. It provided the means for the students to pick their favourite Shakespeare movie which they had watched in the *Let's Watch Shakespeare* group. This was also another avenue for them to express their opinions and justify their choice of responses. As all polls were anonymous, it lowered the stress and apprehension for the students. It enabled them to be more open and honest. In addition, this polling tool was also used to collect students' responses and data about this course.

## STUDENTS' FEEDBACK AND EVALUATION OF THE COURSE

This data was collected through the poll in Edmodo. Six questions were posted and the students made their choices by clicking on the response *Yes*, *No* or *Unsure* as in Table 1.

*Table 1:* Students' responses on the course they have attended.

Question	Yes (%)	Maybe/ Unsure(%)	No(%)
<b>1. Was the course effectively organized?</b>	81	19	-
<b>2. Are you able to explicate Shakespeare after attending the course?</b>	74	22	4
<b>3. Would you recommend the use of Edmodo in another course?</b>	74	15	11
<b>4. Would you recommend the use of Padlet in another course?</b>	59	26	15
<b>5. Is the use of Google Apps (Docs, Slides) beneficial?</b>	63	19	19
<b>6. Can the digital applications used in the course be relevant to your own teaching practice in the future</b>	93	4	4

Based on the online poll in Edmodo, 81% of the students found that the course was effectively organized. In Phase 1 the lecturer played a very crucial and dominant role in guiding the students in acquiring the skills of understanding Shakespeare's language and style. In phase 2, using the flipped classroom mode, the students began to utilise the skills acquired in phase 1 to 'break the language code' themselves before coming to class for further questions, explanation and discussion. From this phase too, the lecturer began their roles as facilitators of learning. By

phase 3, the students came to class ready to critique and analyse the play. The LMS Edmodo was able to accommodate and facilitate the dynamics nature of this course from Phase 1 till Phase 3. It served the changing needs, purposes and activities of the course very well.

As for the question on whether they were able to explicate Shakespeare after attending the course, 74% responded yes. The students have also given positive responses on the digital tools that were used in the course. 74% would recommend the use of Edmodo in future courses while 63% agreed that the Google Apps were beneficial. A convincing 93% of the students felt that the applications used in the course would be relevant to their own teaching practice in the future.

## **INSIGHTS GAINED**

The journey in planning and conducting this course had been time consuming for the teaching team. There were also many moments of uncertainties to the many firsts that we attempted. However, these were eclipsed by the many insights and learning that we gained. Some of the significant insights are discussed here.

This was the first time that the teaching team conducted blended learning instruction and also the first time in using Edmodo as a learning management system for a whole course. It was indeed a new experience where we had to learn new skills while trying to navigate ourselves and do the best for our students. It was also our students' first time experiencing blended learning instruction. Although they are of the Gen Z category, they hardly had such experience while they were in school. They were eager and open to try out the various digital tools without any difficulties.

Through blended learning, the students gained the best of both worlds. From the evaluation given by the students, they have gained the skills to help them understand Shakespeare's play without fear or boredom. Their motivation and engagement were sustained, resulting in a more effective learning experience. Contrasting this to the traditional classroom instruction of sixteen hours of chalk and talk, we can confidently say that blended learning is an innovation to promote the learning of Shakespeare.

Incidentally, the use of the technology and digital tools also opened up a new dimension of learning experience for these students. This is especially significant for them as student teachers because this becomes part of their learning experience as learners. As Lortie noted (as cited in Borg, 2014) teachers' experiences gained while they were learners often have a lasting stronghold on them. Despite their formal teaching education training where they learnt good practices in teaching, teachers tend to fall back on their past experiences when they conducted their teaching. Blended learning together with the web tools has enriched the students' experiences and provided good models for them to begin their own professional learning.

Throughout the duration of the course, students were also periodically made aware of the rationale for the approach taken, and also constantly reminded that the tools they used could be outdated in time. They needed to keep up with current tools that would be more effective for their own students. Just as the teaching team had modelled to them, they were to constantly look into the different ways to make their teaching more effective to their future students who would be from another new generation. It is hoped that this experience can become one of their very basic principles that underpins their own professional development.

Another significant insight gained was the importance of time as a crucial element in bringing about impactful change. At every step, the teaching team spent a great deal of time planning, thinking, discussing, learning new skills, adjusting and helping each other.

The other vital element that took us through this course successfully was the support and collaboration among us. It gave us the opportunity to share and complement each other's strengths for the good of our students. Although some of us needed much help in the use of technology and the digital tools, we were constantly supported by our teammates who tirelessly guided us through. We have also improved and learned new classroom instruction skills from each other. We look forward to learning and gaining new skills, experiences and working as a team. The satisfaction and rewards speak for itself, for we have continued to collaborate in other courses after this experience.

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