

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Birmingham		
Unit of Assessment: UoA27: English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Making Shakespeare inclusive: Practice, pedagogy and productions		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2005–2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Michael Dobson Professor Ewan Fernie Dr Abigail Rokison-Woodall	Director, Shakespeare Institute Chair of Shakespeare Studies Senior Lecturer, Shakespeare Institute	2011–present 2011–present 2013–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014–July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Although Shakespeare is a national icon, for many people the author and his work remain inaccessible and elitist. In response to this perception of exclusivity, a team of scholars from University of Birmingham's (UoB) Shakespeare Institute (SI) generated more inclusionary modes of engagement, connecting Shakespeare's work with diverse communities throughout Birmingham and across the UK. Through these new modes, the team:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improved social inclusion of marginalised groups and members of the public; 2. Stimulated cultural creativity and changed the practice of both amateur and professional Shakespearean performers. 		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>The Shakespeare Institute (SI) is a world-leading research centre committed to galvanising contemporary interpretations of Shakespeare's legacy by exploring historic adaptations of the playwright's work, editing his texts and partnering with organisations that teach, perform and reimagine his repertoire for new audiences. Working both individually and in collaboration, this trio of SI scholars has produced research findings that span pedagogy, philosophy and performance practice, and which can be summarised as follows:</p> <p>Dr Rokison-Woodall's research expands the accessibility, understanding and performance of Shakespeare for young people (RO6). Analysing Shakespeare adaptations aimed at children — from <i>Lamb's Tales</i> to Manga — Rokison-Woodall evaluates the successes and limitations of these attempts, indicating how new versions can be used to introduce and teach Shakespeare in an authentic but engaging way to young people today. Rokison-Woodall has further extended and focused this research through the <i>Signing Shakespeare</i> project (2017–2020), which explores the practical approaches that enable D/deaf children to gain improved access to the world of Shakespeare (RO4).</p> <p>RF1. Through utilising specific techniques and approaches, it is possible for adaptations to preserve Shakespeare's verse whilst still reorienting the work in a way that is relatable and accessible to differing age groups, backgrounds and abilities. With D/deaf children specifically, they benefit in particular from rehearsal exercises that are grounded in visual stimuli, involve the use of the whole body in communication and which avoid cognitive overload.</p> <p>Rokison-Woodall also collaborated with Professor Dobson to produce a new series of edited Shakespeare plays aimed specifically at performers. <i>The Arden Performance Editions of Shakespeare</i> include facing-page notes that provide not just definitions of words and key textual variants, but also information about historical performance choices, pronunciations, metrical ambiguities and glosses (RO5).</p>		

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RF2. By re-editing Shakespeare's plays with active performance in mind, rather than classroom study, texts often read and taught solely as "literature" can be "retheatricalised" for the amateur and professional performance space.

Moving from the practical requirements of amateur performance to the history thereof, Dobson's research traces the evolution of non-professional Shakespeare productions over the last four centuries (RO1). He explores the way amateur performers from the nineteenth century onwards viewed Shakespeare as both 'high art' and 'virtuous', and flanked their performances with lectures and educational social gatherings. Shakespeare became, for them, a way of positively reforming civic life.

RF3. Amateur performance has been, and remains, central to our Shakespeare inheritance; this knowledge can be used by amateur groups today to legitimise their work within cultural discourses and environments.

Looking even further afield than the amateur performance space, *New Places: Shakespeare and Civic Creativity* — edited by Professor Ewan Fernie and containing chapters by both Fernie and Dobson — considers how Shakespeare has been taken out into the world beyond the theatre (RO2). Mixing critical reflection on the social value of Shakespeare with analysis of new creative work, it reveals the ways in which Shakespeare — both historically and now — contributes to contemporary civic life. This research also builds on Fernie's ongoing enquiry into the historic conjunctions between Shakespeare and notions of freedom (RO3). Here, Fernie unpacks the interdisciplinary impetus embedded in Shakespeare's language and legacy, which can, he argues, act as a stimulus to vital conversations in the public sphere. Amongst his subjects, he considers the influence of George Dawson in the nineteenth century, who championed the establishment of Birmingham's Shakespeare Memorial Library, and David Garrick, whose 1769 *Jubilee Ode to Shakespeare* was an important articulation of the association between Shakespeare and freedom, shaping the ways in which we celebrate Shakespeare today (RO3).

RF4. Given the aesthetic and historic connections between Shakespeare and freedom, the playwright's liberating potential can still be harnessed by civic culture and adapted to the interests of diverse audiences that exist outside of the dominant professional theatrical and academic community.

3. References to the research

- RO1.** Dobson, Michael, 'Shakespearean Comedy as a Way of Life: Performance and the Voluntary Sector,' in *Shakespeare in Performance*, ed. Eric C. Brown and Estelle Rivier. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, 121-136. ISBN: 9781443847827
- RO2.** Fernie, Ewan, and Edmondson, Paul (eds), *New Places: Shakespeare and Civic Creativity*. Arden, 2018. ISBN: 9781474244558
- RO3.** Fernie, Ewan, *Shakespeare for Freedom: Why the Plays Matter*. Cambridge University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9781107130852
- RO4.** Rokison-Woodall, Abigail, Irish, Tracy, and Wooten, Angie, 'Making Macbeth accessible to deaf learners,' in *British Association of Teachers of the Deaf* (September 2019). ISSN: 13360799
- RO5.** Rokison-Woodall, Abigail, ed. *Hamlet: Arden Performance Editions*. Bloomsbury, 2017. (Series co-eds: Simon Russell Beale, Michael Dobson & Abigail Rokison-Woodall). ISBN: 9781474253888
- RO6.** Rokison-Woodall, Abigail, *Shakespeare for Young People: Productions, Versions and Adaptations*. Arden, 2013. ISBN: 9781441125569

4. Details of the impact

Two primary areas of impact were achieved by generating more inclusionary modes of engagement and thereby connecting Shakespeare's work with diverse communities across Birmingham and the UK.

1) Improved social inclusion of marginalised groups and members of the public.

The initiatives below impacted on tens of thousands of individuals who would otherwise have been excluded from engaging with Shakespeare's work. Activities include both large- and small-scale interventions devised in collaboration with key organisations. These led to the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) changing its approach to improving cultural access to Shakespeare, in particular through its education department which reaches over half a million students a year (S8). As a result, marginalised groups across the country were able to experience Shakespeare through a range of different media and forms:

a) Improved access and educational provision for D/deaf students to Shakespeare.

The Royal Shakespeare Company's (RSC) education department changed its approach to include engagement with d/Deaf audiences due to Rokison-Woodall's innovative and timely project, *Signing Shakespeare* (RF1; RO4). As the RSC Deputy Artistic Director explains: 'The work being undertaken by Abigail and the project team is **pioneering new forms of understanding** about [...] the role that Shakespeare's work and BSL [British Sign Language] interpretation can play in developing this understanding in Deaf children' (S1). As a result, the RSC is now co-producing a whole range of Shakespeare for the D/deaf films, and — **for the first time — devising bespoke activities specifically geared towards D/deaf children** (RF1; S1). This work is significant as, despite there being 45,631 D/deaf children in the UK today, these children remain severely disadvantaged in the classroom, with only 41.1% of D/deaf children passing 5 GCSEs. All schoolchildren in the UK are required to study Shakespeare at Key Stage (KS)3 and KS4; however, many students in schools for the D/deaf are not taught Shakespeare at all as it is deemed too difficult for them. Again, as the Deputy Artistic Director suggests: 'it was clear that many Deaf students were not accessing [our] plays and that there are multiple barriers to them being able to do so [...] The *Signing Shakespeare* project sought to address these barriers head on' (S1).

Signing Shakespeare directly responded to these barriers by **increasing access to Shakespeare's work** for this community, whilst **informing the pedagogical practices** of teachers of the D/deaf (RF1; RO4; S2). **Access to and understanding of Shakespeare amongst D/deaf students was increased** through the development and delivery of bespoke and targeted resources to aid their engagement; these included new films of popular scenes from *Macbeth* starring D/deaf actors using British Sign Language (BSL), Sign Supported English (SSE) and Visual Shakespeare (VS), and the creation of accompanying storyboards and downloadable props. With regard to **informing pedagogical practice**, teachers testified how, previously, they 'would sometimes avoid teaching Shakespeare to pupils as we would feel that they didn't have the language capacity to cope with it' whereas now, as a result of the project, their 'fear of teaching Deaf pupils has been lessened [sic]' and they have gone on to use these exercises with other year groups too. With regard to the **impacts on the students themselves**, teachers observed how their 'confidence in the language greatly improved [...] In terms of aiding their understanding and inspiring them to act the scenes themselves, [these resources] are invaluable' (RF1; S2).

b) Improved cultural access to Shakespeare for marginalised school children and their families.

Professors Fernie and Dobson **improved the cultural access of marginalised KS2 schoolchildren** from across eight primary schools (located either in deprived inner-city wards or rural areas with a high Traveler population) **and their families**, via the *Ode to Shakespeare* project (RF4; RO3). By performing in the project, the children **increased their appreciation and knowledge of Shakespeare** and **grew in self-confidence**. Their involvement also engendered a **change in Arts provision** in their respective primary schools (S3).

As feedback attests, taking part in the *Ode to Shakespeare* performances taught the children 'to **believe in myself more**', to 'Watch more Shakespeare plays' to 'Sing more!! And be more

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brave!' (S3). This significance is further attested to by one of the participating head teachers who said the project had **'inspired' in the pupils 'a sense of value and worth'**; a uniqueness that will never be replicated'. She also said it had 'given our children an opportunity that otherwise they probably wouldn't have [...] It has opened the door to so many opportunities' (S3). The project — which was part of the celebrations to mark the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death — involved reviving Garrick's 1769 *Ode to Shakespeare* as well as commissioning a new ode by Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy; both were then performed in a series of live concerts starring the schoolchildren, all of whom had little or no previous experience of participation in the arts (RO3; S3).

In terms of impacts on the children's families, most did not know 2016 was the anniversary of Shakespeare's death until they were involved; for some parents, coming to watch their children perform was the **first ever classical music concert they had attended**; other parents even came despite speaking no English at all. In terms of the project's public reach, the concerts were attended by 1,574 members of the public and broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 to 3,100 people (S3). Over the next six months, they attracted a further 24,172 viewers on BBC iPlayer; 79,984 via the BBC Shakespeare Lives site (3.2 million views in total) as well as 69,000 via Twitter. Finally, downstream impact included one participating school committing to the launch of an inaugural school-wide Shakespeare Week; another secured funding for its vacant music teacher role, having observed the major impact of the project on their students (S3).

c) Improved public arts access and engagement with Shakespeare across Birmingham.

By **changing the Library of Birmingham's (LoB) approach** to facilitating public access to its collections, Professor Fernie **increased engagement amongst the people of Birmingham** with the city's important Shakespearean heritage and **generated new public funding for the region**.

In 2015, due to government cuts, LoB no longer had an in-house curator; instead they turned to Professor Fernie to develop the *Our Shakespeare* exhibition (April–September 2016) given his expertise regarding the LoB's Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library (BSML); the first, oldest and largest Shakespeare collection in any public library in the world (RF4; RO3). The exhibition's reach — with over 10,000 visitors from across the city — and the audience responses revealed how, by working not with a traditional curator but with an expert on the collection's historic context and impact, the BSML could in fact be presented in such a way as to **generate major civic engagement** (RF4; S4). As the LoB's Cultural Partnership Manager states: 'Professor Fernie's research [...] ensured the *Our Shakespeare* exhibition **spoke to local audiences with particular strength and relevance**' (S4). This effect on audiences is illustrated by 45% of attendees visiting LoB for the first time, with 40% of visitors claiming 'little' knowledge of Shakespeare before attending. Similarly, 49% of all visitors stated they would 'do more research after visiting', while 33% said they would now 'attend an event about Shakespeare elsewhere.' 58% of respondents reported the strong emotional impact of the exhibition, with the following positive markers cited as part of visitors' experiences: inspiration (38%), belonging (23%) and empowerment (21%). When these terms were ranked in importance, "inspiration" came out on top, with "belonging" in second, once more attesting to the civic connection the exhibition elicited between the Birmingham public and their city (S5).

Fernie subsequently assisted LoB and Birmingham City Council with a **successful £675,000 National Lottery Heritage award** (2019) for 'Everything to Everybody'; contributing to a new £1.7m three-year public engagement initiative to revive the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library. Being an Arts Council 'Designated Collection' of national significance, this **enables LoB to fulfil its statutory obligations** to utilise the BSML collection for the public benefit by bringing in Birmingham's communities to explore, interrogate and improve the collection, thereby extending the BSML's founding principle that it is actively owned by everyone (S4).

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2) Stimulated cultural creativity and changed the practice of both amateur and professional Shakespearean performers.

Professor Dobson **changed the practice** of over 3,000 amateur Shakespeare performers, **generated new productions, stimulated cultural engagement** and **shifted the approach and demographic** of the RSC (RF3; RO1; S6). These impacts came about via the *Open Stages* project, on which Dobson was Chief Advisor, which was launched in 2013 to combat the common perception that Shakespeare — and theatre in general — belongs to the elite. To date, the project has engaged close to 300 amateur theatre companies and involved over 3,000 amateur participants via workshops, networking events and mentoring schemes, 90% of whom said that *Open Stages* has **changed significantly the way they work**. Impacts include amateur actors acquiring new techniques and expertise; amateur companies which had never staged a Shakespeare play before going on to do so; and directors being inspired, as a result of the project, to devise their own series of education outreach initiatives (S6).

Dobson's work with *Open Stages* also **changed the way the RSC connects with and encourages participation from communities across the country** (RF3). In 2015, the RSC adjusted its organisational aims and strategic plan to include a specific reference to its commitment to encouraging and enabling 'the development of emerging and established theatre-makers' (S6). Then, in 2016, *Open Stages* led to a new kind of touring RSC production, which featured professional actors alongside amateur actors and local children from every city it visited. This version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was produced by the RSC Deputy Artistic Director, who stated that Dobson's 'research into the history of amateur theatre making was influential on my choices' (S2). The play involved 13 partner theatres, 14 amateur companies and 580 schoolchildren, was performed to thousands of audience members (S8) and was deemed 'a play for the nation' by the *Guardian* (23 May 2016); it also altered the demographic of the RSC's audience, drawing 'a noticeable number of new audience members who had **never before attended an RSC production**' (RF3; S6).

Elsewhere, Professor Dobson and Dr Rokison-Woodall **transformed the amateur and professional rehearsal room** by making Shakespeare's work more accessible (RF2; RO5). Where previous Shakespeare editions were laden with academic and historic notes, the *Arden Performance Editions* include glosses, scansion notes and a diverse range of performance choices, providing the type of explanations that actors — rather than scholars — want and need (RF2). These editions have now been **adopted in the amateur classroom by leading drama schools** such as LAMDA and RADA; the Director of the latter states how it has 'now become my standard go to edition for teaching and the one I recommend to students and staff' (S7). He goes on to describe how the editions 'are almost unique in my experience in understanding the kinds of notes which are useful to actors (and which are not)'; their accessibility also 'makes for a **more inclusive working and learning experience** [...] likely to lead to a **much greater sense of "ownership" by students of all backgrounds**' (S7). The editions have been adopted by a further 62 UK schools and universities, and 28 US universities, further extending their reach.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1.** Testimonial from Deputy Artistic Director, Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) (February 2020).
- S2.** Teacher feedback from Braidwood School (October 2020).
- S3.** Odes report by Academic Ideas Lab (February 2017).
- S4.** Testimonial from Cultural Partnerships Manager, Library of Birmingham (LoB) (August 2020).
- S5.** *Our Shakespeare* exhibition report by BDRC Continental (October 2016).
- S6.** *Open Stages* report (2017).
- S7.** Testimonial from Director of Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) (September 2020).
- S8.** Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) webpages.