Shakespeare

Why bother?

It is a relatively recent phenomenon that children and young people are expected to have some knowledge of Shakespeare and that his works should feature as a part of the National Curriculum – part of every child's entitlement. It was only in the late nineteenth century that compulsory schooling into people's teens became the rule and with that came a desire to foster a sense of national cohesive identity – a project that Shakespeare was designed to fulfil. By getting to know his plays, the argument went, so the nation would be sharing in a key part of its collective culture which in turn would shape national pride and a sense of belonging – whatever our backgrounds. It's a nice idea.

The question of whether or not Shakespeare should enjoy this privileged (or is it a cursed?) position in our education system continues every time the curriculum is debated or reformed. For many years Dr Rex Gibson was the editor of the 'Cambridge Shakespeare in Schools' project. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, he was the champion of a kind of 'active' Shakespeare teaching in schools designed to remind teachers and young people that they were dealing with plays and not books and that it was legitimate to play with these texts, to have fun with them and above all to speak and listen to the language as a means of a better understanding of what is going on.

At the same time Dr Gibson was a key advocate for the importance of Shakespeare in the curriculum and in UK schools. In the spring 1990 edition of Shakespeare and Schools he wrote an article entitled Why Teach Shakespeare? It is an interesting question and one for which the list of answers has probably expanded since Rex compiled his own point-by-point justification.

Activity – Debating the issue

This activity is in three parts – first come up with as many answers to the question 'Why teach Shakespeare?' as you can in 90 seconds. When you have a list, brainstorm your ideas with others to come up with a definitive list.

Now compare it to this list derived from Rex Gibson's observations. Are there any suggestions that you came up with that he did not consider? The list has been arranged in a random order – very different from that in the original article.

1. Shakespeare is relevant. Take Julius Caesar – it is about the struggle for power and the isolation (and dangers) that power can entail; it is about the difficulties for those in power to achieve a balance between their private and personal lives; it also features examinations of the ways in which mass populations can be manipulated and the way mobs can behave in monstrous ways. It is also a cracking 'thriller' – a close study of conspiracy and murder – shown almost in real time. *Does any of that seem interesting, or familiar, up-to-date or relevant?*

2. Shakespeare worked collaboratively – so should we. Rex's point has become even more relevant with the emergence of the web, social networks and the essentially collaborative opportunities opened up by sites such as Flikr and YouTube where images both still and moving can be shared and opened up to comment and criticism to audiences on a scale that were, until recently, completely unimaginable.

3. Shakespeare opens up moral debates and provides a source of models for human conduct? This is not to say that we can guess Shakespeare's politics or day-to-day attitudes from his plays. The fact that there is a lot of conflict between fathers and daughters does not mean that he fought endlessly or was defied by Susannah or Judith – his daughters. But there is plenty in his plays to suggest it is not a good idea, for example, to try to take short-cuts to power; or demand the love of one's children – making it a condition of their inheritance; or imagine that good ends justify the means of achieving those ends. These could be the lessons to be learnt respectively from Macbeth; King Lear, and by witnessing the contortions of the conspirators against Caesar.

4. Shakespeare feeds our imaginations. Shakespeare's plays are both open-ended and rich in imagery and emotion – they contain 'an invitation to infer'. For example, the descriptions of the terrible omens and ghostly prodigies that precede Caesar's murder or Cassius' descriptions of examples of Caesar's human frailties are both full of vivid 'pictures' and can provide an invaluable scaffolding upon which to build our own thought and writing.

5. Shakespeare is sometimes difficult to understand. There is nothing wrong in this argued Rex, in fact, getting to know Shakespeare is all the richer for its being a bit of a challenge.

6. Shakespeare needs to be de-mystified. Get to know Shakespeare well and it is hard then to be taken in by those that say he would have voted 'conservative' or that he was unequivocally in favour of royalty; or that he thought young people should be 'seen and not heard'. It is also important to be able to resist the idea that Shakespeare is something very solemn.

7. Shakespeare is fun. Give young people a blanket, tell them a storm is brewing – rain starting to fall, first one person takes shelter beneath the blanket, then a second – a stranger to the first, and then the third enters to find the two 'arranged' in a funny way beneath the cover – what ensues? What is the rude comic potential of this scene? In this way The Tempest is playful and obscene and slapstick all at the same time, just as it is beautiful, poetic and philosophical. Although, there is less low comedy in Julius Caesar – the exchanges between the tradesmen and the two tribunes – their representatives – in the opening scene is full of comic potential: the more powerful being cheeked by their inferiors.

8. Shakespeare opens up radical thinking. It would be hard not to wonder at some point about the relationship between rulers and the ruled when the practice of power and the struggle for power are both opened up as they are in Julius Caesar. It is a play in which there could always be a niggling idea that societies could be better run. At the end, there are plenty of indicators that the future for Rome and the Roman world is not going to be a harmonious one. Just how lacking in harmony it will be emerges in Antony and Cleopatra.

9. Shakespeare is great to learn by heart. As with all great poetry, it is a good thing to learn it by heart. Once you have a speech embedded in your memory, it is always yours. To learn Mark Antony's speech from the pulpit about Caesar is also to gain a crash course in rhetoric and so potentially make one's own powers of persuasion all the greater.

10. Shakespeare is constantly renewed. Although Welles' Julius Caesar with its modern dress was less original that he would have liked to think, it did underline the play's relevance in 1937 in a world lurching towards fascism and war. Know a Shakespeare play well, and you can gain huge insights into the times in which it gets produced – each production being in many ways a barometer of that moment. A recent Henry V for example, suddenly acquired a huge relevance because the country was involved in foreign wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

11. Shakespeare's international reputation as a playwright and poet of genius – a reputation that has grown rather than diminished over the last four centuries – means that it would be putting modern British children at a disadvantage not to know their own country's residing literary champion. He is a part of what it is to be British.

12. Shakespeare is a passport to other literature. Writers have loved Shakespeare and it is hard to appreciate aspects of their work without a knowledge of the original. At its most extreme, modern authors have come up with modern versions of Shakespearean stories and filmmakers too. There is a wonderful 1950s sci-fi called *The Forbidden Planet* which is very entertaining but even more so when you realise it is closely based on The Tempest.

13. Shakespeare allows for 'true education'. By this Rex meant that Shakespeare opens up the world rather than closes it down. One way he does this is to leave unanswered questions: Who was the mother of King Lear's three daughters and what happened to her? What happened to Lady Macbeth's child? What is the cause of the enmity between the Montagues and the Capulets in 'Romeo and Juliet'? As well as such glaring unanswered questions, the plays also have a habit of presenting both sides of an argument – leaving space for the play-goer to make up their minds about what's right and wrong.

14. Shakespeare provides a crash course in theatre. It is hard to imagine how young people or adults might understand theatre today without having a grasp of Shakespeare and how he worked his plays to suit the playhouses for which he wrote. Drama is also justified in schools because of the ways it provides young people with outlets for their emotions and creativity while helping to develop their powers of empathy. Shakespeare does all these things too.

15. Shakespeare's language: the power and energy of Shakespeare's language, it's vitality and muscularity, it's physicality and emotional immediacy helps us experience the drama of language and how powerful it can be for us.

Now get into small groups and put these 15 points – and any others that you came up with earlier – into what you think is their order of importance. When you've done that, share your list with the other groups, compare the differences and justify your choices.

(You can also use this exercise to get students to write their own summative piece about the relevance (or otherwise) of Shakespeare. If they are familiar with Julius Caesar or another particular play, then invite them to use examples from it to illustrate their views.)