



**The Scots College**  
Sydney Australia

**Faculty of Language Arts**

**ACTION RESEARCH @ Scots**  
***Doing Shakespeare Differently***

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**Dean of Language Arts**  
**15 May 2013**

**Introduction**

This Action Research Project evaluates an approach to teaching a Shakespeare play to an able Year 10 class of 24 boys. The teaching approach is designed to be “different” and to throw learners quickly into the deep end of the pool, so to speak, before they have become entirely confident in their swimming skills. Like all Units of Work, the intention is to engage students, but through this particular teaching approach to engage the boys in **thinking about a concept at the outset of the Unit**. The Unit of Work also aims to improve understanding of Shakespeare’s language, to encourage enjoyment of Shakespeare, and to develop essay-writing skills.

**Teacher:** Mr Stephen J. Stoneham

**Class:** Year 10 Honours English at The Scots College,  
Bellevue Hill, Sydney, Australia

**Date of Unit of Work:** 5 Weeks, March 11 – April 11 Weeks 7-11 in the  
second half of Term 1, 2013

**The Problem – an Anecdote**

My son is currently in Year 11 at another school and he is studying *King Lear* in Advanced English. His English teacher’s approach to “teaching” the play is the same approach as that used by my Year 10 English teacher in 1968 when he attempted to

“teach” me *Macbeth*. Both teachers assigned character parts to students so that the play could be read in class: in my son’s class in 2013 and my class in 1968 – exactly the same teaching approach! That would not be a problem if this tried and tested teaching method had proved effective then and now. Using this method, that on the surface seems valid because it actively involves the students in close scrutiny of the play script, the play is read from start to finish. But, it is read by students who not only read Shakespeare badly but may read any English text badly – and, I suspect, even the most straight forward of texts. Little wonder that neither my son in 2013 nor myself in 1968 could engage with the play.

In my 1968 Shakespeare class, sometimes, after suffering through a bad reading of a section of play script for thirty-five minutes, the final five minutes of the period was given over to a hasty teacher “translation” of what had just been stumbled through. In my son’s 2013 Shakespeare class, this hasty teacher-decoding also takes place at the end of the lesson.

My son has no idea why anyone could possibly like Shakespeare – and at his age, nor did I. My son certainly has no understanding of the way Shakespeare’s language makes concepts and ideas still relevant today, memorable and interesting.

In my own teaching of Shakespeare, I wanted to approach the play *The Taming of the Shrew* using a different teaching strategy. I would make no attempt to read the play or cover the play. And I would lead the students into the play at such a point where they might be able to make sense of the play without my telling them what it was about. I wanted to design a Unit of Work and a teaching strategy that would prompt the students’ natural intellectual curiosity and help them to become interested in the concepts and ideas that the Shakespeare play discusses.

### **The Question**

Is it possible to “teach” Shakespeare by NOT reading the play in class, and by NOT making an attempt to “cover the play”, and yet give students a deeper understanding of the play and engage them from the outset in a consideration of the key concepts presented in the play?

### **The Teaching Method or Strategy**

In brief, my strategy was as follows.

STEP 1 In the first lesson, I defined teaching as “behaviour management” and questioned this definition and its morality. In other words, I introduced Shakespeare’s play by talking about a concept that seemed relevant in the play purely through its title.

STEP 2 In this same first lesson, I read Katherina's last speech of the play where she supposedly demonstrates that she has been tamed and transformed into a dutiful wife who knows her place and acts accordingly. I read her speech, and acted it out....in a minimalistic way...by placing my hand beneath an invisible Petruchio's foot for him to tread on should he so wish. I asked the **important question** (a lesson prompt in effect): **"Do you think there is enough evidence from this speech to suggest that Katherina has been tamed?"** Some students expressed doubt, and I asked them to prove this opinion by using only the script of the play as evidence - since that was all they had. They had not *yet* read the play; but some found that even in the text of Katherina's speech, hyperbole (exaggeration) was enough to suggest her insincerity, and, in fact, even a degree of defiance.

STEP 3 I **challenged** the students to find evidence through the play to prove whether Katherina had been tamed or not. They would do so in an **essay** to be submitted in three weeks' time. I was not interested in their opinions, only in their evidence from the play and the logic of their case; AND the clarity of their essays.

STEP 4 I e-mailed the boys my teaching Program, and the most useful section of this Program directed them to key parts of the play that concentrated on Petruchio's method for taming Katherina...and of course culminating in Katherina's last speech. This was their scaffold, to use jargon from education-speak. This program was written in "essay style" and thus modelled essay writing – the structure of sentences and paragraphs, the way quotations are set out and the objective tone of the essay "voice".

STEP 5 I narrated the story of the play (story-telling in effect) – this took one lesson; and then focus went to the scene where the audience first sees Katherina with her father, sister and suitors.

STEP 6 I read the scene where Petruchio and Katherina first meet and play a verbal-sparring game, and I read the description of Petruchio's behaviour at the wedding.

STEP 7 Then, I went on an excursion for six teaching days, and was absent for a further two teaching days of professional development. The boys were left alone to write their essays – with an expectation 3-4 pages of Times New Roman 12 point font as the finished product.

The most significant part of the e-mailed Program for the students was the following extract (See the whole electronic program in the APPENDIX to this Report).

## **Extract from the Teacher’s Electronic Program E-mailed to the Boys at the Start of the Unit of Work**

*NOTE: the “Program” is designed to satisfy NSW Board of Studies accountability and yet also be used by the teacher and students in class as an important teaching and learning resource. It is written TO THE STUDENTS and not to an audience of Board of Studies Inspectors or even other teachers. This is part of a policy to ensure that a teacher’s time remains focussed on the two ingredients of great teaching: lesson preparation and feedback to the students. Thus, programming of Units of Work becomes synonymous with lesson preparation.*

Shakespeare’s plays often feature a **main plot** and a **subplot**. In this play, the main plot centres on Petruchio and Katherina; the subplot on Bianca and Lucentio. The class focus will be on the main plot – the taming of Katherina by Petruchio.

Not all the play is to be read in class nor studied. In class, particular attention is paid to the following sections:

- I.i.49-83 and I.i.188-190;
- I.ii.57-105;
- II.i.39-69;
- II.170-326;
- III.ii.;
- IV.i.55-75;
- IV.iii.;
- IV.v.;
- V.i.126-135;
- V.ii.137-180.

Note particularly the following notable quotations:

- Petruchio: She is my goods, my chattels... (III.ii.230.);
- Peter: He kills her in her own humour. (IV.i.169.);
- Petruchio: Thus have I politicly begun my reign (IV.i.176) and the falconry image in relation to taming and training;
- Tranio: Faith, he is gone unto the taming-school. (IV.ii.55.);

The important sections indicated above mark the stages of the main plot. They deal with the strategies that Petruchio uses to tame and train Katherina. Ultimately for a modern audience, the ethics of the Petruchio’s education system come into question.

The play *The Taming of the Shrew* is a Shakespearean comedy. As such, the story will be structured in such a way as to end in an “up-turn” (Aristotle’s word “anastrophe”). However, before it arrives at this up-turn, all sorts of problems, assumed and mistaken identities, errors and problems will occur. In the spirit of comedy, all errors will ultimately be forgiven and a general notion of game-playing will filter through the play. Petruchio’s wooing of Katherine will seem like an elaborate game, and Lucentio’s disguise as a tutor to win Bianca away from her elderly suitor Hortensio will also seem like a game. We are not greatly concerned for the feelings for those losers in the game. And in comedies, no matter what error is made, there is always another chance to fix the error. Shakespeare’s term for errors and mistaken identity is “misprision”. In another comedy, *Twelfth Night*, at the peak of confusion, a character utters, “misprision in the highest degree”. When you “prize” something, you “value” it. To “misprize” something means to value it in the wrong way – and thus, “misprision” is a sort of valuing of other people and things in a wrong way. In the final scene of a comedy, all **misprision** will be set right. As stated in class, comedies present a view of life as we wish it could be.

However, just as in Shakespeare’s comedy *The Merchant of Venice*, there is a troubling, dark element. In *The Merchant of Venice*, it is the actions and treatment of the Jew Shylock. In *The Taming of the Shrew* it is Petruchio’s treatment of Katherine. Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity after losing his beloved daughter, his possessions and his pride through public humiliation. Katherine is put through a **behaviour modification program** where she is forced to conform to the submissive female stereotype of Shakespeare’s day. At the end of the play, she gives a speech of wifely submission that negates all she has been before. It is as if she has been turned into another person.

### **Essay Topic given to the Boys in the first Lesson of the 5-Week Unit of Work**

#### ***Essay Portfolio Assignment***

Write an extended piece of prose (sentences and paragraphs – “essay”) that answers the following questions:

1. What is the method that Petruchio uses to tame his shrew? Outline the stages in his strategy.
2. At the end of the play when Katherine delivers her long speech about wifely submission (V.ii.137-180.), is she really tamed? Give evidence for your opinion.

NOTE: You may answer in two parts under headings OR run your answer into one, well-structured essay.

Do not just refer to the play in general but prove your ideas by discussing specific parts. See the above Program to see which specific parts of the play are easily used for specific evidence.

**How long should the essay be?** It would be impossible to do an adequate job on this in under three pages.

**How much time should you spend on this?** To do complete this assignment to a high standard, it is expected that students will spend 3-5 hours in total on it, spaced out over three weeks.

**Date Due: end of third week of Unit – Friday 29<sup>th</sup> March.**

## **RESULTS of the ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT**

### **How successful was this Unit of Work and this teaching approach?**

To gauge the success of the Unit and approach, two evaluation “instruments” were used:

1. a **survey** designed by the teacher, answered and submitted anonymously by each boy - the survey is printed below;
2. **24 student essays** held in individual student portfolios kept with the teacher - the system is known as **Continuous Portfolio Assessment** where an assessment narrative of each student’s progress is available to students, teachers and parents. The work is chronologically filed over a number of years and handed from one teacher to another as the student progresses through the school. It provides empirical evidence in terms of authentic tasks of a student’s progress or lack of it without having to translate assessable products to data.



**Faculty of Language Arts**

**ACTION RESEARCH SURVEY**

**Year 10 Honours English 2013**

**Teacher: Mr Stoneham**

The purpose of this survey is to collect information about student reactions to the teaching approach used by their teacher for the second Unit of the Honours English course: a five-week Unit of Work on Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. The Unit of Work in "teaching" the play discussed ideas relevant to the concept of behavior modification. Some educators have explained teaching as a process of behavior modification.

Please answer the questions and give a rating where required.

1. Did you find Mr Stoneham's approach to teaching the Shakespeare play different from any other teachers' approaches to Shakespeare that you have experienced?

Yes                      No                      (circle appropriate answer)

If you answered "Yes" to the above question, rate how different on a scale of 1 – 5 with 5 meaning "very different" and 1 meaning "slightly different."

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

(circle as appropriate)

2. How would you explain Mr Stoneham's approach to teaching *The Taming of the Shrew*?

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How would you explain Mr Stoneham's approach to teaching *The Taming of the Shrew* using just three words?

Word 1

Word 2

Word 3

3. Did you find Mr Stoneham’s approach to teaching helped you to understand the play?

Yes                      No

If you answered “Yes” to the above question, rate how well you feel you understood the play on a scale of 1 – 5 with 5 meaning “very well” and 1 meaning “slightly.”

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

4. Did you find the essay you wrote on the play at the end of the Unit represented an improvement in your essay writing?

Yes                      No

If you answered “Yes” to the above question, rate how much you feel your essay writing improved on a scale of 1 – 5 with 5 meaning “greatly” and 1 meaning “slightly.”

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

5. Would you like more Units in the Honours course to be taught like this?

Yes                      No

If you answered “No”, explain why not.

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## Results of Survey – Data Analysis

19 surveys were answered from the 10 Honours English class of 24 students – five students absent for various reasons (on excursions/sickness/appointments)

1. **Did you find Mr Stoneham’s approach to teaching the Shakespeare play different from any other teachers’ approaches to Shakespeare that you have experienced?**

**RESULT:** All 19 students answered “YES” to this question.

**If you answered “Yes” to the above question, rate how different on a scale of 1 – 5 with 5 meaning “very different” and 1 meaning “slightly different.”**

**RESULT:** 2 students circled “5” on the scale indicating a “very different” teaching approach.

13 students circled “4”

4 student circled “3”

2. **How would you explain Mr Stoneham’s approach to teaching *The Taming of the Shrew* using just three words?**

**RESULT:** (yellow highlighting shows recurrent descriptors used by the students): effective, interesting X 4 student answers, insightful X 4 student answers, different X 4 student answers, beneficial, brief X 2, helpful, initiative, lenses, independent X 5 student answers, unique, analytical, engaging X 2, thought-provoking X 2, open or open-ended X 5 student answers, hard, motivating, confident, fostering, eccentric, relevant, humorous, alternative, stimulative (*sic*), undefined, freedom, enthusiastic X 2, passionate X 2, exciting, unusual, challenging, engaging – this section not answered by 1 student.

**Most Used Answers (4 or more students using the word):** independent, open-ended, interesting, insightful, different

3. **Did you find Mr Stoneham’s approach to teaching helped you to understand the play?**

**RESULT:** All 19 students answered “YES” to this question.

**If you answered “Yes” to the above question, rate how well you feel you understood the play on a scale of 1 – 5 with 5 meaning “very well” and 1 meaning “slightly.”**

**RESULT:** 8 students circled “5” on the scale indicating that they understood the play “very well”.

8 students circled “4”

2 students circled “3”

1 student wrote in “3.5”

**4. Did you find the essay you wrote on the play at the end of the Unit represented an improvement in your essay writing?**

**RESULT:** 17 students answered “YES” to this question.

2 students answered “NO” to this question.

**If you answered “Yes” to the above question, rate how much you feel your essay writing improved on a scale of 1 – 5 with 5 meaning “greatly” and 1 meaning “slightly.”**

**RESULT:** 2 students circled “5” on the scale indicating that they felt their essay writing improved “greatly”.

5 students circled “4”

6 students circled “3”

4 student circled “2”

**5. Would you like more Units in the Honours course to be taught like this?**

**RESULT:** 17 students answered “YES” to this question.

1 student answered “No” to this question.

1 student answered “May be” to this question.

**The “No” student followed with the comment:** “I answered ‘No’ because it was a very sudden change for me. I liked how Mr Stoneham taught but for the first unit we did with him, I think we needed a little more aid. I think we need a bit more settling in before he leaves us more or less on our own.”

**The “Maybe” student followed with the comment:** “I feel there may be some texts in which throwing us into the deep end wouldn’t help as we wouldn’t have the knowledge to survive. A possibility could be to give us some insight into the texts in order to strengthen our independent research.”

It was interesting that at Question 2, these two students wrote the following about how they would explain Mr Stoneham’s approach:

**The “No” student** wrote “He taught us what we needed but using a different method. He taught us based on relevance to the topic not just the whole thing in one. He left it mostly to us the decipher the play’s real meaning.”

**The “Maybe” student** wrote “He forced us to take responsibility on us. Although it was difficult, I felt I had a higher understanding at the end.”

### **Teacher’s Interpretation of the Survey Results**

The vast majority of the students found the approach to Shakespeare different from the teaching approach they had previously encountered.

They found this open-ended approach helped them to become independent, thinkers, interested in the insights of Shakespeare’s play.

While the vast majority felt their essay writing had improved through completing the portfolio task given them, because they had already won a place in the Honours program through their writing skills, half of the class thought that the degree of improvement in their essay writing was marginal. The other half reported major improvement.

All but two students wanted further teaching in this mode, with two students showing an element of anxiety about this even though when they were asked to comment on the teacher’s approach, they seemed to contradict themselves by reporting benefits.

### **The Empirical Result – the 24 essays Submitted, Marked and filed in Student Portfolios**

19 of the 24 essays submitted were awarded an A based on the English Department’s marking scale.

The Descriptor for an A is as below

*100-85% Extensive knowledge, understanding and analysis of the content and can readily apply this knowledge. In addition, the student has achieved a very high level of competence in the processes and skills and can apply these to new situations.*

This ratio of A Grades for a major essay is beyond expectation and experience.

## **Appendices**

One scanned essay example is included with teacher's hand-written annotations as APPENDIX A

Others follow without correction or annotation as APPENDIX B.

The full teacher's Programmed Unit of Work with The Scots College Program Title Page appears as APPENDIX C. This was written to the students, for the students and e-mailed to hem at the beginning of the Unit of Work.