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CHAPTER ONE

Shakespeare and Open-space Learning

*As if he master'd there a double spirit/
Of teaching and of learning instantly*
(*Henry IV*, Part 1, Act V, Scene 2, lines 63–4)¹

As we have seen, OSL has its origins in the teaching of Shakespeare and the development of two parallel modes of study for the University of Warwick's English undergraduates taking the compulsory final-year module 'Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time'.² Students are invited to choose either a practical (OSL) or a non-practical method of study ('without chairs' or conventional). The 'without chairs' practical option recruits a maximum of sixteen students and takes place in two-hour sessions in open spaces – usually a theatre studio or rehearsal room, but any space is feasible provided it can be cleared of furniture and 'opened'. The conventional non-practical version is studied in small, seated groups, with a maximum of fifteen students, in traditional seminar rooms and involving discussion of the plays led by seminar tutors. Both groups are expected to attend the twice-weekly lectures delivered on this module. This chapter is unlike others in this book, in that its focus is less on a detailed description of OSL methodology and more upon an analysis of data from a survey of students taking this compulsory module. The data has been gathered over three years, and provides some strong indicators of student attitudes, pedagogical trends and, most importantly, some clues as to the efficacy of OSL. The chapter concludes with a series of challenges by a senior Shakespeare scholar to OSL methodology and our responses to those challenges.

'Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time' covers all the areas any introductory module focussed on early modern drama might be expected to cover, and is framed as follows for undergraduates in their handbook:

In this module we look at a selection of plays by Shakespeare and some of his most eminent contemporaries in the context of the theatre and culture of the time. We aim to write a 'grammar' of the Elizabethan theatre and to

explore elements of the texts and performance in a concentrated body of plays. We discuss ways in which these plays have been (and are being) produced in the modern theatre and on film. We are interested in history and politics as well as performance, poetry and genre – we aim to set Shakespeare's early career against Christopher Marlowe's, then observe his development as a writer of comedy and tragedy against selected plays by, for example, Thomas Middleton and John Webster. The module also features theatre trips and a range of practical events offered by The CAPITAL Centre; these are designed to encourage a creative and theatrically sensitive engagement with Shakespeare's texts. Students will be assessed on one 5,000-word essay (50 per cent) and one 3-hour examination (50 per cent). In Section A of the examination (worth 50 per cent) students are required to think about a passage from one of the plays as a 'theatrical text'.

As a proving ground for the ideas that formed the core of The CAPITAL Centre's project, this compulsory module was the obvious choice. It is taught in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies, but its textual material is the work of a playwright, scripts that need reading *in* performance and *as* performance; arguably, then, it would attract students who were interested in studying Shakespeare practically, and would recruit them to a programme that piloted innovative teaching. This proved to be the case, with three groups of about twelve students opting for the OSL version of the module in 2007/8, the first academic year it was offered. These numbers have increased each year: in 2008/9 the module recruited fifty-eight students, and in 2009/10 ninety-five students were studying Shakespeare in groups using either entirely or mostly OSL methods.

It should be noted that in 2009–10 students had a further choice in that, partly as a result of student feedback concerning the OSL option, it was decided to introduce a 'hybrid' version of the module. The intention was to attract students to participate in OSL by de-centring certain perceptions – particularly those concerning 'acting'. Samples of this feedback are available later in this chapter.

The OSL and the seminar versions are differentiated as follows. Students in the 'with chairs' groups work according to the traditional Humanities seminar format, with a tutor leading discussion and students contributing in conversation – or with formal and informal presentations and projects they may have been invited to bring to the sessions. In the OSL sessions (both without chairs and hybrid), students are required to participate in a range of

practical activities from theatrical warm-up exercises to mini performances of scenes. Each week's workshop is specifically tailored by the seminar tutors to the play – or plays – studied in any particular week. The following are three different exemplar sessions: 'Staging the Witches', 'Early and Late Style in Shakespeare' and 'Stage and Social Space in *The Changeling*'. A very general guide to the activities in a weekly OSL session might be as follows: a warm-up that might include voice exercises, but is much more likely to feature students in pairs exchanging lines whilst moving through the space; an introductory task in which the pairs form fours/fives and briefly develop lines of text around the theme of the session; a central exercise in which students are separated into two groups and asked to put a longer section of text on its feet (either the same or complementary sections) and then to show their work; and a period of reflection and discussion to conclude. Often these activities will be supported with the use of audio-visual materials and/or basic prompt objects. The difference between the original 'without chairs' version of the module and the hybrid version is that in the hybrid version there tends to be more time available for note-taking and reflection.

It is important to note that from the first year of OSL teaching we gave the students the option of submitting, in place of the standard 5,000-word essay, a 'creative project'. These were modelled on protocols set down by the Warwick Writing Programme for assessment of creative writing, and included the project itself and a reflective essay designed to satisfy the examiners in the areas of process, reading, bibliography and intellectual engagement. Creative projects were an option across the module, irrespective of whether students were studying conventionally or 'without chairs'. Students have produced some fascinating work, such as *Othello* re-written by Lodovico, a film treatment for *The Tempest* set on an abandoned ship, and a triptych addressing the plight of Ophelia.

Beyond this, the following information was offered to students pondering their choices of seminar OSL for Shakespeare in the academic year 2008/9:

A Philosophy of Learning – or – What We're Doing in Shakespeare Without Chairs

Taught in The CAPITAL Centre using teaching methods that explore open space and enactive learning, 'Shakespeare Without Chairs' takes an innovative approach to re-imagining the standard academic seminar. We work in a rehearsal room, in a shared space where conventional

hierarchies (teacher/student) are dismantled to be replaced with the idea, borrowed from the theatre rehearsal room, of the ensemble. We operate democratically as a group of collaborators to investigate Shakespeare's texts on our feet, in three dimensions. 'De-throning' standard academic authority – the academic in the rehearsal room is *an* authority but not *in* authority – we work through experiment, creative offer and play, taking risks by establishing intellectual, physical and creative trust. Simultaneously, we empower the learner. Making individuals responsible for particular 'knowledges' that they then own and represent across the term, we ask them to wear 'the mantle of the expert' in their area and to offer their expertise to the ensemble. Our workshops aim to tackle 'threshold concepts' and 'troublesome knowledge'. We ask: how do we, as continuous learners, embolden ourselves to cross over thresholds and encounter the troublesome, especially when such encounters inevitably mean a 'loss of previous certainties' and involve a 'reconstitution of the self'? How do we take risks as learners? And how do we make creative use of failure? (We take it as understood that failure *must* be admitted as a productive aspect of learning. Like the actor rehearsing or the writer redrafting, the student must be permitted to fail in order – as Beckett has put it – to 'fail better'.)

Practicalities

In the autumn Term 2008, we will be looking at *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Henry IV Part 1*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Love's Labours Lost*, *The Jew of Malta* (Marlowe), *The Merchant of Venice*, *Richard II*, *Edward II* (Marlowe), *Much Ado About Nothing*, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (Middleton) and *The Winter's Tale*, but we will begin in the first workshop with the opening scene of what was perhaps Shakespeare's first play, *Henry VI Part 1*.

At all times we were keen to be as frank with students as possible but also make them understand that what we were offering was not acting classes, but a serious engagement with the academic content of the module.

The results of the survey of OSL's initial impact in Shakespeare teaching is recorded below, and compares various aspects of the student experience of teaching and learning in the 'Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time' module – including attitudes to OSL and other sessions, attendance

at lectures and the teaching of Shakespeare in higher education more broadly. The first results come from autumn 2007. The purpose of this initial survey was to establish student attitudes to the teaching and learning of Shakespeare, and to make a comparison between the ways they had been taught in secondary school and the ways university teaching is conducted. In particular, we were keen to discover why students chose the practical or non-practical option. There were also more general questions aimed at discovering levels of enthusiasm for Shakespeare as a subject area, and discovering student attitudes to the compulsory nature of the course for undergraduates studying English Literature.

One hundred and eighty three out of a possible 211 students responded in the autumn term of 2007/8. Of these, 72 per cent chose the non-practical version of the module. Figure 1.1 shows the students' response to why they had chosen this version of the module. There was evidence in the language used in the comments section that showed great resistance from certain students to what they perceived as a demand on them in the practical workshops to 'act': 'if I had wanted to act at University I would have chosen a drama course, not literature', 'please, please, never make me act', are two examples. Equally there was great enthusiasm amongst the minority concerning the practical model: 'how can Shakespeare be taught any other way', and 'the poetry is meaningless to me, it's all about performance'. Our experience has led us to believe that there will always be a minority of students who will reject any learning that is kinaesthetic, embodied or enactive. We would suggest that a figure of around 15–20 per cent of any cohort is realistic for this group. Equally, a similar percentage of students will embrace practical methods wherever they encounter them. What remains is the majority of students,

Figure 1.1 Reasons for choosing non-practical Shakespeare

and it is these that the development of increasingly effective methods of OSL has been designed to reach.

The students were next asked what was their preferred model of learning. Figure 1.2 gives the responses. This is particularly interesting in the light of the next question, which looks at the way students were taught Shakespeare before university. It seems clear that teaching and learning in schools features a far wider range of methods for teaching Shakespeare than does Warwick – and there is strong support for supposing that this is the case beyond Warwick and across the sector (Thew 2006: 12).

Prior to university study, clearly there are a variety of methods of teaching and learning Shakespeare. As shown in Figure 1.3, most of the students revealed that they had encountered most at one point or another.

Figure 1.2 Students' preferred method of learning

Figure 1.3 Teaching methods used at 'A' level

The students were asked about their enthusiasm for studying Shakespeare. As Figure 1.4 indicates, they were mostly enthusiastic. Many felt that ‘English literature begins with Shakespeare’.

The students were then asked if they felt that Shakespeare should remain compulsory for finalists taking English degrees at the University of Warwick. Figure 1.5 shows that 75 per cent believed that Shakespeare should be compulsory. Again there was a polarized response, with the minority of students who were opposed to the compulsory nature of the course tending to feel infantilized or patronized by the notion that *any* module should be compulsory for finalists. There were, however, many students who felt that ‘English literature without Shakespeare [was] unthinkable’. Others made a link between the compulsory nature of the course and Warwick’s proximity to

Figure 1.4 Enthusiasm for studying Shakespeare

Figure 1.5 Should Shakespeare be compulsory?

Stratford-upon-Avon as the birthplace of Shakespeare, home of the RSC and UK cultural capital for the study of the playwright and the plays in performance.

Next, the students were asked if they would favour the replacement of examinations by an assessed performance of any kind. The 20 per cent shown in Figure 1.6 as being committed to a performance-based approach to the entire module reinforces the notion implicit in the results from question 1 that there tends to be a percentage of students committed to methods like OSL, and that these students will always opt for practical work, even in assessment. If the 10 per cent figure is added for students who would like to see a combination of the two assessment methods, there is a surprisingly high number of students willing to undergo an assessment fundamentally different to that which they are expecting at university. This tends to undermine the anecdotal view that students tend to be resistant to change and rather conservative in their outlook.

Finally, the students were asked if they had any other comments. The following is a representative selection:

‘We should be tested on our ability to think, to make links, our understanding in a performance space rather than our ability to remember facts.’

Figure 1.6 Students' preferred method of learning

'Performance-assessment should always be voluntary; compulsory performance is not fair to those doing literature not theatre degrees.'

'Final year is not the place to work on my weaknesses (drama).'

'Module is too focussed on theatre/performance and not enough on literature.'

'Didn't choose performance (though seem to have ended up there), but feel it has enhanced my experience and understanding which would not have been possible in a solely text-based analysis.'

'More seminars! One and a half hours is not long enough!'

'Challenging, surprising, entertaining'

'It really encouraged everyone to communicate and engage with each other.'

'The skills of working in a group I found beneficial in order to express ideas and be exposed to ideas I may not have thought of.'

'Communication skills are also developed in ways that standard seminars don't [allow].'

'Helped my confidence in challenging conventional approaches to a text and understanding how a play can lend itself to interpretation.'

'I still can't act but that's not an issue!'

'[The sessions gave me] the confidence to speak to peers at an academic level, [and to] challenge each other's opinion and work together to form new ones.'

'I realized quite recently that the idea behind [without chairs] is closest to the idea of "university learning" that I had before I attended university.'

'The vacuum of note-taking is filled by "muscle memory".'

'This seminar group ensured that there was a way of bridging the gap between students that are here "just for literature" and those willing to try drama out.'

'This module helps with the "agnostics" and brings them to "faith" – those that are unsure are given conviction and the skills to confidently approach early modern texts as a site for play.'

Our next results are from the summer term of 2008. One hundred and eleven out of a possible 211 students responded. These responses were the final ones students had to the module before they graduated – the students

had experienced 18 weeks of lectures and seminars, had received marks and feedback on a 5,000-word essay, and most had been exposed to at least one practical workshop.

Figure 1.7 shows the number of students undertaking the practical and the non-practical routes.

The students were asked if their choice of practical or non-practical seminar had been the right one. Figure 1.8 shows that 5.5 per cent of students in the non-OSL groups felt they had made the wrong choice; 6.5 per cent of students in the non-OSL groups felt that *perhaps* they had made the wrong choice; no students in the OSL groups felt they had made the wrong choice.

It is interesting that over 12 per cent of students who took the non-practical option felt that they had either definitely, or had perhaps, made the wrong choice. Strong anecdotal evidence from interviews with individual students

Figure 1.7 Number of students in practical and non-practical routes

Figure 1.8 Was this the right choice of route?

on the course suggested that once students understood that acting was not a requirement for successful participation in workshops they became far more comfortable with the idea. It is worth re-emphasising that all the students interviewed who took the OSL option would not have changed. The figures in the overall module data below confirm this trend.

The following is a representative selection of student comments:

‘Non-practical. Yes this was the right choice as I am more interested in the textual elements of the module.’

‘Non-practical group, but I don’t really feel it was the right choice. Having heard about the practical seminars, I do feel that they may have been more useful, as the emphasis of the module is on performance. I thought they would just be full of English and Theatre people though.’

‘I am in a non-practical group. I would have liked to be in a practical group but I was concerned about the extra time involved.’

‘I was in [a] non practical group which was the right choice for me, although the small practical element [the tutor] introduced was incredibly helpful.’

‘Non practical. From the feedback of friends, I feel the right choice was indicated because they thought the practical approaches helped with understanding the text as plays, but did not help enough ... materially or with the plays discussion parts. This made the essay writing more difficult.’

‘Non-practical. Really regretted not taking the practical option as I think it really makes a difference – you NEED the practical side with Shakespeare otherwise it just becomes another text.’

‘Non practical. Yes and no – I believe the two methods should be integrated, bearing in mind the two elements are in the exam and considering that there is 1.5hrs for the seminar – could the first 45mins be practical, then sit down and discuss the themes, symbolism etc?’

‘I was in a non-practical group. I am not sure if it was the right choice, a practical group may have been more enlightening and productive as people may have been more open to share ideas than in a normal seminar setting. I didn’t really give the performance seminar a chance when we were given the chance to choose, I thought it would be too “thespy” despite the emails saying you didn’t need acting skills etc. However,

I am not really in a position to say if I made the right choice as I did not experience a practical session.'

'I was in a text based, with chairs group. This was right for me. I don't like theatre very much, and am no good at it.'

'Non practical seminar and yes, I think it was the right choice because I am not a native speaker and a practical seminar might have been very difficult for me.'

'Practical group and yes it was the right choice. It was certainly a gamble, and I was pleased that even the practical option allowed for moments of discussion because I do value that, but to engage with Shakespeare through both the mind and the body felt like the beginning of a deeper understanding; one, perhaps, I may not have obtained had I done the non-practical option. The best things about it were (a) understanding a scene on its feet; (b) exploring a play through its images/pictures and props (the *Hamlet* and *Othello* workshops). There are ways it could improve, which I am happy to talk about, but if it remains organic and learns from itself then this method of learning is potentially brilliant and I am pleased I took the gamble. I also liked the way in which the tutor became a student too – seeing them gain a fresh understanding of texts through this new form of exploration.'

'In the non-practical group – felt right for me, as we still did some practical stuff – to be honest there needs to be a balance so you can understand the plays theatrically.'

The students were then asked that, if they could go back, would they change their option or choose a path somewhere between OSL and non-practical methods. Figure 1.9 shows the results, and the following is a representative sample of student comments:

'Yes, because I have had previous textual experience, but not "practical" experience.'

'Yes, I regret not doing the practical element as I think all study of theatrical texts should include at least half practical approach. However, ideally, literary seminars and practical workshops would be great!'

'Yes, I think so. I think I would have got more out of the practical seminars, but I suppose you can't really be sure! I don't know if I would have found the practical seminar too intimidating.'

Figure 1.9 Would students have chosen differently?

‘No, I wouldn’t change – the practical route I found to be more engaging than a lot of the non-practical seminars I’ve had at university and the chance to actually see the text put on its feet, or put the text on its feet myself, meant that it stayed in my head longer and that I made a lot more effort to understand and engage with the text.’

‘I think there were some benefits to doing both, but might well have only done practical if I were to go back, because I found that style of learning better engaged me with the text.’

‘No – the practical Shakespeare seminars were the most exciting and eye-opening thing I have done on my degree.’

‘I think that, as a result of taking the practical classes throughout the year, I had a clearer idea of what the plays can look like on stage and of how the scenes can mean more. Apart from anything else, this was very helpful for the exam.’

‘I wouldn’t go back and change – I enjoyed the practical events that we did do, but if I had been in a practical group I would have felt “out of my element” and more stressed and so I wouldn’t have enjoyed it.’

‘No. I see absolutely no point in solely studying the “poetry” of Shakespeare, he wrote for a theatre & theatre has to be political, has to be able to change something – by getting the texts on their feet we are

forced to make an active interpretation which is memorable on many senses. This is why theatre is so great.'

'I'd change. All my friends that do practical said it was really fun.'

'Yes, the workshop I went to was ace, and clarified the staging part of I [*Henry IV*, Part I] and helped me with certain speeches, although I don't think it should stand alone because I didn't get a total understanding of the text (obviously I haven't participated in actual practical groups, so there might be more of a balance in that respect). I think a seminar and practical session each week would be brilliant.'

'The exam was more catered towards performance than I expected, so in retrospect perhaps the practical option would have been more useful. However, I do not feel that I would have been comfortable in a practical group, and feel that the lectures should be more accessible to all students rather than favouring those who take English and Theatre Studies or the practical group.'

'I think I may have changed, as the seminars I had became a bit repetitive and were not very productive, as many people were unwilling to participate with enthusiasm. A practical session, in which I presume, everyone MUST participate to some degree, would have helped group dynamics/exchange of ideas. Even I think just incorporating a small amount of performance [for example] reading aloud would have made seminars more engaging, or given a starting point for ideas. I have only realized this after a bit of thought however and talking to people who did the performance.'

'I think I am more interested in discussing the text as we did in the non practical group rather than focussing on realizing the text as a performance, which I thought was the focus of the practical group. But if I were given the chance to at least test both the options before making the choice, I would definitely take it. Then, maybe, my choice would have been different.'

'I would not go back and change, but I do value the opportunity to discuss plays, theatre and ideas with a group of students led by an academic – if this can be a part of the practical sessions, if not define it, then that would be valuable. I think a plurality of learning/teaching methods works best. Sometimes you have to discuss ideas, and sometimes you have to reflect on practical work – the hegemony of one or the other is a bad thing I think.'

‘Would not change – the best thing about the practical group was that it helped literally put scenes “on their feet” and think about them from a performance-specific point of view. Only drawbacks was time time time!! Just wasn’t enough time to cover the entirety of the plays, but then this is surely a hazard with seminars as well. Only other tiny drawback was that, sometimes because we were concentrating so much on putting the scenes on their feet we were unable (again because of time) to generate any ideas for more experimental ways to put on various scenes and so in some instances it felt a little like we had done a lot of groundwork to only get to grips with a small amount of text – BUT this was just, again, because there was not enough time.’

‘No, I would not, because I believe I’ve got more out of the practical seminars than I have from the conventional seminars on other modules. I was particularly impressed by how the practical seminars made us pay closer attention to textual specifics, which I did not anticipate. Other aspects of the practical seminars such as the greater energy level and greater awareness of performance were more expected.’

‘Definitely not. Leaving the words on the page results in a very A-level method of teaching: take apart the words, scour them for meaning and then rebuild. Getting them off the page and on the stage (as it were) explodes their meaning and gives us the clues to the text as a theatrical text that those who solely read it will miss. I do not believe that a practical seminar gives you less than a non-practical seminar, rather the reverse is true. We are required to know about the text in the same detail as those who take the non-practical option in order to make the practical session work. We start where the others have finished.’

Next, the students were asked what they thought was the best method of learning on a scale of 1–5 (with 5 being ‘excellent’ and 1 being ‘poor’). Interestingly, Figure 1.10 shows the tendency of students to rate all their learning experiences at a level above average. Plainly, also, the majority of students still feel that the traditional seminar/lecture mix is the best way to learn in higher education.

Those students taking the non-OSL options were asked to rate the one compulsory OSL workshop they attended. Figure 1.11 highlights the discrepancy between the ‘average’ scores for workshops as a notion and the ‘good’ scores for the workshop in practice. It is not clear why this should

Figure 1.10 Students' preferred method of learning

Figure 1.11 Responses to compulsory workshop

be the case, but strong anecdotal evidence reinforces the notion that the prejudice against workshops is at least partly erased once students have experienced them. Clearly, also, much will depend upon the efficacy of the person delivering the workshop.

The students were asked to indicate the number of lectures they had attended. They indicated that they had attended an average of thirty-four lectures out of a possible thirty-six for the academic year. This information would appear to conflict with head counts at lectures indicating attendance

of around 75 per cent of students registered for the module. It is possible, of course, that all the 111 students surveyed were the regular attendees.

The following is a representative selection of student comments:

‘Text-based, analysis type lectures were pointless and very dull! Easier to cover that in seminars.’

‘Editing lectures unhelpful!’

‘CAPITAL is innovating the seminar-side of Shakespeare learning, but the lectures needed shaking up too, with a variety of new thinking and imaginative formats needed. Some lectures were very good – but I didn’t always feel the impetus to go because I found them, very often, un-engaging and didn’t feel particularly disadvantaged in missing a few of them. Lectures have their place, but there should not be two a week for the whole year – some were simply not stimulating. Half of EN301’s lectures should be scrapped and replaced with discussions/polylogues between several academics and the student attendees – I would never ever miss one of these and it would encourage and foster the plurality of approaches necessary when engaging with Shakespeare. I did one of these for my dissertation on *The Pillowman* – so much discussion and fresh ideas emerged. Also, I think set questions for this module should be scrapped. Students should have the ideas and innovative ability to create their own questions. When the essay questions came out some students were despairing because they didn’t know “which one to do” – they hadn’t even considered the possibility that the preset questions were not compulsory – this worried me for some reason.’

‘Thoroughly enjoyed the module, always interesting and enjoyed going to both seminars and lectures. I would have preferred a few less plays, I felt [there were] too many [26] and would have appreciated a little more time spent on each one. Out of all the lectures I found the close scene analysis ones more interesting than general context lectures.’

‘Lecture quality was very variable. A general guide, I think, should be that contextual/historical lectures are not helpful as much basic contextual information – and much of that dealt with in the lectures was basic – is easily and readily accessible. Many lectures are too generalized and lack focus. The best lectures for me were those that dealt with performance history and related this to the ideas and possibilities of the play text.’

I would cite [the lecture] on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an excellent example of the latter. Lecturers should not be afraid to introduce difficult concepts and arguments at a fast pace; I never felt challenged or pushed by any of the lecture this year (although I did in the practical seminars). I wonder whether the lecture model of “this is the lecture on *Henry IV*, this is the lecture on *The Merchant of Venice*” is the best model as it seems to encourage generalized introductions to the plays rather than really stimulating ideas about them – would not more thematic lectures, cross-referencing between plays, be a better model? I feel the ideal weekly structure of the course would be lecture + practical seminar + shorter conventional seminar.’

‘Missed a couple that duplicated material, when I knew that I didn’t get on that well with the lecturer’s style.’

‘Really did not like *Edward II* workshop – and did not enjoy having the cast take over the lecture – it didn’t teach me anything about the play at all.’

Finally, students were asked if they had changed their opinion on whether Shakespeare should be compulsory at Warwick. As can be seen in Figure 1.12, 12 per cent of students changed their opinion on this. There was an almost equal division between those who had changed their views from compulsory to non-compulsory and those who had changed their views from non-compulsory to compulsory. These changes were largely dependent on the extent to which the student enjoyed the course and the benefits they perceived they had gained from it. The following is a representative sample of student comments:

Figure 1.12 Should Shakespeare be compulsory?

‘No. I love Shakespeare, everyone should study him. Engineers included.’

‘Yes – at the beginning I rejected the idea that Shakespeare should dominate & be a finale of the course, however now, I agree that course NEEDS to be done, but maybe without “selected dramatists”.’

‘No. I think we should have had a decent amount of choice. There is a lot of other literature I would have preferred to study in my final year. I appreciate that Shakespeare has had a huge bearing on English Literature, but the module should not be compulsory.’

‘As a student on a joint honours degree and not based in the English department there is a more limited range of choices that we have in terms of modules. The final year is the biggest range we get throughout our four years at Warwick – but I still think that the Shakespeare should be compulsory. I’ve always liked the plays and seen them on the stage, so for me the chance to study them in more depth, to learn about plays I wasn’t familiar with, to discuss them with tutors and students who were interested in the same things as me, made it one of my favourite courses throughout my time at Uni.’

‘No. He’s still the most important writer of the English language, the skill areas to study his work brings together many of the separate strands and areas of the subject, and he’s constantly being updated in performance.’

‘I believe that by the third year, a student should be self aware enough to know what they wish to study. By maintaining Shakespeare as a core module you are sending out a Shakespeare-centric view of lit., that he is the be all and end all. This is incorrect. Please allow people the option to choose for themselves.’

‘I suspected that Shakespeare would be an “essential” experience, but I had not given much thought to whether it should be compulsory. I took it for granted, given that it is part of English law that it is studied by every schoolchild, most of whom could take it or leave it, whereas university students are presumed to have a modicum of enthusiasm for their chosen subject. I am glad that it is compulsory, and find nothing sinister about Shakespeare’s “inherited” cultural centrality.’

The overall module data from 2007/8 and the trends for 2008/9 revealed the following:

- Thirty-one students took the OSL version in 2007/8 from 211 students, and 49 registered in 2008/9 from an intake of 220. This represents a 37 per cent increase in raw numbers, and a 31 per cent increase statistically.
- The percentage of students receiving first-class marks for the module overall in 2006–7 was 11 per cent (22 of 202).
- In 2007–8 this figure was 18 per cent (38 of 211).
- Of students taking the OSL version in 2007–8, 22.5 per cent received firsts (7 of 31). Of students taking the seminar version, 17 per cent received firsts (31 of 180).
- Of these firsts, 9 per cent of students taking the OSL version received firsts in the examination compared to 14 per cent of those taking seminars. Twenty-nine per cent of OSL students, however, received firsts for their essays compared to 24 per cent of those taking seminars.

Plainly, it is possible to interpret these numbers in many different ways. The figures cannot tell us, for example, exactly why students who took the practical version of the module were 5 per cent more likely to receive a first-class mark. It may simply be that students taking the practical option were more confident in their own abilities than the others, or that students taking the practical option might have benefited from the additional thirty minutes contact time per week, or even perhaps that certain students from the non-practical groups were right when they expressed their view that students taking the practical option had received an unfair advantage in their preparation for section 'A' of the examination. This section involved students considering an extract as a 'dramatic text'. However, the statistics do not support this latter view, showing a poorer performance in examinations than in assessed essays from students in the practical groups. There is anecdotal evidence, also, that final-year students have passed on positive reports about the practical option to students in the year below about to make their choice of Shakespeare option. Interviews with undergraduates do, however, support the overall findings, as do results and analysis from later surveys.

We conclude this chapter by detailing the following exchange – derived from email – between a senior Canadian Shakespeare scholar and Dr Nicholas Monk, member of the OSL team, concerning OSL and seminar methods of teaching Shakespeare. Professor G. B. Shand is an academic who has always used practice in the classroom, has pioneered the idea of 'actorly reading'

for literature students of Shakespeare and has worked as a dramaturg with actors and directors. He led the 2009 British Shakespeare Association (BSA) conference, devoted to new Shakespeare pedagogies. He was playing devil's advocate in the email exchange, putting pressure on those of us who are trying to redefine practice to consider, *seriously* and *attentively* what we're doing and how we're doing it – and whether it's taking us anywhere new or merely back around into a predictable rut of teaching and learning. The discussion focussed, in particular, on *The Winter's Tale*.

SHAND: I sometimes wonder whether we're actually inviting/leading/showing students into brave new worlds of perception, or whether we're often really devising bright new ways to take them to the same old pedagogical conclusions about the play.

MONK: What we're actually doing is none of the above – I hope. The point of OSL is to allow students – to a significant extent – to create their own knowledge and define its parameters. Very experienced academics often talk from the perspective of someone who feels there is very little new to be discovered; this is far from the case with the vast majority of our undergraduates who find that OSL methodology takes them far more rapidly into, and beyond, 'threshold concepts' [a threshold concept is one that, once grasped, leads to a qualitatively different view of the subject matter and/or learning experience and as oneself as a learner] than the seminar and lecture model. Naturally, they would not articulate it this way, but remarks like 'workshops seem to trigger alternative thought processes or responses to sit-down discussions' seem to me to at least to imply something of this. Similarly: 'the practical option is the best thing to have happened to the English department since I have been a member of it. Full support should be given to encouraging it to push boundaries and challenge students in a way unlike anything else they can do here.'

SHAND: Bringing in the local/global dimension, what do you say to the instructor who says 'I'd need to be experienced, even immersed, in theatrical play myself before I could ever imagine adopting a strategy like yours'?

MONK: We say, here's 'Staging the Witches' – available from our website in a number of formats from video to a written plan – you can see

it involves no acting skills, or drama education training. Try it, and see if it enriches teaching and learning for you or your students. Here are the remarks of a tutor new to CAPITAL before he taught his module here in 2007/8: 'practical exercises are greatly enriched here ... I've been able to use theatrical improvisation demonstrations to explore power roles in dialogue and physical character interaction, [and] conduct creative writing exercises while engaging in physical exertion [like] arm wrestling.' Besides: 'fail again, fail better'.

SHAND: Another kind of thought: What you're doing 'without chairs' is very clearly fostering close reading. Would you distinguish between this kind of close reading and the table work that begins a lot of rehearsal processes? Or the close reading that goes on in the traditional drama classroom? And so on.

MONK: Again, the author of the critique possesses a perspective derived from an obvious depth and breadth of knowledge of the subject matter, but I would say, from the perspective of a weaker undergrad, 'without chairs' may be the only means by which they are required to practice close reading in a manner that exposes their reading to the scrutiny of their peers and tutor yet is supportive in its structure. For the smarter/more advanced student, the difference is more nuanced:

In the practical EN301 seminars [the 'Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists' module], if anyone had thought that 'Shakespeare without chairs' would be less rigorous than a standard seminar, they were soon persuaded otherwise; putting the plays into practice as real scripts for performance demanded an exact attention to the specifics of the text; vague generalizations or sloppy thinking cannot survive such a process, and my seminar group thrived in this creative but uncompromising environment. The process does not, however, involve merely 'acting out' Shakespeare; it uses performance practice for academic ends, not substituting one for the other, and theoretical and contextual aspects were often brought into 'play' in these seminars.

I think these remarks capture the brighter student's sense of what's different about our close reading and the desk-bound variety.