As Monika’s discussion of Shakespeare’s varied uses of ‘offence’ showed, in some ways Shakespeare is Mr Offensive: you can go online and find Shakespeare insult generators, or buy mugs bedecked with his more memorable roasts. But rather than simply indulging in his obscenities, this talk aims to offer a space to reflect on what place his ability to offend, and our capacity to be offended, has in teaching and learning about Shakespeare. What, in other words, is at stake when we teach Shakespeare as, or and, offence. Like Monika, rather than being prescriptive or definitive, I will try to describe and analyse what we’re doing, and where we are, in thinking about Shakespeare, offence, and teaching. Through this, I will try to address these key questions:

- How and why might teaching Shakespeare cause offence, and/or improve our understanding of offence?
- In what ways is Shakespearean offensiveness useful or challenging (or useful because challenging) for students?

I will begin with three brief case studies presenting some of the issues of teaching offensive Shakespeare. As I do, I will complicate what the case studies present. Again, I am trying to map the debate about what is happening with honesty and clarity – not resolve disputes or offer conclusions. In part, I’m doing so for my own benefit as much as anyone else’s – as a teacher of Shakespeare now, I need to think about what I’m doing and why. I will end by considering my last question, which can be rephrased as the most important question, and one I’ve just asked: why? Why even bother to teach offensive Shakespeare in the classroom?

Example 1# - Northumbria University

Picture the scene: a few years ago, I was ending a typically scintillating second-year university seminar with about 15 students, on a module we call Early Modern Cultures, which puts the literature of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in historical context, past and present. We had been looking at Othello in its own time, and in ours. Doing this involved me mentioning reactionary responses to what was then the relatively new Black Lives Matter movement. Some of these responses, from people like Steve Bannon, Donald Trump’s erstwhile chief strategist, seemed to recycle racist ideas about the inherently violent nature of African-Americans. I thought it might be interesting to set such ideas alongside what people in the play like Iago (but maybe, in time, Othello himself) say about Othello’s unstable and demonic identity. In other words, should we see the play as a problem because it gives voice to prejudices and presumptions that still have power today? So, to kick things off, I gave the students a quote about the play from the actor Hugh Quarshie, who said:

“I am left with a nagging doubt: if a black actor plays Othello does he not risk making racial stereotypes seem legitimate and even true? When a black actor plays a role written for a white actor in make-up and for a predominantly white audience, does he not encourage the white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking at black men, namely that black men, or ‘Moors’, are over-emotional, excitable and unstable, thereby vindicating Iago’s statement, ‘These moors are changeable in their wills’?” Hugh Quarshie, Second Thoughts About Othello (1999), 5.
I split the class in groups and asked them to say whether they agreed or disagreed with Quarshie’s point. But when the time came for the groups to feed back, a white English and Creative Writing student said ‘I don’t feel I can answer that…it is not my place to answer that’. They elaborated that they didn’t feel they could know how black people might feel about this, and didn’t want to be offensive to anyone by assuming they did. Never having encountered this before, I said, ‘OK’, and we moved on: despite my efforts, the class seemed more animated by the play’s gender politics than its racial implications.

Later, I thought the student was daft (or at least deliberately trying to derail my meticulously designed seminar) – you don’t have to be Jewish to find parts of The Merchant Of Venice an affront to humanity. Maybe, I reflected, with self-righteous grumbling, this was what Frank Furedi detected in English undergraduates: a ‘self-censorship’, or internalised ‘Politically Correct’ policing, of the kind someone like Mick Hume sees as an ‘enemy of free speech’.

“In my discussions with English undergraduates, I was struck by the fact that many of them have decided to self-censor…the extensive practice of self-censorship has developed into an aggressive conviction.” Frank Furedi, What’s Happened to the University?: A Sociological Exploration of Its Infantilisation (2017), vii, 80.


“For many, an attack on free speech is an attack on the very idea of the liberal university: Universities are places where, above all, free speech should be honoured, not prevented.” Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, House of Commons, Hansard (12 November 1985), col. 423. Cited in Evan Smith, 158.

These concerns are not historical, abstract or philosophical, but reach to the current corridors of power, and respond to an apparent crisis in education. In 2018, the then-Universities Minister expressed qualms akin to Furedi’s and Hume’s:

“A culture of censorship has gradually been creeping in [to universities], and a monoculture is now emerging where some views are ‘in’ and others are clearly ‘out’… [due to] the rise of no-platforming, safe spaces, trigger warnings and protest.” Sam Gyimah ‘Civility Under Threat’, Research Research (1 October 2018; https://www.researchresearch.com/news/article/?articleId=1377459)

“Although formally introduced by the NUS [National Union of Students] in 1974 as a reaction to the rise of the National Front (NF) in Britain, ‘no platform’ had its antecedents in the anti-fascist battles of the 1930s and 1940s, and the student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since then, it has been continually re-evaluated. … Even in the twenty-first century, it remains a living and reflexive tactic, which students themselves determine, debate and continue to argue over. … students have argued for ‘no platform’ to be extended to other forms of prejudice since the 1970s, and …this has been continually contested” Evan Smith, No Platform: A History of Anti-Fascism, Universities and the Limits of Free Speech (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

It is worth pointing out, as Evan Smith does, that Sam Gyimah’s predecessor as Universities Minister, Jo Johnson ‘launched a parliamentary inquiry into free speech at universities in late 2017, and in 2018 it concluded that the threat to free speech on campus was highly exaggerated’ (24-5). Moreover, as Smith has recently shown, students have, for a long time, been keen on challenging views they find offensive, and that challenge has included forms of censorship, such as ‘no platforming’.
With that in mind, and not being someone naturally inclined to agree with Conservative politicians of any era, on further reflection I started to appreciate that maybe the student had a point, and was actually being sensitive and smart, not naively adhering to some ‘woke’ PC-agenda. If we think in the terms articulated by Ian Smith, they were, however bluntly, problematizing their own status, ‘checking privilege’ and ‘unpacking’ their position as a white student, ‘making’ their ‘whiteness visible’, and undertaking a form of ‘racial self-inquiry’ that, if I were to have the chance to have that seminar again, I would do well to handle better – both more sensitively, and more critically.

Critics [or, indeed students] who have notoriously read Othello’s end as the inevitable relapse of an innately savage black man have failed to understand or have resisted [or have not been taught about] the play’s dialogic demand for racial self-inquiry.

“Speaking of Othello, speaking about race within the discipline, requires unpacking one’s white positioning, which includes making whiteness visible and an object for critical interrogation; checking privilege; and exposing the denials and misinterpretations that…keep race a minority issue and race studies a faddish or questionable enterprise in the era of so-called postracial enlightenment.” Ian Smith, ‘Speaking of Race’, Shakespeare in our Time, eds. Dympna Callaghan and Suzanne Gossett (2016), 121.

So, experiences like this, and working and thinking with Monika, started to sensitise me to how students and teachers could make more of such moments, to understand both Shakespeare and the world in which we’re studying him now.

Example 2# - Durham University

I didn’t have long to wait to encounter another. Just down the road from my own institution, Durham university was working through its own issues with offensive Shakespeare, surrounding the use in Shakespeare teaching of what are known as ‘Trigger Warnings’. The Durham student newspaper reported things like this:

“…no one is saying that Titus Andronicus should be taken off the curriculum because of its potential to trigger victims of sexual abuse. This, ironically, is what trigger warnings are for: to give vulnerable people the choice to opt out of a potentially harmful discussion, whilst still leaving the topic open for those able to contribute. …I really cannot see how anyone can be offended by trigger warnings, which do not in any way prevent us from discussing difficult topics and save some people a lot of pain. …”

“Durham English Students are expected to sit through lectures and tutorials discussing Lavinia’s rape in Titus Andronicus (although we did get a trigger warning about bestiality with regards to part of the lecture on A Midsummer Night’s Dream).” Simon Fearn, ‘In defence of trigger warnings’, Palatinate: Durham’s Independent Student Newspaper (May 7, 2016).

This state of affairs prompted much discussion from concerned commentators, taking the line of Claire Fox, who condemned what she saw as phenomena like this ‘privileging subjective interpretation’; a case of students saying ‘I don’t wanna do this, and if you make me that’s a micro-aggression’.

“This privileging of subjective interpretation means we are all easy targets for being accused of hate crime.” Claire Fox, ‘I find that offensive’ (2016), 22.

For Frank Furedi, again, such scenes indicate a repressive silencing and naïve misunderstanding of ‘aesthetic experience’, because Shakespeare is meant to upset you.
“That some students now seriously believe that warning them about the content of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is an example of good academic practice might seem puzzling to the millions of readers who regard the emotional upheavals provoked by his plays as part of a wonderful aesthetic experience.” *Furedi, What’s Happened to the University?*, 150.

Now, we might counter: what is anything we do if not subjective interpretation? Indeed, most marking criteria for students’ work privilege subjectivity. In other words, students are meant to showcase their originality, and universities reward it. Equally, we might argue back that ‘emotional upheaval’ is no guarantee of ‘a wonderful…experience’ – arguably if you are really upset by it, you are really feeling it, but that does not make it ‘wonderful’. Certainly, this is how the seminal Shakespearean and philosopher of censorship and desire Jonathan Dollimore felt, on reading *Othello* while going through various psychological crises:

> “…*Othello* made **too much sense** to me – so much so that I could no longer even read it.” *Jonathan Dollimore, Desire: A Memoir* (2017), 42

There is censorship here: Dollimore confesses he could not carry on reading. But this is in intense response to, rather than petulant dismissal of, Shakespeare’s work. And for good reason: we only censor what we think has power. But this means we need to find a way to engage with what disturbs us, and maybe trigger warnings are one way to do this. There are others, perhaps – I and many other university tutors use something like ‘Rules of engagement’, like these from a module I teach on Shakespeare’s contemporary, Christopher Marlowe:

> “On this module we can expect to engage critically with some potentially controversial or disturbing ideas and arguments. … many of Marlowe’s ideas were challenging in their own time, and many remain so. Equally, the ways many people – including students – think about Marlowe can generate arguments, if not controversies. … it is important to remember that we base our arguments on evidence from the texts and contexts we are studying. These contexts include our own responses here and now to the texts: what you bring to and get from Marlowe really matters. But this should not mean your arguments can fall back on saying ‘I believe…’ or ‘I feel…’. Instead, say what you think the text or context says, always conducting your arguments, and confronting assumptions, within appropriate and constructive modes of expression. **As we will learn, Marlowe was taught to think in terms of argumentum in utramque partem (arguing/defending in both directions): let’s see if we can do the same.”

My third case study, from Cambridge, is like Durham’s, but especially notable for the publicity it generated:

**Example 3# - Cambridge University**

> “Trigger warnings” were printed alongside the description of at least one English literature lecture and one seminar due to take place this term. One was a lecture on violence, which was billed as a discussion of “control and consequence; when do we laugh at violence, and why?”, focussing particularly on Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* and *Titus Andronicus*, and Sarah Kane’s *Blasted.* Camilla Turner, ‘Cambridge students warned Shakespeare plays may distress them’, *The Telegraph* (18 October 2017)

Initial responses to the publication of this report in the comments section of the version of the article published online were hyperbolic to say the least:

> “It would appear that education has come to an end. **The age of enlightenment is over”**

> “History shows that **when civilisations become too soft they often disappear**”
“What this is about is the creeping control of language and the continued assault on free speech emanating from the cultural Marxists. These people have a stranglehold over academia and with every new piece of ideological insanity emerging from their twisted minds it becomes more impossible to not notice.”

“I bet that the poor little darlings all have box sets of Game of Thrones, do those carry a trigger warning?”

In turn these responses triggered others in the comments section, which criticised other posters’ hyperbole:

“May I suggest the Telegraph includes a trigger warning at the top of page one, indicating: "Warning, this newspaper contains material which some readers may find intensely irritating. Those who are easily distressed are advised not to read any further”.

“It’s PC gone mad. Even Roy Rogers films come with trigger warnings now.”

“Trigger warnings are just a tiny label, not a big deal, and you're all massively overreacting. … Trigger warnings are just that, a warning. A little symbol … no different from having a content warning on a movie, just so anyone going to the lecture knows what to expect. It's to warn those with traumatic pasts, not to dissuade and censor the learning of the average student. The lecturers here aren't expected to tone down their content at all; on the contrary, trigger warnings are to prevent them from having to do that.”

Joking aside, the final comment, ostensibly from an actual Cambridge student, is vital if not paramount. This sets out how something like a ‘trigger warning’ about potentially offensive Shakespearean material is a way to open up and facilitate debate. I will return to this point presently.

In the meantime, building on Monika’s points, I will overlay what we have seen in these case studies with the following observations:

‘Thou but offend’st thy lungs to speak so loud:’ (MoV, 4.1.142)

1. Teaching has always been subject to conditions, controls, censorship, interventions, bowdlerizations and silencing:

“Teachers appointed to instil knowledge into the minds of the citizens should not teach that which is false or noxious….they should not teach that which tends to disturb civil society…” Samuel Von Pufendorf, ‘On the Duties of Citizens’ (1682), in Paul Barry Clarke, Citizenship (1994), 92.

2. So has ‘free speech’:

“The unrestrained communication of thoughts and opinions being one of the most precious rights of man, every citizen may speak, write, and publish freely, provided he is responsible for the abuse of this liberty in cases determined by the law.” Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens (France, 1789), reprinted in Thomas Paine, The Rights of Man (1791-2).

3. So has literature, including Shakespeare:

“Titus Andronicus…I shall leave out of account, because, even if Shakespeare wrote the whole of it, he did so before he had either a style of his own or any characteristic tragic conception.” A.C. Bradley, Shakespearian Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth (1904; rpt 1994), 21.
Here, Bradley discounts (that is, *silences*), a play on the grounds of Shakespeare’s artistic immaturity; is it a coincidence that this play featuring rape, mutilation, murder, and interethnic relationships, is one so many students now study, with or without trigger warnings (or pleasure)?

But thinking of ‘trigger warnings’, the last observation I’d make at this point is that we have to understand ‘trigger warnings’ have unclear effects.

4. Trigger warnings have a mixed press, and unclear effects:

> “Much support for trigger warnings arises from the desire to provide students with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other disadvantaged groups with an inclusive, level academic playing field. … However, others believe that trigger warnings *hamper academic inquiry and “coddle” students by sheltering them from any stressful material they may encounter…thereby undermining their preparation for the “real world” beyond the campus gates. … Trigger warnings do not appear to be conducive to resilience…Trigger warnings do not appear to affect sensitivity to distressing material in general, but may increase immediate anxiety response for a subset of individuals whose beliefs predispose them to such a response.” *Benjamin Bellet et al. ‘Trigger warning: Empirical evidence ahead’, Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry, 61 (2018), 134-41.*

This fascinating study randomly assigned literary passages varying in potentially disturbing content to online participants without PTSD, but gave only some of those participants trigger warnings prior to reading. The findings were ambiguous. The researchers thought trigger warnings were not good for participants’ resilience – they *‘hamper academic inquiry and “coddle” students by sheltering them from any stressful material they may encounter…thereby undermining their preparation for the “real world”’*. However, they found that trigger warnings probably also don’t really affect anyone who doesn’t already have PTSD. In other words, the jury is out.

> ‘privileging of subjective interpretation’? (Fox, 22)

Another way of thinking about trigger warnings and how they might have an impact on how we teach and learn about Shakespeare is to *historicise* their use. I don’t have time to map that history here, and others have already done it better, but perhaps we can see a prehistory for trigger warnings built into the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Think of it like this: countless plays for the early modern stage or page feature prologues and epilogues conditioning audiences’ responses, begging for applause, and humbly genuflecting to ensure no-one will be or has been offended. This made good business sense and showed political acumen in an age of censorship and book burning, when theatres were commercial concerns relying on aristocratic patronage.

But this version of a humility *topos* verges on self-parody and a critique of those forces which would presume to contain or censure a playwright’s wit. *We can see this self-conscious parody of the desire to avoid causing offence within plays, too, like A Midsummer Night’s Dream, just before the rude mechanicals’ final performance:*

**QUINCE (as Prologue)**

*If we offend, it is with our good will.*

*That you should think: we come not to offend*

*But with good will. To show our simple skill,*

*That is the true beginning of our end. MND (5.1.112-15)*

[Palgrave (2007) editorial note: 112 will. Quince inadvertently inserts a full stop here and changes the meaning of the line]
Can we read this as an early modern trigger warning? The ambiguous punctuation, echoed in modern editions, makes us ask: do or don’t the players mean to offend? If they don’t mean to offend, they mean instead simply to evoke good will. If they do mean to offend they also mean to do so only (‘But’) with good will. With his wordplay, Quince signals – and queries – intention (‘our end’), but also tries to condition audience response. Quince also introduces conditionality (‘If we offend’); offence is not a given but depends on subjective responses. And Quince’s paradoxes (‘the true beginning of our end’) highlight the oxymoron of working with ‘simple skill’: this is simple and skilful language, at once silly, banal and profound, powerful and weak, just like a playwright themselves. Maybe Shakespeare saw the ironies of trying to both protect and provoke those he sought to enlighten. When it comes to those now trying to enlighten others about Shakespeare, through teaching and offence, what, then, is the state of play?

Mobilising Offence in/as Shakespeare Teaching – Example 1#

I will now move to a conclusion by looking at a couple of recent approaches or models to recognising offence in the Shakespearean classroom, and for mobilising offense as something possible or useful for students.

If you don’t know it, James Stredder’s great book sets out his ideas for the ‘active’ Shakespearean classroom, fizzing with techniques from drama teaching. Obviously, as Stredder notes, there are health and safety implications attached to such activities. These implications are not just for our physical wellbeing, but for ‘areas of the mind and the emotions’, too, including trauma, and can focus on offence in the classroom: ‘personal memory may be touched very painfully for a particular individual, causing an unexpected and unwelcome breaking out of feeling’. In other words, Stredder sees the potential risks and benefits of bringing offence into Shakespeare teaching:

“Safety awareness is vital, too, in imaginative work, which may disturb areas of the mind and the emotions, and reveal them to others in ways that have not been anticipated and may be distressing. This can happen, of course, in serious work of any kind.

In an apparently academic classroom discussion, personal memory may be touched very painfully for a particular individual, causing an unexpected and unwelcome breaking out of feeling. …

If educational work is serious and sensitive to differences of all kinds within groups, it should have the resources to withstand the potentially negative effects of such rare incidents – and quite possibly turn them into positive experiences. … Insult games assemble pairs or groups as antagonists in order to explore and enjoy the energy, humour and inventiveness of Shakespeare’s ‘insult’ language.” James Stredder, The North Face of Shakespeare: activities for teaching the plays (2009), 31, 156.

I have equal admiration for the work of Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi. They say:

“The purpose of teaching Shakespeare’s plays is to increase a student’s familiarity with complex texts. … But the teaching of Shakespeare is a vehicle rather than a destination: advanced learners need increasingly sophisticated literary skills to face all complex texts.” Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi, Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centred Approach (2016) 7, 8.

Through engaging with ‘complex texts’, like Shakespeare’s, people can find a way to talk about complex issues, particularly around identity. If we don’t do this, we diminish Shakespeare and we ignore what matters about ourselves in relation to others.
In a recent webinar on teaching Shakespeare, they explicated their aspirations and concerns in relation to events like the Black Lives Matter movement, by asking whether Shakespeare might be compared to the kinds of statues of problematic historical figures that some in the movement have in their sights and want to pull down. Thompson and Turchi asked: is Shakespeare at risk of being pulled down too? They raised this question not out of a desire to cause that iconoclastic censorship, but to prevent it; and not out of a desire to condemn the movements that see the need for making statues fall, but in profound fellowship with them. In that webinar they conveyed this clearly:

“[I]f we don’t have a way to talk to our students and to make the learning of Shakespeare coincide with the learning of truth...then it’s done [ie. learning about Shakespeare is doomed]...Shakespeare does allow us to talk about race...in truthful ways.” Ayanna Thompson in conversation with Laura Turchi, ‘Shakespeare Teachers’ Conversation: Teaching Anti-Racism through Shakespeare’ (31 July 2020; convened by Gillian Woods, Birkbeck University)

But, as Stredder noted, doing this kind of complex engagement with complex texts risks being seen to give offence. This is a risk worth taking to keep Shakespeare alive and to show what matters about the lives of those talking about him:

Mobilising Offence in/as Shakespeare Teaching – Example 2#

“Where better to talk about complex identity issues than through complex texts? ... [If we don’t engage with ‘complex identity issues’] rich differences among...students are ignored, thereby rendering those differences unmentionable and irrelevant. ... Silence is never neutral with regard to difference. It communicates values, assumptions and hierarchies for race and social identity...[T]he costs of silence and colour-blindness are experienced by all: not just by people of colour.” Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi, Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centred Approach (2016) 13, 74-5.

So, as I say, Thompson and Turchi recognise the risks and opportunities of offense in the Shakespeare classroom, and give some examples of how it might work:

“Shakespeare’s plays may offer lines that some students are not willing to speak: ... ‘As a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear’...Students preparing scripts for classroom performance may be tempted to edit out or otherwise de-emphasize troubling lines. Teachers may want to point out that theatre companies, textbook editors and politicians have all edited Shakespeare for the same reason. Especially when one has to perform lines that are awkward [or offensive?] socio-politically, one may want to change the script. ... Advanced learners should be granted the opportunity and authority to edit Shakespeare [including by not doing Shakespeare?], but they need to be held accountable for these decisions and all decisions must be subject to scrutiny [by?]”. Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi, Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centred Approach (2016) 80-81.

These are really inspiring but also suggestive assertions: is this work empowering or not, for staff or students? What matters, here, though, is the way longer histories of understanding Shakespeare as offensive and as censored can be brought to bear on current understandings of his problematic power. Thinking like this exemplifies Thompson and Turchi’s approach, built on openness and transparency: teachers saying with not just to students that this is what we’re doing with Shakespeare and why.

Thompson and Turchi use the idea of the seminar as a safe space in which to have these discussions. But this isn’t to shut down debate or destroy Shakespeare. Instead, ‘the potential for bad choices and significant discomfort’ and the ‘risk of offence’ as people grapple with potentially
sensitive issues have to be acknowledged, in order ‘to ask questions and make statements about race, gender, ability and sexuality [and class?]…without fear of censorship’.

“In a curriculum that pushes identity to the forefront of discussions about Shakespeare and performance there is the potential for bad choices and significant discomfort, and so we urge overarching principles of direct talk and safe spaces.

Teachers have a responsibility to let students know that the classroom is the place to ask questions and make statements about race, gender, ability and sexuality [and class?]…without fear of censorship. Even with this acknowledgement, neither the students nor the instructor should then believe that there is no risk of offence when one asks about or points out areas of tension. There will be tense moments because these conversations are not occurring elsewhere in our students’ lives.” Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi, Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centred Approach (2016) 83.

In their recent webinar, Thompson and Turchi emphasised this embrace of offence as a tool for teaching, in precise, practical terms, where the mobility applies to students changing their minds:

“Someone saying something that may be offensive at the beginning of the semester, and then moving his or her thinking throughout the semester is OK…I do like to say…that there are going to be times when we all say something that offends somebody else and this [the seminar or class] is precisely the place where you should do it, because this is the place where we’re meant to learn together.” Ayanna Thompson in conversation with Laura Turchi, ‘Shakespeare Teachers' Conversation: Teaching Anti-Racism through Shakespeare’ (31 July 2020; convened by Gillian Woods, Birkbeck University)

As you can tell, I’m a Thompson and Turchi fanboy – their progressive pedagogy is all about debate, inclusion, and drawing on the identities of learners to help them understand what is going on beyond as well as within the classroom, in our urgent now. Their pedagogy is also about using and reinvigorating Shakespeare to achieve this. When people read Shakespeare, they read themselves – a truth evident in many periods and contexts. If we can’t read ourselves in or through Shakespeare, then we won’t read him.

Models of English

Their approach fits well within the model of learning English which is about ‘critical literacy’. But in an attempt to be ‘critically literate’ ourselves, and deepen our reflections, might we see some problems with Thompson and Turchi’s approach to offence in the Shakespeare classroom?

Firstly, Shakespeare has been put to work informing the many political persuasions people also use to read themselves, from fascism to communism, nationalism to postcolonialism. So while aiming for progressive outcomes, the challenge remains: what if Shakespeare doesn’t change but emboldens the white supremacist in your seminar group?

Moreover, emphasising the present-day value of something, especially thinking or teaching or learning about a complex problem, is vital. But it poses a risk, even if you are doing this for progressive ends. To put this another way, Thompson and Turchi want to help students use Shakespeare to help themselves understand themselves. But that isn’t all Thompson and Turchi suggest reading complex texts like Shakespeare is good for: ‘All students need these skills to be prepared for university and employment in the twenty-first century’.
“All students need these skills to be prepared for university and employment in the twenty-first century…” Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi, Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centred Approach (2016) 13.

This reduces the study of Shakespeare to the acquisition of ‘the transferrable work readiness skills that businesses need’, because ‘employers need access to a pipeline of graduates’. Sadly, this fits in with how too many people with too much power see education, including higher education. Such education will turn learners into ‘thinking, complex problem-solving and decision-making individuals’, prepared for ‘complex-decision [sic] making’ and ‘people management’. If we learn ‘cognitive flexibility’ by giving and taking offence in the Shakespeare seminar, we can learn how to manage people in complex organisations. We all need to work with people from different cultures and places. We can’t allow offence to derail productivity. We need to be taught to be sensitive so the wheels of commerce keep on going.

Offence and Employability: The Business Case

“Higher education providers need to provide degrees with lasting value to their recipients. This will mean … teaching students the transferrable work readiness skills that businesses need, including collaborative teamwork and the development of a positive work ethic, so that they can contribute more effectively to our efforts to boost the productivity of the UK economy. … employers need access to a pipeline of graduates with the skills they need…” UK Government, Department for Business Innovation & Skills, Green Paper on Higher Education Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice (2015), 8, 11, 19.

“The higher education sector…needs to transform itself to remain relevant to the changing landscape. The focus of higher education needs to change from providing employability enhancements, to prepare learners into thinking, complex problem-solving and decision-making individuals. Based on current trends in the job market, some of the proposed enabling factors for the individual learner are as follows: Focus on judgement-driven skills: Preparing the student for complex-decision [sic] making by inculcating the softer aspects of the job requirements in the curriculum – negotiation skills, analytical thinking, complex problem-solving, communication skills, people management and cognitive flexibility,” Ernst and Young and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), Future of jobs and its implications on Indian higher education (India, November 2016), 6.

This corresponds with another, more reductive, instrumental model of learning English: ‘English as skills’. As we have seen though, alternatives are possible, not least, finally, in the form of the idea of the student as a ‘Citizen Scholar’: ‘A student who cares not only about gaining information and generating knowledge but one that is rooted in the reality of their context, problem oriented and interested in applying their knowledge for the betterment of society’.

The Citizen Scholar

“A student who cares not only about gaining information and generating knowledge but one that is rooted in the reality of their context, problem oriented and interested in applying their knowledge for the betterment of society: a student who is a Citizen Scholar.” James Arvanitakis and David J. Hornsby, ‘Introduction’, in Universities, the Citizen Scholar and the Future of Higher Education, eds. Arvanitakis and Hornsby (2016), 1-6, 1.
Thompson and Turchi, I think, subscribe to this view far more than the instrumental ‘skills’ model. They talk about using Shakespeare’s complex texts to help students understand all complex discourses and debates in society. Given some of the contradictions we find ourselves in, critical literacy has never been more necessary.

In a neo-liberal world, how can we be both self-interested consumers and entrepreneurs and social-conscious citizens? How can our students? Another complex contradiction that we and our students need to be able to read critically derives from marketizing education in the liberal university. If students are consumers, and universities really are, as some neo-liberal ideologues would suggest, a ‘market place of ideas’ that cannot countenance censorship, then why shouldn’t they get what they pay for? Who would pay to be in an unsafe space?

Finally, if people seem concerned by calling out a culture of ‘microaggressions’, might we read such a culture as a response to what Ira Wells calls ‘a politics of macroaggression’ (‘The Age of Offence: The politics of outrage, and the crisis of free speech on campus’, Literary Review of Canada: A Journal of Ideas (April 2017), https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2017/04/the-age-of-offence/)? This ‘macroaggression’ has dominated the last few years in the US and beyond. In the face of merciless, faceless globalised forces, populists react by telling us to take back control; what is ‘woke’ culture but a comparable attempt at taking back control of the political realm from the worst excesses of populism?

I can’t answer these questions or resolve these contradictions here. But I will end with this point. As we have seen, Thompson and Turchi are aware of the role thinking about offence can play in helping students become ‘Citizen Scholars’, because it can encourage a crucial constituent of that identity: cultural humility. Cultural humility is ‘a commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique…a desire to address and change power imbalances…the development of partnerships…’; a commitment which involves asking: ‘Might I be offending…?’

“a commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique…a desire to address and change power imbalances…the development of partnerships…Might I be offending, or prying into someone’s life…?” Milton Nomikoudis and Matthew Starr, ‘Cultural Humility in Education and Work’, Universities, the Citizen Scholar 69-84, 71-2, 76.

This is not about censorship or silencing, but about dialogue and deep respect.

This is also not a world away from where I and we began, with that moment where a white student of mine said they didn’t feel they could talk about black responses to Othello.

Now I might see such moments as a way to discuss being white, as much as to understand being black.

So, in a spirit of accepting my own cultural humility, and knowing what I now know, I am a world away from letting go again of the chance to make more of such moments.

Questions:

- Why Offensive Shakespeare? Is he uniquely offensive? Are there other authors whose potential to offend is something we should be concerned about or interested in?
- What is the relationship between the marketisation of Higher Education and concerns about ‘free speech’ on campus?