

## *Play the Knave in the English Shakespeare Curriculum: A Review*

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### **A Review of the Literature**

The question of what constitutes “effective curriculum” in high schools is one that has now become complicated by the prevalence of technology in the modern classroom and the demands that 21<sup>st</sup> century society places on students entering the world after high school. According to the California Department of Education (CDE) Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts/English Language Development (ELA/ELD), California teachers must prepare students for life outside of school while exposing them to multiple texts and media for the sake of broad literacy (53). Thus, technologies and multimedia forms are becoming increasingly prevalent – and necessary – in high school classrooms. In this review and recommendation, I will begin by discussing effective literature instruction to frame my later recommendation. Subsequently, I will describe and discuss the technology and performance-based unit entitled “Drama King” before identifying it as an effective or ineffective learning tool in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning in California English courses.

This literature review will define quality instruction in high school English classrooms, specifically in California, by responding to the following questions:

1. What is effective literature instruction?
  - a. What are the expectations for California high school English students?
  - b. What is the proper context for learning in such classes?
2. How should students be assessed? How does writing factor into an effective curriculum?

The necessity for teachers to adapt their curriculum to the changing times is directly related to the new literacies experienced by current high school students. However, in order to understand the educational possibilities of performance- and videogame-based instruction, one must first examine what it means to achieve “effective literature instruction.”

The Curriculum Evaluation Committee of the CDE (2014) defines the goals for California high school graduates as “develop[ing] the readiness for college, careers, and civic life; attain[ing] the capacities of literate individuals; becom[ing] broadly literate; and acquir[ing] the skills for living and learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (p. 53). These educational expectations suggest that teachers must provide students with multiple opportunities to engage with the world they will enter as graduates, using a wide range of materials. Importantly, the Curriculum Evaluation Committee (2014) states that the qualities of literate individuals include: “demonstrating independence; building strong content knowledge... comprehending as well as critiquing; valuing evidence; using technology and digital media strategically and capably; and understanding other perspectives and cultures” (p. 54). Thus, students are expected to be independent and knowledgeable individuals capable of constructing evidence-based arguments and using multiple forms of media to do so by the time they graduate. A lesson or unit which is considered successful will have components which encourage independent learning, understanding rather than simple regurgitation of facts or events, evidence-based arguments, the use of technology as a supplement, and discussion with and about different perspectives (Curriculum Evaluation

Committee 2014, p. 54). Students must also be “broadly literate” meaning they “appreciat[e] an array of texts” including “books, plays, radio programs, poetry, film television, mixed media, and more,” meaning teachers must incorporate a wide variety of materials into their units in order to help students fully succeed (Curriculum Evaluation Committee 2014, p. 55).

Other studies concerning the education of high school students agree that, in addition to the CDE’s standards, students must also achieve a variety of social and cognitive skills, including effective communication. In their study on the impact of games in education, Howells and Cramner (2010) state that students in the study believed “increased collaboration, creativity and communication” were possible educational benefits of game-based learning (p. 6). This suggests that effective literature instruction includes opportunities for students to collaborate and communicate with peers, as well as exercise creativity, as these are qualities expected of students exiting high school. Howells and Cramner’s (2010) research aimed to “enable each young person to be **a successful learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen, and an effective contributor**” (p. 10). Therefore, in addition to the standards laid out by school governance, researchers and students both believe students must achieve qualities which will prepare themselves for civic life. Lesson plans which encourage student growth in these areas will allow for effective instruction.

The context in which students learn is equally important in judging the effectiveness of instruction. The Curriculum Evaluation Committee (2014) states that successful implementation of English curriculum takes place in an environment which is “integrated, motivating, engaging, respectful, and challenging for all students” (pp. 53, 61). Teachers are expected to encourage lively discussion and learning of the material in order to provide their students with the proper educational supports. Motivation and engagement play a large role in student success. Howells and Cramner (2010) name the following qualities as particular benefits of game-based activities: “harnessing children’s current culture, engaging and motivating children and preparing children for future life” (p. 7). Alig (as cited in Daddona 2013) also believes in the importance of engagement in classrooms and suggests that teachers can “keep students motivated” by “embedding a writing assignment in real-life, problem-solving situations,” which “can be invaluable” (p. 34). Therefore, one of the most important factors in educational plans must be to provide students with an environment that relates to students on a personal level, thus engaging them and motivating them to participate in learning. As Howells and Cramner (2010) note, “active learning is very much on the agenda for schools,” as students are more likely to absorb the material if they are engaged (p. 27).

In the next section, I will describe a mini-unit entitled “Drama King” to contextualize the curriculum which I will recommend in the final section.

## **Description of Curriculum**

This review focuses on “Drama King,” a mini-unit designed by Brendan Ward, a UC Davis’s Education Credential and Master’s Program graduate student. The lesson is designed for an English high school class, specifically in ninth grade, and utilizes drama and acting activities as tools for teaching Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. It is part of a larger Shakespeare unit in which Mr. Ward taught students how to identify iambic pentameter and other structural features

of Shakespeare. The main concern of this review, however, is the mini-unit focusing specifically on acting and *Play the Knave*.

The unit uses state standards to guide its implementation in that it incorporates writing, reading, and interacting with multiple kinds of texts in order to increase student reading comprehension and analytical ability. The objective of the curriculum is as follows: students will demonstrate textual comprehension and analytical ability through scene performances. The grading criteria were as follows, on a 0-5 scale:

1. Memorization
2. Blocking/staging informed by the text
3. Character motivation as informed by the text
4. Character emotions as informed by the text
5. Character gestures as informed by the text

This unit was designed to improve and assess student comprehension abilities as well as engage and motivate them to interact with the texts, by way of performance.

The format of the lesson went as follows:

1. Students performed a Globe Activity with Romeo's final monologue in which students identified diction, iambic pentameter, and rhyme scheme to consider Romeo's motives and concerns in the scene. (will elaborate later draft)
2. Students were given a writing prompt asking to write a half page analysis about Romeo's final monologue.
3. Students were given handouts which had scripts of the scenes being performed (due to the format of the *Play the Knave* videogame, students chose short scenes that were present in the game) using both the script from the game (slightly abridged) and the script from the original text.
  - a. These handouts included boxes for students to identify important words and phrases, as implied by iambic pentameter, as well as sections asking students to "stage the scene" – i.e. write movements to be performed, emphasis points, etc.
4. Students were split into groups of four: two actors, one dramaturge, and a researcher. The actors acted out the scenes as staged by the dramaturge and the researcher, who used the handout to create emphasis points and movements and to describe the overall tone/manner of the scene being performed.
5. In these groups, students discussed the scenes, looking for evidence to justify their performance decisions. When the students were done setting up their scenes, they had the option of utilizing *Play the Knave* to rehearse their scenes. These *Play the Knave* performances spanned two class days.
  - a. While rehearsing, students discussed with Mr. Ward the reasons for their staging choices, and received feedback on performances as well as scaffolding questions to encourage more active performances.
6. Students performed their scenes in front of their classmates, without the game, as a final performance. Students were originally expected to memorize the scene, but ultimately were permitted to utilize their scripts if they felt it necessary.
7. The lesson concluded with a half-page scene analysis of the scene performed by each group.

This lesson utilized kinesthetic activities with the goal of increasing student engagement, awareness, and analysis of scenes. Written assignments allowed the teacher to assess student abilities both before and after the performance of the scenes and encouraged evidence-based analysis by students.

## **Recommendation**

The mini-unit “Drama King” is a dynamic set of activities which addresses the need for student engagement in curriculum as described by the Curriculum Evaluation Committee of the CDE (2014), which states, “It is critical to incorporate motivational factors, such as interest, relevance, identity, self-efficacy, into curriculum design” (p. 63). This unit incorporates student interest through the game *Play the Knave* while still challenging them to analyze and interact with the text. The lesson plan’s engagement capabilities, writing tasks, challenge level, and flexibility of implementation all make this a highly effective program for high school English students learning Shakespeare.

According to Groff, Howells, and Cramner (2010), games such as *Play the Knave* can be useful tools to create a “learning space where new ideas and problem-solutions can be tested and retested...where a new identity can be tried on and embodied, where it’s ok to try hard at times while being more relaxed at others,” meaning game-based learning can provide students with a supportive, yet challenging, environment (14). This means that the structured nature of the “Drama King” game, combined with its potential for adaptation based on student responses, is useful because students are given the opportunity to independently play and construct their performances. Students are supported with scaffolding questions after each practice, but they are left to generate ideas and analyze text as well. Thus, the teacher utilizes engagement strategies and challenges students while still supporting them.

The mini-unit also incorporates discussion-based approaches through the small group setting, another characteristic of effective curriculum. According to Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003), courses “with high academic demands and more emphasis on discussion-based approaches show higher end-of-year literacy performance across track levels” (717). Essentially, courses which encourage discussion are considered beneficial to students of all levels, especially when they are rigorous. “Drama King” meets these criteria through its various parts (analysis, group discussions of the text, staging, and execution of analyses through performance) which challenge students to discuss and physically implement rigorous consideration of texts. Furthermore, “Drama King” utilizes students’ connections to the world of technology in order to produce an engaging, dynamic environment for students to test and retest their physical representations of their analyses.

“Drama King” may be seen as distracting to some students due to the highly active, videogame-centered nature of the lesson. However, implementing this game into a performance-based lesson plans creates the engaging, interactive, and challenging environment which is required in California high schools. Thus, “Drama King” is an effective curriculum for students learning English in California high schools.

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