



IN WHAT WAYS DID THE 2010 GREAT SHAKESPEARE DEBATE HAVE A POSITIVE PEDAGOGICAL IMPACT UPON STUDENT PARTICIPANTS?

A CASE STUDY

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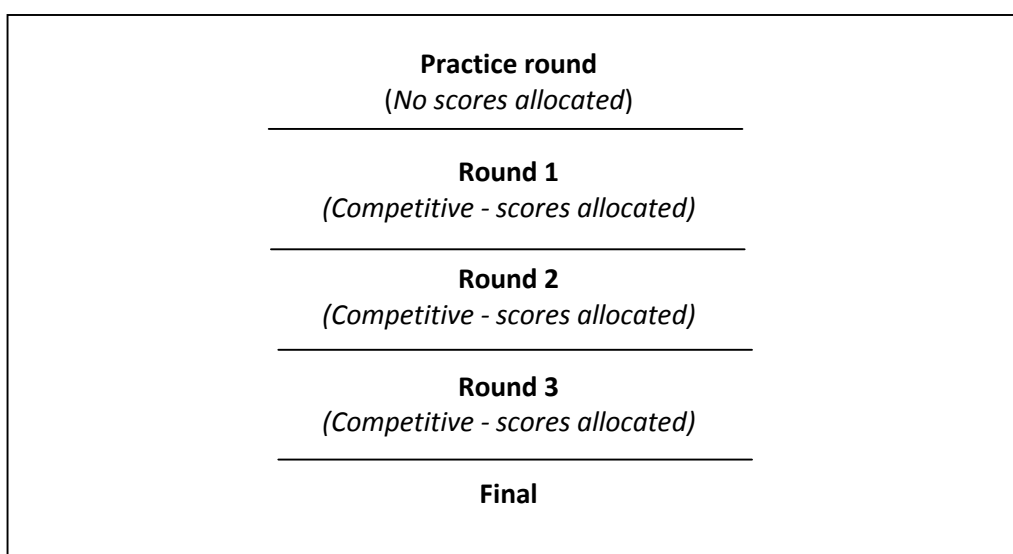
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Introduction

The Great Shakespeare Debate (GSD) developed out of a collaboration between two educational charities, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (SBT) and the English Speaking Union (ESU) and, since 2006, has been supported by the CAPITAL Centre at the University of Warwick. The event, which has been running annually since 2005, gives students from schools across the country the opportunity “to explore the world of Shakespeare through dynamic discussion and lively debate” (BritishDebate.com). The GSD fuses the SBT’s mission to “promote the life and works of William Shakespeare” (Shakespeare Birthplace Trust) with the ESU’s ambition to “nurture dialogue and the exchange of ideas and opinions” (Jason Vit, interview March 2010). Participating schools enter teams of three students who compete in formal debates against representatives from other schools, with each debate being driven by an issue, idea or question provoked by a Shakespearean play. Alongside the debating process students go and see live theatre, take part in discussions with Royal Shakespeare Company actors, visit Shakespeare’s Birthplace and hear lectures delivered by the SBT Education team and University of Warwick academics. These experiences do not exist in isolation from one another but are designed to complement and feed back into the debating process, with students expected to cite evidence from them when developing and articulating their arguments and ideas in the formal debates. The debating process itself consists of five rounds with each GSD participant competing in at least four of them. Each debate is a contest between two groups of students, who are scored according to their grasp of (a) Reasoning and Evidence; (b) Organisation and Prioritisation; (c) Listening and Response; and (d) Expression and Delivery. The debating process is outlined clearly and simply in Figure 1:

Figure 1



(Debate between the two highest scoring teams from previous 3 rounds)

Student teams applying to take part in the 2010 GSD were judged by a video they submitted to YouTube, responding to a range of criteria set by the SBT. This included exploration of (a) the ways in which the students had used Shakespeare's work in school over the previous two years; (b) what they enjoyed about studying Shakespeare; and (c) a two minute discussion about love, ambition, appearance vs. reality or fate. A total of nineteen schools applied to take part in the 2010 GSD, twelve of which were selected to participate. Of these twelve institutions there were four were State schools, four Grammar schools and four fee-paying Independent schools – an equilibrium that was coincidental rather than engineered. Student participants were at the AS/A2 stage of their education and, whilst representing a range of disciplinary interests, English, Mathematics and History were by far the most common (see Appendix 1).

Following the recent abolition of SATS at Key Stage 3 there is a fresh opportunity to reconsider and revitalise the way in which Shakespeare is taught in schools. The GSD model is an example of the kind of innovation that could be encouraged within this new context, providing students with opportunities to enter constructive and generative dialogues about Shakespeare's texts whilst simultaneously building an armoury of key transferable skills. The purpose of this research is to explore the positive ways in which the 2010 GSD impacted upon:

(a) Students' command of key transferable skills, such as verbal communication and teamwork

(b) Students' level of engagement with Shakespeare's texts

Anecdotal evidence from previous GSDs suggest that the event helps students develop sophisticated and thoughtful responses to theatrical texts, as well as enhancing their ability to declare and contest complex ideas within a public space. For such pedagogical benefits to be formally accepted this *anecdotal* evidence must be substantiated by empirical investigation. From the 2nd-3rd March 2010 I attended the two-day event in Stratford-upon-Avon and investigated the pedagogical impact of the Great Shakespeare Debate.

Methodology

Case study

At the heart of this investigation is a case study exploring the experiences of three students from Bacon's College, South-East London – who attended the Great Shakespeare Debate in March 2010. According to Martyn Denscombe, a specialist in teaching research methodology, the case study 'enables the researcher to grapple with relationships and social processes in a way that is denied to the survey approach' (Denscombe 2007, p.45). A survey approach by itself might well exclude personal narratives and the incremental details of process and progress. The subjects of my research were (a) the students and (b) the GSD, with (c) being the interaction between the two. By focusing on a particular case I was able 'to deal with the subtleties and intricacies' (*ibid*) of this interaction and reflect on it with a holistic understanding of the context. This idea is supported by Joe Winston, a drama educationalist at the University of Warwick, who asserts that the case study approach seeks 'to convey a valid sense of the experience of a programme as well as its effects'. Given that my research focus is on the relationship between students and a learning *process*, an informed impression of the *experience* of learning was as vital as any statistical *outcome*.

Bacon's College in South-East London specialises in digital media and became an academy school in 2007. According to a 2009 Ofsted report:

'Half of the students are from minority ethnic groups, the largest being African. One in five speaks a first language other than English and 25 of these are at an early stage of learning English. A quarter of students have special educational needs and/or disabilities, of which the main one is behavioural, emotional and social. Two out of every five pupils are eligible for free school meals.' (OFSTED 2009)

I selected this school for a number of reasons, chief amongst which was the fact that it had never participated in the Great Shakespeare Debate and did not have any traditional link with Shakespeare, Stratford-upon-Avon or debating. I calculated that the pedagogic impact of the GSD would be most effectively measured by exploring the experiences of students who did not have any institutional connection to the sort of cultural capital espoused by the SBT and ESU, as opposed to the schools in which debating, Shakespeare and live theatre were embedded in the curriculum.

Another reason for selecting an inner-city State school was the fact that it better represents the educational experiences of most young people in this country, the majority of whom attend schools in densely populated urban conurbations in which there is social, economic and cultural diversity. If the GSD and models like it are to gain political and economic support then it is important (and far more potent) to draw focus onto the narrative of students to whom this blend of cultural and educational capital is remote.

Interviews

This case-study was executed through a programme of interviews and a process of observation. Bacon's College students were interviewed (i) at the beginning of the two-day process to capture their expectations, hopes and concerns; (ii) at the end of day one to capture their reflections on what they'd experienced; and (iii) at the end of day two to capture their thoughts and reflections on the entire process. The interviews established a space in which the students were able to reflect on their individual and collective progress, capturing an authentic account of their journey across the two-day process.

Observation

Whilst interviews were a vital constituent of this research, my own personal observations of the process provided an *ongoing* analysis of the event. Interviewing the students offered a valuable reflection on what *had* happened, but by employing an observational strategy I was able to consider what *was* happening at any one time and make an accurate record of it. Indeed, as David Wilkinson and Peter Birmingham have argued observational studies allow you 'to know more about your research topic because you have experienced it, participated in it, shared the experience with the very people you are researching and seen all from the their point of view' (Wilkinson and Birmingham 2003, p. 120). My immersion in this two-day process ensured that my dialogue with the Bacon's College students was based on an understanding and empathy with their process, whilst simultaneously allowing me to step back and observe the event from a critically-engaged standpoint.

Survey

A case study by itself does not provide the wider statistical evidence needed to verify the accounts and experiences of these three students. In addition to the case study approach, I surveyed the entire 2010 GSD cohort – which generated a statistical resource against which the qualitative evidence generated by the case study could be measured and verified. This was executed through a simple entrance and exit questionnaire (see Appendix 1), which every student participant completed

at the beginning and end of the process. Whilst my utilisation of the interview method provided an invaluable *dialogic* form of evidence gathering, the use of questionnaires ensured every GSD participant was asked the same set of questions swiftly and efficiently, and on an equal basis.

Additional investigations

Alongside my formal research methodology I undertook both formal and informal enquiries with event organisers. These included interviews with Jason Vit, the ESU's representative at the event and its Head of Speech and Debate, and Elizabeth Woledge, who is a senior figure in the SBT's Education team and organised the GSD. Such consultations were initiated to establish a greater sense of context and information from people who were both agents and observers of the process, as well as any relevant thoughts, ideas and interpretations they might have.

Shortcomings of research

Originally, I had intended to stretch this research project over several months in order to capture any short-medium term impact the GSD had upon the Bacon's College participants. This more longitudinal approach would have involved me making monthly visits to the school from after the 2010 GSD had ended up until the beginning of the school's summer holiday. This would have involved interviews with the three students in question and discussions with relevant teachers, as well as further observation of their practice and conduct in relevant learning contexts. This may well have been an effective means by which to assess and scrutinise any lasting outcomes of their GSD experience. In the light of the students' exam preparations, the onset of study leave and various breakdowns in communication, this stage of my research collapsed. This was a regrettable development, yet in an attempt to salvage at least some of its remit I sent each of the three Bacon's College students a questionnaire that asked them to consider the ways in which the GSD had impacted on their learning experiences since returning to school.

Analysis

Debating process

Kate, Val and Mwari, who began the Great Shakespeare Debate without having had any previous experience of public debating, were largely unclear as to what the event would involve, as Kate's comment suggests:

“We haven't got much idea... we were told that there are these debates and that they take place over two days.” (Kate, Interview 1)

Following an ESU-led discussion on the rules and regulations of formal debating the three students began preparation for a practice debate, for which they were required to oppose the following motion:

This House believes that Shakespeare portrays love as a force more destructive than hate

The students had found the debating discussion useful as an information resource, but were unable to take on board the sheer volume of rules and tools they would need to deal confidently with the practice debate. In this debate, for example, the group did not attempt one single *point of information* – a signifier of confident and engaged debating – the absence of which they attributed to their uncertainty about what one was. The pedagogical value of this practice debate, therefore, was that it gave those who had had little or no previous experience of debating the opportunity to fail without it damaging their overall chances (see Figure 1). This experiential approach to understanding debate was further enhanced by the system of feedback put in place by both the SBT and the ESU. Each debate was adjudicated by a University of Warwick English undergraduate (who provided feedback on the substance of their argument in relation to Shakespeare) and a member of the English Speaking Union (who provided feedback on their debating skills). This co-authorship of feedback ensured that students had an independent yet experienced eye to observe and critique both the substance and style of their arguments, something the Bacon's College students were emphatically and vocally supportive of:

“The test one was a real confidence booster and getting the criticism was a big help for the proper one. After we got that criticism we saw where we were going

wrong and we saw how to improve it [and] we all felt much better and more able.” (Val, Interview 2)

“After having done it once you knew not only what to expect from debate but also what to improve on in yourself.” (Kate, Interview 2)

Every individual participant in the GSD took part in at least four debates and Mwari, Val and Kate were clear that their debating skills improved with each one. In the privileged position of observer I was able to chart this journey in more technical detail. Figure 2 illustrates the Bacon’s College students’ incremental progress over the course of their four debates:

Figure 2

<i>Practice debate</i>	<i>1st debate</i>	<i>2nd debate</i>	<i>3rd debate</i>
Very little structure to their arguments, as both individuals and a collective; individual arguments had some clarity but very little sense of collective thought and expression.	Some structure to their argument; improved gelling of arguments.	Some structure to their argument with clear and effective referencing of the RSC production of <i>King Lear</i>	Structuring of argument evident as individuals and as a collective – persuasive on both levels; clear referencing to <i>King Lear</i> production as well as other theatrical and film adaptations of Shakespeare plays.
No points of information	2-3 points of information	4-5 points of information	5-6 points of information
Extremely nervous before & during the debate, evidenced by lack of vocal dexterity, mumbling when speaking, eyes glued to their notes.	Slightly more confident, evidenced by eye contact with opponents, louder/ clearer expression and ability to address opposition’s points of information	Far fewer referrals to their notes; ability to speak clearly and fluidly to the entire room; certain points of information rebutted very effectively.	Despite being in a smaller and more cramped space they retained their vocal confidence and even took risks by injecting a passion into their tone and humour into their arguments. Assured handling of opposition’s points of information.

As is evident, each new debate represents a marked improvement on the previous one, in terms of both style and substance. It is to the credit of the GSD organisers that such a well-structured system is in place (Figure 2), as a more traditional knock-out competition may deprive less experienced students of a sustained opportunity to improve. As we can see from Figure 2 the Bacon’s College students acquired structure to their arguments, vocal clarity and the confidence to raise and contest points of information. Val, who began the process as the least confident and vocally dextrous of the Bacon’s cohort, felt assured that he had made significant progress:

“Confidence in speaking has really improved for me. I’ve never really done anything like this... so I was a bit shaky. But after the 4th time I’d done it I was much more confident, I could easily do it again now.” (Val, Interview 3)

Increased vocal confidence and improved technical ability was not limited to the three students in my case study; indeed, my exit survey showed that 94% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their debating skills had improved as a result of the GSD (see Appendix 3). There is an apparent synthesis between survey, interview and observation, which at the very least indicates basic and widespread improvements in debating and potentially the beginnings of increases in key life and employability skills such as verbal communication and confidence in public speaking.

A range of experiences – social and educational capital

As previously stated, this year’s GSD finals included schools from a variety of socio-educational contexts, splitting equally between State, Grammar and fee-paying Independent Schools. The latter two of these groupings have a historic tradition of debating societies, raising the possibility that a hierarchy might emerge between those who were accustomed to formal debate and those that were not. The students from Bacon’s College, however, were hugely grateful for the different ranges of debating experience present at the GSD, as Val asserts:

“You can take things that they do and use it your own speech and it’s good to see it done by someone who knows what they’re doing. If we’d just gone in there and faced someone that was our level of skill then we would have probably not have done as well because it makes you step your game up a little bit to try and meet these guys at their level.” (Val, Interview 3)

This social constructivist account of learning encapsulates the educational psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s influential concept of *the zone of proximal development*, which highlights:

‘The distance between the actual developmental level as determined through problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.’ (Vygotsky 1978, p. 8)

According to Vygotsky a young person’s development as a learner is enhanced when engaged in collaborative practices with students of contrasting experiences and abilities. Learning and working with students from a range of backgrounds and cultural experiences establishes a learning

environment absent in many students' educations – in which streaming is dominant. Indeed, given the range of debating experiences present at the GSD, the fact that 94% of students detected some improvement in their debating skills is highly impressive. It suggests that students from across the experience spectrum – basic, intermediate and advanced – felt that the GSD moved them forward in some way. Mwari claimed that:

“By looking at the others we could see what they [those giving feedback] mean, because what *they* do good *we* lack and what *we* do good *they* lack. It's good to see how other teams are... it helps us know what to look out for and how to improve ourselves.” (Mwari, Interview 2)

Whilst the Bacon's College students often spoke highly of their opponent's style, confidence and vocal clarity, those debating *against* them were equally complementary of the strength and originality of their arguments – as Mwari said, “what *they* do good *we* lack and what *we* do good *they* lack”. English Speaking Union representative Jason Vit argues that the structures present in formal debating prevent a tyranny of the experienced – “because there's a specific time limit in which you're allowed to speak and nobody is able to dominate” (Jason Vit, Interview). He suggests that this benefits the least confident students who are given exactly the same level of democratic space as the most confident, allowing both sides in a debate to make pedagogic advances. The GSD, therefore, presents a context in which different students with different experiences can pool their varying aptitudes and levels of experience for the collective benefit of all.

Teamwork

In addition to learning from their opponents, the Bacon's College students also learnt from each other. Working intensely over a period of two-days they were required to think and perform as a unit. When preparing for a debate it is necessary to communicate, negotiate and delegate within your team. Kate explained that the first time the group prepared for a debate they did it entirely “as a team”, but because that method of preparation “didn't work very well with the time” they had to adapt their strategy (Kate, Interview 2). According to Kate, the second time they prepared for a debate, “we still did it together and pooled our ideas, but then went off and worked on our own things” (*ibid*). This is a small example of the group becoming aware of a more advanced/appropriate method of teamwork. Rather than composing their entire argument as a collective, they discussed certain issues and then delegated appropriately. My observations in Figure 2 confirm the effectiveness of this change in approach, where it is possible to chart the group's incremental

improvements in debating as a *unit*. In Figure 3 (below) I've reproduced the relevant observations I made from both the Practice debate and the 3rd and final debate:

Figure 3

<i>Practice debate</i>	<i>3rd debate</i>
Very little structure to their arguments, as both individuals and a collective; individual arguments had some clarity but very little sense of collective thought and expression.	Structuring of argument evident as individuals and as a collective - persuasive on both levels.

This contrast illustrates the beginning and end points of the Bacon's College students' journey at the GSD and demonstrates their progress from fragmented and unstructured to cohesive and united.

Working effectively as a team in this context was made all the more difficult by the intense time pressures placed on each group. Between being informed of the proposition and debating it, there is a total of 45 minutes preparation time. In an informal discussion during the two-day event Jason Vit suggested to me that debating, which to some extent simulates the intense pressures of written examinations, can make a valuable contribution towards students' ability to cope with the rigours of summative assessment – in which the speedy formulation and articulation of ideas and arguments are often prerequisites. To verify such a claim would require a far larger and more longitudinal research project than this, however, the experiences of the Bacon's college students suggests that this claim may have some validity:

“If we'd been given it two days beforehand we wouldn't have put as much effort in as we put in during that forty-five minutes. That short time frame made us get our heads down and do it properly.” (Val, Interview 3)

“It made us focus. We had so many things to say... we had to get focused and it made me more determined to do well. We've got forty minutes so let's get on with it and do our best.” (Mwari, Interview 3)

I am not arguing that two days of the GSD will transform the Bacon's College students' prospects at A-level, however, they were explicit about the fact that the time-restricted process of preparation proved highly generative in discussing, negotiating and planning an effective argument.

Outcomes

We may question why any of this matters. What is the benefit in improving the debating skills of students? The answer is two-fold; one is an issue of skills, the other an issue of citizenship.

Skills

“It helps us even in the future: whether to talk more, be more confident when explaining points.... Everyone should get a chance to do that [debating] because it helps them so much, because it gives them more ways to express themselves about a topic.” (Mwari, Reflective Questionnaire)

In his introduction to the 2010 CBI Education and Skills Survey the organisation’s Director-general Richard Lambert stated:

“Youth unemployment has risen sharply in the last year, and it is essential that schools and colleges ensure that young people enter the labour market with a strong grasp of basic skills...

Problem solving, team-working and time management skills are a necessary part of employment, and business will often consider these qualities to be as important as exam results and formal qualifications. Improving these skills was employers’ top priority for the education system”

(Lambert 2010, p4)

The report demonstrated employers’ priorities for (a) schools and colleges; and (b) Higher Education. In both cases a majority of employers (70% and 81% respectively) cited improved employability skills as their number one priority (CBI 2010, p6). The CBI’s definition of what constitutes employability skills is listed below in Figure 3 (*ibid*, p24). I have taken the liberty of underlining those skills that are addressed by the GSD, demonstrating its value as an educational approach (see overleaf).

Figure 3

- **Self-management** – readiness to accept responsibility, flexibility, time management, readiness to improve own performance
- **Teamworking** – respecting others, co-operating, negotiating/persuading, contributing to discussions
- **Business and customer awareness** – basic understanding of the key drivers for business success and the need to provide customer satisfaction
- **Problem solving** – analysing facts and circumstances and applying creative thinking to develop appropriate solutions
- **Communication and literacy** – application of literacy, ability to produce clear, structured written work and oral literacy, including listening and questioning
- **Application of numeracy** – manipulation of numbers, general mathematical awareness and its application in practical context
- **Application of information technology** – basic IT skills, including familiarity with word processing spreadsheets, file management

This investigation is not longitudinal, so it is not possible to make a thorough assessment of the extent to which this event can enhance the key skills of participants. What is evident, however, is that in just two days 94% of participants detected some degree of improvement in their debating skills and, as is evident from the Bacon's Case Study, the students benefited in levels of confidence, as well as improved communication and teamworking skills. Employment organisations and governments are placing increasing pressure on educational institutions to develop ways and means of strengthening young peoples' command of employability skills. These skills cannot be addressed from conventional teaching and learning practices, which position the teaching/educator as the creator and disseminator of knowledge. An approach that necessitates participation and encourages the negotiation, exploration and articulation of ideas is far more likely to impact upon young people's grasp of key skills in communication and teamwork.

Citizenship

The second core reason why these skills matter is citizenship, as Jason Vit states:

“If you can't articulate views and rights then you're not able to defend the rights that you have, you're not able to argue for change in society. Whether it's academic requirements for students being better at structuring their arguments,

whether it's them doing well in oral examinations, or whether it's for interviews for university or jobs".

(Jason Vit, Interview 2010)

By asking students to stand in a public space and assert ideas of moral and intellectual value whilst responding to the ideas and rebuttals of others, the GSD is presenting a model of learning that is democratic and participatory to its core. A tangible and indeed remarkable outcome of this process is the fact that in the wake of the GSD debating has continued to play an important role in the lives of the Bacon's College students, as Mwari explains:

"Since returning to school we have had a class debate (in the same format) on the novel *Enduring Love* by Ian McEwan. We had to teach our class the format and guide them through the debating process which was fun. We're also re-opening a 'Debating Society' which was done around 2-3 years ago at our school & closed because the teacher left... The 'Debating Society' will allow all students to participate in debates on any subject which should be really fun. This has all happened due to the influence of the Shakespeare debate".

(Mwari, Reflective Questionnaire)

This demonstrates a GSD impact beyond the two-days spent in Stratford-upon-Avon. Returning students have disseminated the skills they learnt, using them for the pedagogic benefit of their classmates as well as for the enrichment of their school's extra-curricular programme. The fact that the Bacon's College students took these ideas back to their own school and created a space for debate is not only demonstrable of the kind of citizenship referred to by Jason Vit, but further evidence of the way in which the GSD helped develop students' sense of confidence and ownership of debating practice.

Shakespeare: a debate-led approach

Val, Kate, and Mwari were specific about the ways in which debating helped them to engage with Shakespeare's texts. They were most vocal about the ways in which this approach opened up their study of Shakespeare to include a range of ideas, arguments and interpretations, as Kate asserts:

"Because you don't have to look at one play... this is more like Shakespeare as a whole so... it highlights links and things that we don't get to see in school".

(Kate, Interview 2)

The following propositions give an example of the kind of issues students were asked to consider when debating:

- *This House believes that Shakespeare conceived of tragedy as more inherent to circumstance than personality*
- *This House believes that King Lear is a tragedy of youth more than age*
- *This House believes that the current production of King Lear leaves us with little hope for the future*

These are what we might call open-questions, which drama educationalists Joe Winston and Miles Tandy have referred to as “open to a wide range of responses” as opposed to closed questions which “may need only a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer.” (Winston/Tandy 2001, p. 72). ‘Open’ questions can act as stimuli for meaningful debate, with the exploration and pursuit of an answer just as important as the answer itself – as prominent educationalist Jerome Bruner said, good questions are ones ‘that take you somewhere’ (Bruner 1978, p. 40). One of the most fundamental discoveries a young person can make when studying Shakespeare is that there is not *one* interpretation or *one* correct version, but a multitude of possibilities. Although debating can run the risk of setting up simple binaries and oppositionalism, at its best it is a constructive and open-minded dialogue and encourages its participants to explore complex issues and ideas with reason, imagination and evidence. This is a socially constructive way of learning, in which the assertions of one group or individual are challenged and/or built upon by the assertions of another. This is not simply about speaking; it is also about listening and learning. Bacon’s round three motion was:

This House believes that King Lear is a tragedy of youth more than age

This opened up a range of philosophical issues focusing on ideas of power, control, failure, love and conflict, whilst simultaneously requiring the debaters to be grounded in specificity and substance. Debating such questions creates a bridge between questions of moral and intellectual significance, whilst retaining important elements of the specific, namely the need to provide textual and narrative evidence. As Mwari argues:

“It makes us realise more, because in the classroom we’re just reading the Shakespeare text and we write about a certain character or certain theme but now we have to be open to everything Shakespeare done. I’ve learnt so much already. In class I don’t really look too much in depth at why Shakespeare made his characters like that or why he did this, but now it’s open”. (Mwari, Interview 2)

Shakespeare and debating were not separate features of this event but intrinsically linked, enriching one another. Indeed, the constant need to refer to the text and make it relevant to the proposition ensured students were not only engaging more deeply with Shakespeare's texts but accruing a bank of knowledge and ideas. Indeed, on leaving the event 91% of students *agreed or strongly agreed* that they now had a better understanding of Shakespeare than they had when they arrived. The same 91% agreed or strongly agreed that they now felt more confident discussing Shakespeare in front of other people (Appendix 3). These two outcomes are part of the same narrative – with a greater grasp and understanding of Shakespeare resulting in students having a more confident relationship with him and his plays. The fact that knowledge was not simply accrued but also *applied* began to naturalise the idea that being active and dialogic with Shakespeare, rather than passive and tentative, is an effective method of engaging with his work.

Feeling positive about Shakespeare

As Susan Gushee O'Malley explains, students "too often believe that studying Shakespeare is a marker of ascendance into elite culture" (O'Malley p. 138). Shakespeare has many roles and many faces, one of which is as an emblem of high-culture – perceived by many as playwright whose language and theatre requires a certain level of intelligence or cultural capital to access. By placing Shakespeare in a process of debate the SBT and ESU are fostering the notion that ideas about Shakespeare are not fixed and that he offers many interpretative possibilities. The concept of openness referred to by Mwari takes Shakespeare away from the assessment-driven criteria of many modern classrooms into a more democratic space. Indeed, 94% of students *agreed or strongly agreed* that their experiences of the Great Shakespeare Debate had made them more positive about studying Shakespeare in the future (Appendix 3). When we couple this with the fact that 91% of students *agreed or strongly agreed* that they now felt more confident discussing Shakespeare in front of others, we can see the insecurities young people build around Shakespeare begin to crumble. This was a complex multifaceted process, yet given the one-sidedness of these figures it is reasonable to extrapolate that the debate-led approach to Shakespeare at the GSD had a positive impact on students' sense of confidence and optimism when exploring his plays – arguably the most crucial step on the road to successful and meaningful engagement with Shakespeare's work.

Cultural capital

Students attending this event experienced a significant dose of cultural capital. They visited Shakespeare's Birthplace, saw a production in his home town, held conversations with actors, experienced the sights and sounds of historic Stratford and received lectures from academics. The

fusion of debating and Shakespeare may be exportable to other environments but these additional experiences helped shape the event into something unique – something that could *only* happen in Stratford-upon-Avon. Kate suggested that being in Stratford “helped to provide inspiration since the whole town is a monument to him”, whilst Mwari referred to the fact that “being in Shakespeare’s Birthplace helped the atmosphere... It really inspired me to learn”. A well structured pedagogical process is the driving force behind this event, however, the experiential and cultural value added by being in Shakespeare’s town should not be underestimated. The GSD is a model for approaching Shakespeare’s plays which other organisations and institutions could adopt and adapt, however, the cultural experiences generated by being present in Stratford-upon-Avon expands and enhances the overall pedagogic impact.

Conclusions

It is possible to make a range of claims and assertions about this event, however, given the need to substantiate these claims with evidence, I will provide a brief and specific account of what I believe the GSD 2010 achieved, in relation to both employability skills and the study of Shakespeare.

1) Enhanced debating skills:

The difference between a young person who mumbles, looks at their feet, cannot articulate their thoughts, struggles in dialogic contexts is the difference between somebody who does get into university and does not, does get a job and does not. The Bacon's College students were explicit that they had greatly improved their ability to stand up in front of a room of people and argue or articulate a point of view. As an observer of this entire process I can confirm these assertions and have provided specific evidence detailing technical improvements in the students' debating and oratory each time they competed. In the two days I spent with Mwari, Kate and Val at the GSD they became more proficient in structuring arguments, citing specific and relevant evidence, articulating points of view, listening and responding to opposing ideas, not to mention greatly improving their teamwork skills. Their experiences can be verified against those of other students, 94% of whom felt that their debating skills had improved throughout the course of the two day process. These proven short-term advances in debating and key transferable skills are encouraging. Far more difficult to prove without the aid of longitudinal research is the longer term impact this event will have upon students. A significant development, one that cannot be reasserted enough, is the fact that Mwari, Val and Kate, on returning to Bacon's College, founded a debating society. Not only does this represent an impact beyond the two days in Stratford-upon-Avon – proving that everything they'd taken from the GSD didn't evaporate the day they left – it represents a legacy through which Val, Mwari and Kate can continue to debate. It takes confidence and competence in debating to setup and run a society such as this one - confidence and competence that even the three students admitted they had not discovered prior to the GSD. The debating society is an outcome of Mwari, Kate and Val's interactions and experiences at the 2010 GSD and is a testament to its value and quality as an inspiring and motivating pedagogic event.

2) Students more positive and confident about working with Shakespeare:

It is important to remember that alongside a richly educational process students were also having a lot of *fun*. This should not be seen as an irrelevance or a diversion but a central component of the students' social and educational experience. As Shakespeare educationalist Rex Gibson argued:

‘School Shakespeare should be a social, collaborative, participatory enterprise. It should mirror what I assume were Shakespeare’s working conditions: cooperating with colleagues in rehearsal to produce something giving delight and insight to others – and themselves.’ (Gibson 1990, p. 3)

Just because exploring Shakespeare can be intellectually challenging, does not mean it has to be dull. The *experience* of learning Shakespeare is of paramount importance when it comes to students and young people forming their opinions about him. Students were emphatic in their endorsement of this event. When asked to rate their overall experience on a scale of 1-10, 80% of students gave a score of 8 or higher – with the average being 8.3 (Figure 3). This is a subjective measure, but given the fact that not one individual rated the experience as being less than 7 it is reasonable to assert that the student reaction to the 2010 GSD was overwhelmingly positive. If we look at the entire cohort huge majorities (91%, 91%, 94%) of students left the GSD feeling:

- (a) Their knowledge of Shakespeare had improved
- (b) They were more confident about discussing Shakespeare in front of others
- (c) More optimistic about studying Shakespeare in the future

The above developments were backed-up by the experiences of the Bacon’s College students, who felt far more comfortable and relaxed with Shakespeare than they had at the beginning of the process, a transition summed up by Mwari:

“I feel more connected in a way. I didn’t really care too much about Shakespeare beforehand. Now I feel like I want to know so much more about his plays.”
(Mwari, Reflective Questionnaire)

Mwari not only feels less distant from Shakespeare and apathetic about his work, but is thirsty to explore it further. The increased confidence in dealing with Shakespeare has, it seems, lead to an optimism and even enthusiasm for his work. The majority of students arrived at the GSD with an already positive view of Shakespeare, with 88 % agreeing with the statement that “it is important to study Shakespeare’s plays” and 84% *disagreeing* with the statement that “studying Shakespeare is boring” (Appendix 5). Yet both enthusiasts *and* those such as Mwari, who arrived with less confidence and fondness for the playwright, found themselves becoming increasingly more positive about exploring Shakespeare’s plays in a teaching and learning context.

By asking students to *apply* Shakespeare's texts - making them matter to ideas and arguments of moral and cultural significance, students felt (a) more knowledgeable; (b) more confident; and (c) more optimistic about studying Shakespeare's work in the future.

Value to Warwick University

As an active supporter of the GSD, the CAPITAL Centre, a HEFCE-funded centre for excellence in teaching and learning at the Warwick University (2005-10), has contributed to the success of the event

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/capital/teaching_and_learning/projects/greatshakespearedebate CAPITAL's primary objective was to explore the value of performance-based, kinaesthetic learning applying the values of the theatre ensemble to higher education. Its financial contribution has supported the involvement of student mentors in the GSD, and over four years eighteen Warwick students have taken part. Drawn primarily from third year undergraduates studying the core Shakespeare course (Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time EN301) in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies, student participants have also come via the student debating society and the Institute of Education. Their role was to facilitate the Great Shakespeare Debate in the following ways:

- acting as mentors to school participants, giving positive feedback on their debating Shakespeare skills
- helping to run workshops led by ESU and SBT staff
- offering display debates
- judging debates using the skills they have been taught by the ESU

The value of the University's continued support is clear. The following testimony is from a current Warwick undergraduate, who is in the unique position of having participated in the event as both a school student and an undergraduate mentor. I have reproduced her thoughts in full as they represent the argument for Warwick University's continued involvement in the GSD most effectively. I have underlined those sentences that best articulate the case:

I took part in the GSD when I was at school and it was by far the most valuable experience I had the fortune to encounter there. It was actually the deciding factor in making me want to study at Warwick; the fact that there was opportunities for students to use their degree in a way that is so inspiring and with very real benefits for everyone involved was something that I just didn't see at other universities. I believe that debating is a vital learning tool (and anyone who's been involved with the GSD will agree) and not just for those doing the arguing. Mentoring and judging cultivated the skills I'd had to develop when I did competitive debating and forced me to learn new ones; taking a step back from

the argument and viewing it as a whole in order to see overarching themes, progressions and, of course, flaws is something that is central to (among other things, but most usefully for me!) essay writing but something that I know many students struggle with. Dealing with argumentation in an entirely fresh way and having to articulate strengths and weaknesses logically gave me a new way to look at not only my essay writing but the way I approached texts. For an English Lit student, especially, analysing other people's arguments is something that we have to do every day when we read criticism, but doing this effectively is a skill that is impossible to teach and difficult to teach oneself sitting at a desk. On a more personal level, the experience was incredibly rewarding. It may sound clichéd, but seeing students gain in confidence and knowledge over such a short period of time was truly special and meant I've stayed in contact with the birthplace trust to get involved with one or two other events they've organised for teaching schoolchildren. My peers in Eng. Literature were very enthusiastic when I told them about it, I feel you'll have a lot more students wanting to get involved next year.

In this report I have outlined the variety of ways that the GSD makes an invaluable contribution to the skills and learning experiences of participating students, as well as directly addressing the political and business communities' desire to see a greater focus on employability skills in both schools and universities. Not only does this event give the University the opportunity to showcase its support and encouragement of innovative, collaborative teaching and learning practices to prospective students, it also provides a space for its own undergraduates to *further* develop the key skills outlined in this report, not to mention the mentoring and leadership qualities which are of huge value at both university and within an employment context. The GSD is also of relevance to one of the University's key collaborations. The Graduate Pledge, a collaboration between King's College London and the University of Warwick (2009/10) to consider how teaching and learning in Russell Group universities might be improved, has highlighted the importance of Academic Literacy:

'There is a need to recognise and enhance not only text-based literacies traditionally supported through writing interventions but also to explore the potentialities of engaging critically with numeric, graphic and practice-based modes of communication.'

Academic literacy identifies oral, aural, written, physical and digital modes of expression and interaction – those aptitudes that are vital to the successful and rounded learner within an academic context. Such an approach implies that a *range* of skills and cognitive functions are required when engaging effectively within a Higher Education learning context. Not only does the GSD help to prepare aspiring graduates in some of the academic literacies (oral communication, teamwork, structured arguments) needed to make an impact in Higher Education, it enables those Warwick University students taking part as student mentors to practice more *advanced* skills sets.

Proposals have been made by the SBT to give Warwick University an even more significant partner role in the GSD process. Following a meeting between representatives of the the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and CAPITAL Centre), the following ideas have been put forward:

- Increase number of Warwick student mentors
- Make attendance and participation in the event a feature of the University's English and Drama PGCE curriculum.
- Make the event more local - consisting of 12 secondary schools in Coventry rather than 12 nationally.
- Far greater publicity (local radio, television, newspapers) for the event

The intention behind these proposals is to make the GSD a local collaboration – between City of Coventry schools, the University of Warwick and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. Warwick, working in collaboration with the SBT, could see very real and tangible benefits in regard to (a) the skills of participating undergraduates; (b) connections with local students and schools/outreach policy; (c) its reputation as an institution that encourages teaching and learning practices that respond to the needs of industry, the conclusions of research and the ethics of learning.

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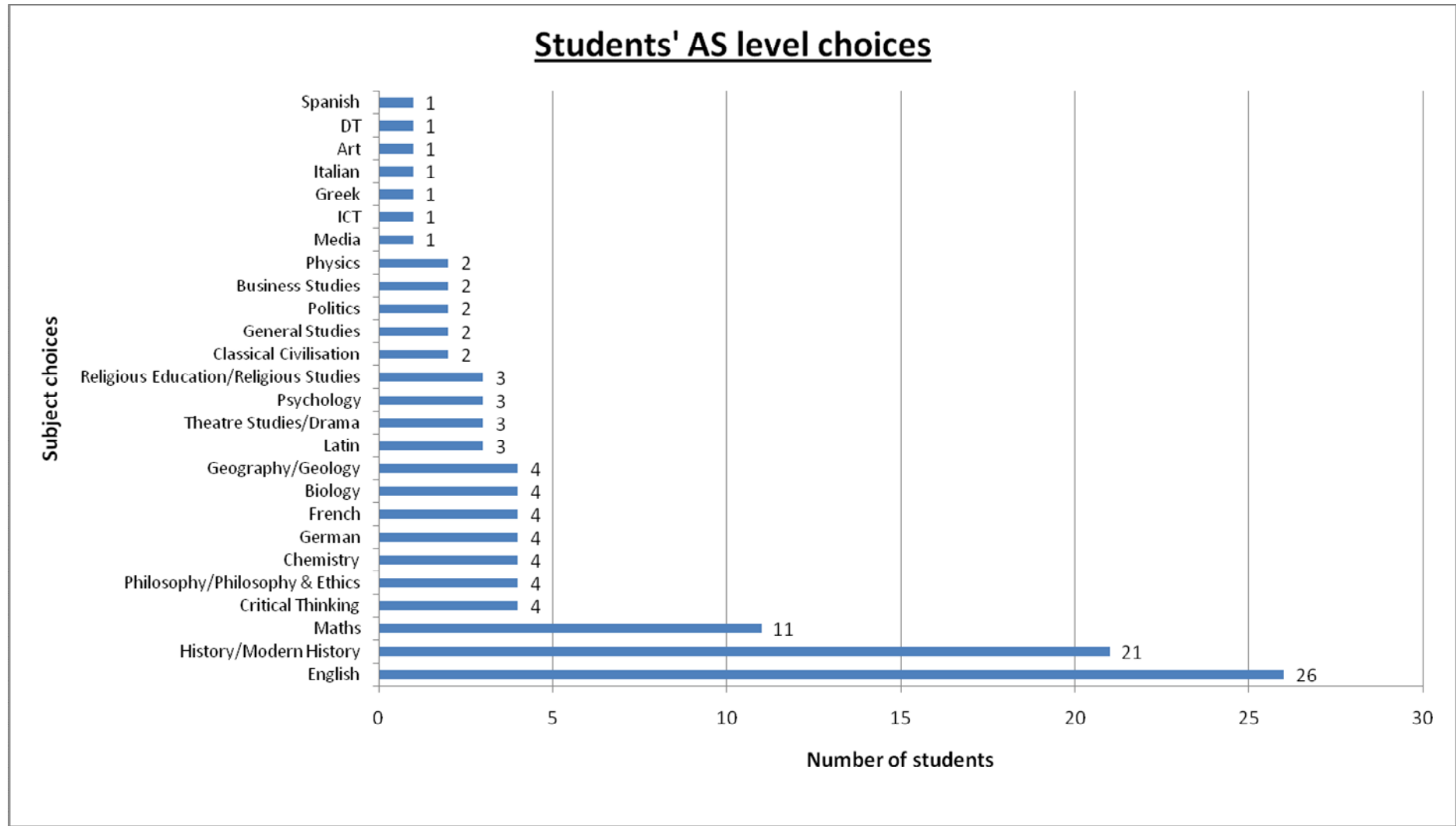
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Appendices

[Appendix 1 - from entrance questionnaire](#)



Appendix 2 - from exit questionnaire

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Over the past few days I feel that my debating skills have improved	0	0	2	15	16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 94% of students <i>agreed</i> or <i>strongly agreed</i> that their debating skills had improved. • 91% of students <i>agreed</i> or <i>strongly agreed</i> that they now felt more confident discussing Shakespeare in front of others. • 94% of students <i>agreed</i> or <i>strongly agreed</i> that their experiences of Great Shakespeare Debate had made them more positive about studying Shakespeare in the future. • 91% of students <i>agreed</i> or <i>strongly agreed</i> that they now had a better understanding of Shakespeare
I now feel more confident discussing Shakespeare in front of others	0	0	3	13	17	
This experience has made me feel more positive about studying Shakespeare in the future	0	0	2	16	15	
Shakespeare is fun	1	2	3	13	14	
Shakespeare's plays help us to understand ourselves and other better	0	3	8	11	10	
Debating is an effective way of exploring Shakespeare's plays	0	0	8	12	12	
Studying Shakespeare is like learning another language	7	20	2	4	0	
Studying Shakespeare is boring	21	10	1	1	0	
I feel I now have a better understanding of Shakespeare	0	0	3	15	15	

[Appendix 3 - from exit questionnaire](#)

To what extent has the Great Shakespeare Debate been a positive experience for you?

Rating (1-10)	Number of students
1	0
2	0
3	0
4	0
5	0
6	0
7	7
8	15
9	10
10	3

- Average rating = 8.3
- 80% rated their experience as being an 8 or higher

Appendix 4 - from entrance questionnaire

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Shakespeare is fun	0	2	1	11	11
Shakespeare's characters and situations are not relevant today	11	12	0	2	0
Shakespeare's plays help us to understand ourselves and others better	0	1	10	12	2
I would be happy to watch a Shakespeare film or play in my own time	0	0	1	15	8
I find Shakespeare's plays difficult to understand	1	14	6	3	0
It is important to study Shakespeare's plays	0	1	2	16	6
Learning Shakespeare is like learning another language	2	13	7	2	0
Shakespeare's plays are relevant to events in the modern world	0	3	4	13	5
Studying Shakespeare is boring	14	7	3	1	0
I wish that I had a better understanding of Shakespeare	1	3	8	8	5

Appendix 5

DAY ONE

		<i>Basic introduction to rules of formal debating.</i>
11:30	Debate Workshops	<i>Opportunity to practice debating without it affecting the group's overall score. Extensive feedback given to participants in preparation for 1st round.</i>
13:15	Preparation time for all teams	
14:00	Practice Debate followed by feedback	<i>1st official debate, giving students the opportunity to apply feedback from practice round. Further feedback given.</i>
15:30	Preparation time for all teams	
16:15	First round motion debated by all teams	
19:15	Performance of <i>King Lear</i>³¹	<i>Trip to see latest RSC production and opportunity to explore a Shakespearean text in performance, providing additional stimulus for following day's debates.</i>

DAY TWO

09:00	Post-performance discussion of <i>King Lear</i>	<i>Dialogue and discussion consolidating student experience of <i>King Lear</i> production. Unique opportunity to question Greg Hicks on (who played the title character) on both play and production.</i>
10:15	Q&A session with a member of the <i>King Lear</i> acting company	
11:10		<i>Further round of debates, but this time participants required to make references to previous night's production of <i>King Lear</i>. Further feedback given.</i>
11:50	Second round motion debated by all teams	
13:40		<i>Visit to Shakespeare's birthplace. Using Stratford's unique history to enrich & authenticate the students' cultural</i>

14:25

Third round motion debated by all teams

*Final opportunity to debate for most groups.
Opportunity to apply all previous feedback into one final high quality debate. Further feedback*

15:10

16:15

'We that are young: watching *King Lear*', a talk by Professor Carol Chillington Rutter from the CAPITAL Centre at Warwick University

*Opportunity to experience university-level lecture on *King Lear* by leader Shakespeare Performance scholar.*

17:00

Preparation time for the finalists

17:45

Final debate commences including floor discussion

Two highest scoring teams participate in final debate. Rest of cohort get their first opportunity to observe a debate. They are also able to make points of information and participate as outsiders.