

Early Modern Culture

Volume 14 *First-Generation Shakespeare*

Article 11

6-15-2019

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Recommended Citation

Catherine E. Thomas (2019) "Fostering Academic Self-Efficacy in First-Generation Students Through Shakespeare Reading Groups," *Early Modern Culture*: Vol. 14 , Article 11.

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Fostering Academic Self-Efficacy in First-Generation Students Through Shakespeare Reading Groups

CATHERINE E. THOMAS

“Tis in ourselves we are thus, or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners....” *Othello*, 1.3.312-314¹

How best can we encourage our first-generation students to engage Shakespeare’s works, and through and beyond that, to gain the confidence to practice the forms of deep reading and inquiry necessary for academic success? While Iago’s words in *Othello* are often suspect, his counsel to a lovesick Roderigo in act 1, scene 3 proves instructive in addressing my initial question. The answer involves providing various forms of support to encourage students’ connection with challenging material, nurture their will to persist in their learning efforts, and promote personal and social development. The embodied motivation to persevere, as Iago’s body-garden metaphor illustrates, is something that can and must be cultivated, particularly in the face of weeds and foul weather, those economic, social, and cultural challenges that can sap our students’ ability to participate fully in their studies. One strategy to promote academic literacy and self-efficacy is incorporating Shakespeare reading groups into early college experiences for first-gen students. Through the process of studying Shakespeare, we may assist them in building a sense of academic community and strengthening their will to pursue success despite adversities.

First-generation students bring many ideas, strengths, and goals to the academic table. However, intrinsic and extrinsic challenges can become obstacles to their achievement, leaving them wondering about college terms and processes (the hidden curriculum) and unsure about their place in higher education institutions (experiencing imposter syndrome).² The remedies to these problems—academic self-efficacy and college acculturation—are not innate qualities. They, too, must be developed through maintaining a growth mindset, taking advantage of resources, asking for help, and leaning on one’s support team. Faculty and staff are central to helping students acquire these habits for success. They can extend guidance and connect students with resources, role models, and other mentors on and off-campus.

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While faculty, staff, and other mentors provide crucial just-in-time support for first-generation students, there are other potential allies to be found in literature. Shakespeare's drama is one such source, offering a rich range of characters from different classes and backgrounds who struggle to understand themselves and others and strive to succeed in a complex world. His plays are full of opportunities for connection, whether learners are fresh out of high school, coming from industry work or military service, older, or otherwise "nontraditional." Even across four hundred years, a less familiar genre, and cultural differences, these works offer tangible models (good and poor) for self-development, goal setting, persistence, and achievement. Students may recognize elements of their lives in the struggles of these literary figures. The embedded stories of self-fashioning also may resonate with the daily code-switching first-gen students often do as they shift between the culture of home or community and academic culture.

Sharing Shakespeare in the informal, low-stakes forum of a reading group helps students explore how his work can be meaningful to their educational development and lived experiences. When a group is voluntary in terms of participation, does not require extensive preparation in advance, and is not associated with a grade, the anxiety and stress of performance are alleviated, promoting learning and discussion for their own sakes, with no strings attached. For students likely less familiar with college culture, this risk-free outlet for intellectual and social discovery may be especially appealing. Shakespeare reading groups provide an opportunity to get involved on campus and integrate into the college community—another key component to personal and academic success. This essay will discuss the rationale for offering informal Shakespeare reading groups to support first-generation student success and share initial reflections about one particular example of this, the Grizzly Book Club at Georgia Gwinnet College.

But why Shakespeare? Certainly, first-year common reading programs and book club activities using other authors and texts have proven engaging and successful. What else do we gain (besides sharing our own enthusiasm and fascination with these works) by placing Shakespearean literature front and center? And will students buy into the notion of a Shakespeare book club? Each class or group's affective relationship to Shakespeare necessarily will vary, as individuals' personal backgrounds, learning experiences, and reading preferences are different. Many students express consternation when they are asked, and in some cases required, to study Shakespeare's works. Others express anxiety or ambivalence, if not apathy. Alternately, others are excited and/or curious.

Some recognize Shakespeare as part of institutional English education, a canonical writer "must-have." While Shakespeare has become less required in higher education English programs around the country in the last decade, secondary school curricula have not followed suit. Reading at least one Shakespeare play during middle or high school is pretty standard fare. Depending on the approach, instructor, and student's receptivity at that time, their first Shakespeare experience will mean differently to them and affect their attitude about his works going forward. They may see his inclusion on a syllabus or book club

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reading list signaling participation in the elite, whether that be intellectual, class-based, or a bit of both. Regardless of our occupying a “post-textual Shakespeare” world of translations, adaptations, and appropriations,³ his value to high culture retains its authoritative residue, something that I would posit most students get, even if their reactions to it are mixed.

For students who are resistant or apathetic, we may want to interrogate the source of their disinterest or “ShakesFear,” to use Ralph Alan Cohen’s term.⁴ As Perry Guevara rightly notes, “first-generation students are more likely to come from cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds in which Shakespearean literacy doesn’t carry the same cultural capital.”⁵ The applicability question weighs heavily on students coming to college with a career-driven focus, one that is strongly influenced and reinforced by family and community members. A college education, to many students, is a way up (and sometimes out), a ticket to social mobility and financial security. Studying Shakespeare may not present as practical and obviously applicable to their goals. By extension, it may be seen as a distraction or detour from their course pathway to success in their major discipline. While this is certainly not an attitude held by all, it is one that we as educators must be aware of and seek to address when discussing the value of Shakespeare study, whether in a formal, classroom setting or in one more informal, such as a reading group.

Other skeptical or defensive reactions may stem from prior learning experiences or social messaging from surrounding individuals or institutions. Kyle Grady’s remark that “students of color often find themselves at a disadvantage in traditional educational spaces, in large part because such spaces often operate in a white cultural register,” is important to consider.⁶ Students may not think Shakespeare and other canonical writers are accessible or relevant to them and their communities, however defined; he/they are owned by another group (e.g. white, male, heterosexual, economically privileged). Grady reflects on how many instructors, however well intentioned, may be teaching in ways that replicate particular dominant arguments and perspectives, therefore alienating the points of view and experiences of many students. Similarly, John W. White and Carlyne Ali-Khan show through their case studies that first-year, first-generation minority students may not only be less familiar with academic discourse, but also highly skeptical if not hostile towards it. The students whose experiences they followed for a semester demonstrated underdeveloped academic reading and studying practices and unfamiliarity with communication etiquette between peers and professors. The students felt that the standard academic style of communication challenged their sense of identity, that they were “being expected to ‘act White’” versus adopt different strategies for this particular learning environment.⁷ White and Ali-Khan share further anecdotes from the students that illustrated their deep-seated fear of being judged for their ways of speaking and thinking. Often they declined to participate in discussions as a result.⁸

These issues represent the detrimental impact of the “hidden curriculum” of academia, especially as applied to the pedagogy of a particular author’s works. If students are not only challenged by the syntax and vocabulary of the plays (or any other text they encounter), but also feel unable to learn experientially and are

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excluded from sharing their own readings and perspectives on the works without judgment, they are more likely to shut down or shun further learning opportunities in that vein. Grady's proposed solution is to promote collaborative environments that validate diverse perspectives as "essential" to the learning at hand.⁹ The Shakespeare reading group is one such venue where a diversity of viewpoints are both welcome and necessary. The group is only as interesting and healthy as the contributions of the participants.

While Shakespeare is not the only author to offer rich texts to stimulate discussion, the potential of his works to produce affective and practical benefits is high. Guevara discusses persuasively how Shakespeare's characters provide "fictive kin" for students, allowing them both to identify with and challenge their attitudes and choices. There is sameness and difference possible there, as well as room for practice and experimentation in interpretation: "Partial connection does not require mastery. It does not demand perfection. Rather, it urges an awareness of the feelings, impulses, and desires laden not only in the text but also in ourselves."¹⁰ There is validation in seeing oneself in another, of being represented and given voice. There also is comfort in finding community, whether on the page or in person. Studying Shakespeare's works is a platform for both of these things. Trying on his characters for size, assessing their decisions and actions—all of that promotes self-knowledge and empathy, encourages participants to ask questions, drives them to seek evidence to support their feelings and views, provides them with examples for navigating complex issues, and urges them to take a stand.

Reading groups are a historically successful endeavor, as Shakespeare clubs have been around for years, if for other audiences than and in differing capacities from what I am discussing here. For example, women's Shakespeare reading clubs in the 1800s, which were widespread in both America and the U.K., served as platforms for self-development, community-building, and social activism. As Robin Williams notes, "Women were invigorated...by the number of heroines who are literate, challenge authority, take on men's roles . . . yet maintained their honor and virtue. They used Shakespeare as an advocate for issues in their lives. . . ."¹¹ The connections that readers make with the texts foster critical awareness, and when nurtured and encouraged, develop their confidence to be academic and social agents. College reading groups, because they are divorced from grades and other formalized assessments, provide particularly fruitful arenas for students to practice exploring literary choices and asserting their critical perspectives.

From a pragmatic perspective, Shakespeare also possesses high potential for wider social and academic benefit. As Shakespeare still enjoys some status in elite circles, first-gen students might find value in having "insider knowledge." They may be able to decipher appropriations in popular culture, deploy quotes strategically in communication acts, and participate fully in conversations where Shakespeare is referenced. More importantly, grappling with the content and style of dramatic texts from the early modern period develops their reading comprehension tools and expands their vocabulary range. Kathleen L. Byrd and Ginger Macdonald's survey of nontraditional first-generation college student perspectives reinforces the need for this ability set. Students most frequently

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referenced college-level reading skills as their academic weak point and perceived them as a prerequisite for academic success. In particular, students were concerned about having an adequate knowledge of college-level vocabulary and handling the volumes and types of required reading.¹² There is a literacy skills transfer argument to be made about the benefits of a Shakespeare reading group, one that with a little framing could connect well with student and family concerns about professionalization and degree completion.¹³

Reading Shakespeare in a book club setting thus helps first-generation students connect—with themselves, the texts, and other individuals as a community. It also assists them in building key literacy skills and gaining the confidence to navigate complex texts and conversations beyond the college setting. Taking the pressure off and creating a safe space to explore the text means that the likelihood of imposter syndrome rearing its head is less. Everyone is present, everyone is risking, everyone is contributing; it is a shared constructive endeavor. The act of jointly reading a complex text such as a Shakespeare play can be truly enjoyable—an escape from other pressing or troubling issues—and it also fosters a habit of practice, of repeatedly coming back to and chewing on words, their meaning, and their relationship to us and our world. The more you do it, the easier it becomes. One’s familiarity and range of tools with which to approach any text are greater, which translates often into more confidence and more investment in the activity. This is in essence the definition of academic self-efficacy, “an individual’s belief in his or her capability of successfully completing a task.”¹⁴ In this way, a Shakespeare reading group functions as a complement to traditional study skills workshops and courses. It fosters the practices and habits of mind attendant to student success, particularly in those areas where first-generation students are often less prepared.

Research on the benefits of reading groups reinforces these premises and provides models for how this work is achieved. Bernadette Lynch and Gina Neale share some of the positive outcomes from their “Make Friends with a Book” project in Sandwell, England. This area’s population is ethnically and racially diverse, with lower literacy rates and economic status as a whole. Over the course of their four-year study, they noted that the majority of participants demonstrated “increased emotional intelligence, more self-awareness and greater empathy” as a result of their reading group experience.¹⁵ The sense of community that was built around shared reading promoted self-confidence and validation, while also providing a safe space and ample support. Participants also commented on the benefits of getting to know and understand others from different backgrounds, with different values and ideals than they themselves held.

The “Make Friends with a Book” project is organized around five important principles:

- The importance of reading followed by discussion
- The importance of reading aloud
- The importance of reading literature [elsewhere labeled “serious” and “quality” literature]
- The importance of the group

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- The importance of a safe, supportive environment

Notably, these five principles align well with standard practice in studying and performing Shakespeare's works. Play texts are commonly read aloud in passages (whether by an individual or group) and/or acted out in a group setting. Discussion follows, and takes whatever directions the facilitator and group desire. The nature of the issues and language used to describe them in the plays also calls for the promotion of safe conversation space; without asking and working through the hard questions about racism, gender discrimination, violence, and power, how are we to learn? The parallels between Shakespeare instruction, performance, and reading group practices like these are striking and suggest common values and advantages.

Susan Chambers Cantrell et al.'s article on promoting self-efficacy through college-level developmental reading courses offers additional evidence for positive results from shared reading experiences of complex texts. They begin with Eric Paulson and Sonya Armstrong's theory of developmental literacy, which promotes the idea that instructors "must understand the perspectives and affective characteristics of participants in developmental education courses."¹⁶ Understanding the whole student—their goals, desires, motivations, challenges, and circumstances—can improve instruction, ostensibly by fostering a more attentive and sympathetic teaching model. They couple this principle with Albert Bandura's work on self-efficacy, contending that "When learners believe the desired outcome can occur and that they can bring the outcome about, they will be more likely to work to achieve the desired outcome."¹⁷ Academic self-efficacy can be promoted by harnessing a better understanding of students and their perspectives, encouraging them to set goals, and providing a pathway and resources to help them achieve those goals.

Cantrell et al.'s study illustrates that students in developmental reading classes (and arguably, all classes) tend to have more self-efficacy when reading in "personal contexts" vs. "academic contexts" and that they possess considerably more "emotional and physiological stress related to reading" in the latter.¹⁸ The researchers concluded that several approaches would help counteract negative reactions to reading encounters and promote self-efficacy, among them:

- Teach strategies for understanding difficult texts, including knowledge needed to transfer strategies to a range of contexts.
- Emphasize modeling and social interaction as a critical feature of instruction and learning.
- Use high-interest texts in developmental courses.
- Link personal and academic reading within the developmental reading curriculum.
- Be sensitive to students' affective states, and teach students strategies for managing negative physiological responses to reading.¹⁹

While certainly not all first-gen students place into developmental reading classes, those who experience imposter syndrome or come from underprepared

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backgrounds very well may share similar attitudes towards college-level, complex reading tasks.²⁰ Similar to the community reading group model, this academic one emphasizes the importance of interesting but substantive texts, attention to community building, and understanding of participants' emotional reactions.

Similar results are illustrated by Kimberly B. Pyne's examination of Elon University's Book Jam experience, part of the Elon Academy program. Book Jam was a reading club that paired high school students with college students and had them self-select into groups based on preferences. A range of books were provided to choose from, and the only required preparation for each session was to read the text selection. The program also established alternative reading spaces for those participants who showed up unable to complete the reading, so that they could finish the task at their own pace. As the sessions progressed it was noted that "The quality of reading and conversations almost immediately improved, and book chats began opening new lines of friendship. . . . Students were immersed in a culture in which reading [was] a lifestyle, not merely an assignment."²¹ The focus of the program was on validating students' perspectives and experiences, as well as building connections—not only between the high school students, but also between them and their senior peers at the university. There was a strong emphasis on "creat[ing] a welcoming atmosphere" and having the college student volunteers serve as "listener[s] and facilitator[s]" versus instructors.²² These programmatic choices facilitated a safe, collaborative learning space that actively engaged the participants in informal analysis of the texts. The results positively demonstrated the student confidence, improved literacy skills, and energy generated around reading group activities.

One debate about this kind of initiative is about the extent to which one should shape discussion around students' personal reactions versus historically attentive readings and/or the critical perspectives shared in Shakespeare studies as a field. While a reading group is not a classroom per se, cultural context and contemporary literary criticism can offer valuable questions and lenses through which to interrogate a text. Some scholars remain skeptical about students' tendencies to think first or principally about relatability when engaging Shakespeare and see this move as a problem. For example, Vessela Balinska-Ourdeva et al. studied a group of urban, culturally diverse 10th graders in Canada and found that "difficulties in critically reading and analyzing the text distorted the meanings students formed. Typically, the interpretations were based on inadequate personal or emotional responses to the words of the play...driven by overgeneralizations. . . ." ²³ Surveyed students noted difficulties not only with vocabulary and syntax comprehension, but also cultural understanding. They ultimately found Shakespeare as something of a turn-off, but insisted on his continued inclusion in English education due to his perceived cultural capital. While 10th graders may occupy a different intellectual and emotional space than college-aged students, it is worth recognizing their reactions, which may be highly emotional, generalized, and shaped by particular cultural assumptions. The researchers remark on these observations critically and somewhat negatively, but they importantly raise the question of whether we should be concerned about or resist such reactions.

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With this in mind, I appreciate Solomon Iyasere's observations about teaching *Othello* to a group of racially and ethnically diverse college students. He begins by asking "how does one convince students to see *what is there, in the play*, as distinct from merely seeing a narcissistic mirror of their own experiences and social prejudices? How does one present the play to students without allowing their anger to overpower their imagination?"²⁴ Reflectively he shares his initial approach, which was very much historically based. Students clashed with this method, insisting on responding emotionally or from personal experience when in discussion. The process was dissatisfying for all.

As Iyasere listened more to what his students were engaging with and commenting on, he shifted his approach to more of a both/and model. For example, he guided them in an exercise to uncover all of the play's different, competing stereotypes, but then expanded that into a conversation about the "ways in which they keep us locked into modes of thinking and perception that prevent us from personal growth and prevent our society from moral advance."²⁵ Offering validation of their gut responses first, he then facilitated a more detailed analysis of what the play does with such stereotypes and to what ends. I think this latter approach makes a lot of sense, especially for our first-year, first-generation students, who may still be figuring out their place and identity on campus, and whether they even belong there. If we are seeking to provide a safe space for discussion and create a sense of authentic community, validation and open expression are absolutely necessary. To neglect these elements is to risk alienating participants. Addressing affective responses can be instructive on its own terms, as it raises up the voices of all and orchestrates them with a purpose.

For many institutions of higher education, two intended outcomes of the college experience are students figuring out what they actually believe and why and finding their own critical voices, whether that be in classrooms, at home, and/or in public discourse. Rashné R. Jehangir, Michael J. Stebleton, and Veronica Deenanath's study of intersectional identity in first-gen, low-income college students examined "establishing voice" as a common theme in its focus groups. What was revealing was how students valued particular types of campus resources in promoting their acclimation to campus and academic and social persistence despite various challenges. These resources provided the necessary support network for them to develop personal agency. Students lauded initiatives "fostering opportunities to create a peer network, bridging the academic and social worlds of FG students, integrating academic and social engagement options, and creating a safe place to cultivate relationships with adult advisors who assisted the students for the duration of their college careers."²⁶ Campus reading groups were not explicitly mentioned in the list of resources; however, one might see how they could offer an experience meeting the four criteria listed. Shakespeare reading groups offer not only the opportunity to read interesting and meaningful texts in a low-stakes environment, but also help students engage each other in constructive discussion, make friends, meet potential mentors, and (if structured to do so) learn about various resource locations on campus. The work of the reading group is not only about promoting reading literacy; it is about college literacy, building students'

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academic self-efficacy and empowering them to connect to and navigate campus more effectively.

One final benefit of the Shakespeare reading group for first-generation students is its potential to develop and/or reinforce growth mindset in the participants. Carol S. Dweck's research on resilience (the ability of students to address challenges positively) and growth mindset has been pivotal in student success theories of the past decade. She contends that individuals generally fall into two camps: those who believe or are enculturated to believe that intelligence and ability are innate—fixed mindset—and those who believe intellectual achievement and skills are acquired through dedication, personal effort, and support—growth mindset. She demonstrates in her work that globally, “students who believe their intelligence can be developed (i.e., have a growth mindset) show superior academic performance across challenging school transitions, enhanced learning on challenging cognitive tasks, and superior performance on IQ tests.”²⁷ This theory holds for students who are categorized as high-achievers, as well as those who are at-risk, may be underprepared, and/or suffer from negative stereotypes about their capacity to succeed.²⁸ Cultivating growth mindset in first-gen students therefore helps them prosper emotionally and academically in college. It ties their achievements not to fixed intellectual ability (“I’m not good at Shakespeare”), but rather to their persistence in pursuing their goals, use of resources, and outreach to others for support (“I can understand the play better next time if I prepare more in advance and meet with my professor to review what is confusing”).

Dweck's concept of growth mindset encourages the ideas that “learning will be difficult,” “efforts lead to accomplishments,” “success is related to process” and it's a positive thing to “seek out and thrive on challenges.”²⁹ As discussed earlier, reading and studying Shakespeare often embody all of these things. Learning how to unpack the vocabulary, syntax, and figurative language in the plays and poems is often difficult and only becomes easier after consistently practicing different reading strategies. One has to put in the time and effort. Introducing first-generation students to the plays and the *process* of understanding them in an informal setting debunks assumptions about some people “naturally” comprehending Shakespeare and other complex texts. It shows them that everyone—even more experienced readers—have to put in the hours and energy to reap the full pleasures of interpretation and application. The structure of the reading group itself tells them they are not alone in this mission. They have the other reading group members, the facilitators, and a host of hardcopy and online resources to assist in their reading endeavor. Techniques like excerpting, “beating” or “chunking” text, reading aloud without worrying about mistakes in pronunciation, using visuals, and introducing creative exercises additionally can make the text more accessible, depending on the style and desired outcomes for the group.³⁰ In these ways, Shakespeare reading groups provide the perfect practice ground for first-gen students to develop or enhance a growth mindset.

To provide some illustration of how a Shakespeare reading group might serve these multiple goals in practice, I will discuss a prototype for a Shakespeare book club at my home institution, Georgia Gwinnett College: the Grizzly Book

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Club—Shakespeare edition. I offered a pilot version in the Fall 2018 semester, which was marketed primarily to students in GGC 1000, our campus' extended orientation model first-year seminar, as well as select lower-level English and Honors classes (the advertising flyer was distributed by faculty on voluntary basis). Six students signed up to participate; five regularly attended. The sixth, notably, was unable to participate due to some of the common challenges our first-generation students face: transportation issues and caregiving responsibilities for ill family members. While the group was not limited to first-generation students, the participants were all students in their first year or two of study. For further context, I will share some background on our school, students, and the structure of the group.

GGC was created to serve the highly diverse area of Gwinnett County in the NE suburbs of Atlanta. It has been recognized as a “majority-minority” institution, as well as a military-friendly school. *US News and World Report* claims it is the most ethnically diverse among southeast regional colleges.³¹ Approximately 40% of our students have identified on their FAFSAs that neither of their parents have earned a bachelor's degree (the federal definition of first-gen, and one that GGC uses), although the proportion of students who are first-gen or share many of the strengths and challenges of our first-gen population is likely much higher.³² We gradually have been increasing efforts to reach out to first-gen students over this past year, with programs such as the Grizzly First Scholars (learning community for first-gen students), Make Your Mark doorcard campaign for first-gen faculty and staff (to create a visual network of encouragement), and both web and hardcopy versions of a college terms and acronyms lexicon. These efforts have been well received on campus and off and have led to the newly formed First-Generation Taskforce, a committee of faculty, staff, and student representatives dedicated to providing outreach and programming for our first-gen community at GGC.

Another campus effort, while not directly targeting first-gen students but certainly serving them, is the Grizzly Book Club. Founded by Camelia Rubalcada, formerly one of the Student Success Advisors in our Mentoring and Advising Center, this club promotes student engagement, community-building, and college-level literacy. As noted in the scope statement for the program,

The Grizzly Book Club! [*sic*] will afford students an opportunity to learn and understand complex behaviors, build a strong community, address social and community issues, and interact with others who have different perspectives. Moreover, you will be encouraged to be lifelong readers and writers, and contribute to your community/institution through service learning opportunities. Studies show that students who take part in cooperative learning and student centered experiences have greater academic success.³³

Through providing a multivalent experience, the Grizzly Book Club supports the whole student—academically and socially. Particularly for students in their first or

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second years of college, discovering who they are and finding a supportive peer community are primary concerns. For first-gen students, who may or may not have family and friends who are supportive of their college experience, connecting with other students, faculty, and staff is even more crucial for their well-being and academic persistence.

The book club's objectives echo this focus on fostering academic and social success. For example, students will "discover new ways to effectively communicate and interact socially," "enhance their critical and analytical skills," "achieve a greater sense of identity," and "gain increased tolerance and empathy."³⁴ The 8-10 students participating in each book group meet four times over the course of the month, holding discussions in different locations around campus. Books are provided free of charge to the students through donations, and they may keep them after the program is over. Faculty and staff facilitate three sessions, while a student peer runs the fourth meeting. Through the book club, students engage provocative texts in a low-stakes setting, have the opportunity to discuss difficult issues in a safe environment, meet and forge bonds with students and faculty/staff, and get to know campus a bit better. While participating in a month-long book club is certainly not a cure-all for the challenges that first-gen and first-year students more generally face, it does provide an important source of student support and an opportunity for student growth.

I interviewed Rubalcada for more insights on her inspiration and goals for the club. She shared that her experience participating in a reading group in graduate school spurred her to start undergraduate book clubs when she began working at other institutions. The reading group motivated her to read challenging texts and more of them, while expanding her social and professional networks. For the undergraduates participating in the book clubs she has run, including the Grizzly Book Club, she established "building a safe space" to discuss difficult issues and "building a sense of community" as her top priorities.³⁵ Additionally, she wanted students to learn more about campus locations and programs (through the rotating meeting spaces), as well as to forge connections with faculty and staff they would not otherwise get to meet. These goals of campus acculturation and community-building, she indicated, were most crucial for first-gen students who might not otherwise find their niche on campus.³⁶

I organized and co-facilitated this special edition of the Grizzly Book Club Fall 2018 using *The Tempest* to gauge the effectiveness of using Shakespeare as a gateway to promoting community and academic self-efficacy in our first-year students. Establishing a Shakespeare play as the text offering provided a neat way of blending personal and academic contexts in a low-stakes, supportive, and friendly environment. I planned the first meeting of the semester as an intellectual and social "warm-up"—introducing the text, as well as having students explore their attitudes towards and previous experiences with Shakespeare. My colleague Rolando Marquez, from the Center for Teaching Excellence at GGC, co-facilitated our initial conversation. Successive meetings were broken down to cover 1-2 acts per week.³⁷ Students were asked to read the assigned acts ahead of time, to bring their books with them, and to jot down questions they had and things they found interesting or confusing along the way.

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The small group of participating students had mixed reasons for being there. One said she saw the flyer and because she had previous, positive experiences in studying Shakespeare, wanted to read and talk more about his work. Another said he was interested in possibly being an English major, so he wanted to check it out to see what a reading group was like. A few students were offered extra credit for participating, as part of their first-year seminar. Regardless of their initial impetus for coming, all expressed curiosity, but also a little bit of trepidation, about reading a Shakespeare play. The student who had studied his works before was enthusiastic in sharing her love of the poetry, characters, and plot lines and embraced the challenge of understanding language and imagery. The other students, who were newer to Shakespeare study, wanted to gain more knowledge about the play and techniques for how to read better (i.e. comprehend more). The group as a whole, therefore, self-identified as seeking various types of literacy: general literacy (ways to effectively read and parse meaning), specific literary (how and why does Shakespeare write in this way), and cultural (What's the draw? Why is Shakespeare's drama famous and valued?).³⁸

When students initially were reluctant to speak at the first meeting, Marquez shared moments of personal inspiration, but also frustration and struggle with Shakespeare's works. He then discussed how he found ways of finding answers to questions and persisted in his study of the texts. This gave students permission to be vulnerable, and they were very forthcoming with their personal struggles with the literature, as well as the moments they found interesting and exciting. Here and there, we informally shared some reading strategies to navigate the vocabulary and syntax, about which they all expressed concern understanding. We also passed out a resource sheet with information about the play, other historical and dramatic references, and links to production clips. These provided some optional anchors to those who wanted them. Taking this time to get interests, concerns, and tactics out on the table built students' confidence in tackling the play. They were primed to ask questions and offer ideas and observations.

In the subsequent weeks, student attendance varied (between 3 and 5 attending out of 5 possible), although engagement levels were high. Participants were generally prepared with the reading, based on the kinds of questions and comments they made. The enthusiasm of the faculty, staff, and student facilitators seemed to help ameliorate any anxiety or insecurities amongst participants; while some students were quieter than others, everyone entered into the conversation over the course of each meeting and expressed interest in the material. As they got to know each other a bit more over the weeks, students became more vocal and direct. They were more interested and willing to pick apart particular issues and questions that arose around the relationships in the play.

Anonymous student survey feedback after the four book club meetings showed that the group had served its purpose well in making students feel welcome and exposing them to different locations on campus. The narrative student comments focused primarily on the intellectual community benefits of the group. One student commented that they liked learning "how students come to Shakespeare on different levels and with different attitudes/biases." Another

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noted that their favorite part about the group was “interacting with students—discussion not tied to evaluation.” Others echoed their appreciation of the free sharing of ideas and “just talking in general.” While I did not ask about reading skill improvement or academic confidence on the survey, anecdotally, students did seem to grow somewhat in their facility in those areas. Expanding the Shakespeare edition of the Grizzly Book Club to include more participants, as well as developing a more robust assessment instrument would be solid next steps. Wider and earlier marketing of the group would likely increase the numbers and variety of participants. There certainly seemed to be interest in continuing the endeavor though; all respondents indicated they would “definitely” be interested in participating in a future Grizzly Book Club session, whether that was covering Shakespeare’s or another author’s work.

In conclusion, I would like to reflect briefly on why we began with *The Tempest* and what I am still thinking through with regard to facilitating discussions. Partially, we began with this play because a publisher donated a number of copies; we had our text resources from the start. However, this play also resonated well because of our college’s audience and the issues the play engages. As a majority-minority school, most GGC students are all too affected by continuing patterns of personal and institutional discrimination, as well as significant political debates that pervade the media. Many, if not most, of these problems involve race, gender, class, immigration status, and violence. While crafted 400+ years ago, *The Tempest* is a text that grapples complexly with these big issues. It resists easy, binaristic solutions. Moreover, while it most certainly is historically and culturally situated, the play offers opportunities for students to analyze circumstances that echo their own or that raise questions still relevant to their lives today.

Similarly, plays like *Othello* provide other approaches to race and violence, domestic and political. *Titus Andronicus* and *Much Ado About Nothing* give us ways to talk about military service and identity, particularly when soldiers come home from war. *King Lear* might register poignantly with older, nontraditional students who find themselves caring for aging parents or who are of an older generation themselves. I continue to think through what plays and questions might provide the most interesting and effective discussion experiences for our students, given all the factors, including the specific learning outcomes for the Grizzly Book Club program.

Shakespeare reading groups allow first-generation college students the opportunity to explore complex worlds and complex selves—their own and others—in an intimate and informal setting built to support them. As Iyasere concludes, “I believe that is what we are about when we read literature, to learn to feel and think and see. But note that we must feel; we must allow ourselves the full play of the powerful emotions great literature evokes in us. . . . At the same time we must not allow those emotional responses to overwhelm us with their power. . . or again we will rob ourselves of the depth and range of the poet’s vision.”³⁹ Through participating in the discussion experiences of the Grizzly Book Club—Shakespeare Edition, or similar Shakespeare reading groups, we can harness the power of affective engagement and critical reading to further first-gen student success. It is my sincere hope that our junior scholars will experience a

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sense of belonging in the GGC community, build their critical reading and commentary skills, and cultivate their confidence, academically and socially.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 2073-2158.
2. For more on this, see, for example, Rashné R. Jehangir, Michael J. Stebleton, and Veronica Deenanath, *An Exploration of Intersection Identities of First-Generation, Low-Income College Students*, Research Reports on College Transitions No. 5, University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2015. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED558986>.
3. For more on this concept, see Douglas M. Lanier, "Post-Textual Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Survey* 64 (2011): 145-62.
4. See Ralph Alan Cohen, *ShakesFear and How to Cure It* (Clayton, Delaware: Prestwick House, Inc., 2007).
5. Perry Guevara, "Toward Speech Therapy: Affect, Pedagogy, and Shakespeare in Prison," in this volume.
6. Kyle Grady, "'The Miseducation of Irie Jones': Representation and Identification in the Shakespeare Classroom," in this volume.
7. John W. White and Carolyne Au-Khan, "The Role of Academic Discourse in Minority Students' Academic Assimilation," *American Secondary Education* 42, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 28.
8. White and Au-Khan, "The Role of Academic Discourse," 30.
9. Kyle Grady, "'The Miseducation of Irie Jones,'" in this volume. For more on this concept with regards to teaching critical reading skills to nontraditional students, see Sabrina Marschall and Cynthia Davis, "A Conceptual Framework for Teaching Critical Reading to Adult College Students," *Adult Learning* 23, no. 2 (May 2012): 63-68.
10. Guevara, "Toward Speech Therapy," in this volume.
11. Robin Williams, "A Return to 'The Great Variety of Readers': The History (and Future) of Reading Shakespeare" (PhD Thesis, Brunel University London, 2015), 164. For more on women's Shakespeare clubs and reading as social activism see Katherine West Scheil, *She Hath Been Reading: Women and Shakespeare Clubs in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2012) and Katherine Schiel, "American Shakespeare Clubs and Commemoration," *Critical Survey* 22, no. 2 (2010): 62-75.
12. Kathleen L. Byrd and Ginger MacDonald, "Defining College Readiness from the Inside Out: First-Generation College Student Perspectives," *Community College Review* 33, no. 1 (July 2005): 32.
13. See also Marschall and Davis, "A Conceptual Framework," 65.
14. Brenna M. Wernersbach, Susan L. Crowley, Scott C. Bates, and Carol Rosenthal, "Study Skills Course Impact on Academic Self-Efficacy," *Journal of Developmental Education* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 14.
15. Bernadette Lynch and Gina Neale, "The Power of Shared Reading," *Therapy Today* 25, no. 1, (Feb. 2014): 20-24. EBSCOhost.

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<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ccm&AN=107893955&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

16. Susan Chambers Cantrell et al., "Patterns of Self-Efficacy Among College Students in Developmental Reading," *Journal of College Reading and Learning* 44, no. 1 (2013): 10.
17. Ibid., 10.
18. Ibid., 18-19.
19. Ibid., 28-30.
20. At GGC, over 30% of students enroll in learning support courses, many of which are developmental English (reading and writing focused). Given 40%+ of GGC's student body is self-declared first-generation, there is both anecdotal and statistical evidence that many of our students in developmental courses are indeed first-gen.
21. Kimberly B. Pyne, "Reading and College Readiness," *Educational Leadership* 69, no. 9 (June 2012): 2.
22. Ibid., 3.
23. Vessela Balinska-Ourdeva et. al, "What Say These Young Ones?: Students' Responses to Shakespeare—An Icon of Englishness," *Interchange* 44 (2013): 344.
24. Solomon O. Iyasere, "Teaching Shakespeare's *Othello* to a Group of Multi-Racial Students," *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 16 (2004): 60.
25. Ibid., 62.
26. Jehangir, Stebleton, and Deenanath, *An Exploration of Intersection Identities*, 36.
27. See Carol S. Dweck, "Can We Make Our Students Smarter?," *Education Canada* 49, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 57. See also her important monograph *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006) and David Scott Yeager and Carol S. Dweck, "Mindsets That Promote Resilience: When Students Believe That Personal Characteristics Can Be Developed," *Educational Psychologist* 47, no. 4 (2012): 302-314.
28. Dweck, "Can We Make Our Students Smarter?," 58.
29. Paraphrased from Dweck's *Mindset* (2006), cited in Fabiola Mora and Jill Putman's 2017 NACADA conference presentation, "Intersectional Growth Mindset for Serving First Generation Students."
30. For more on these and other reading and study tactics for Shakespeare's works, see Christina Porter, "Words, Words, Words: Reading Shakespeare with English Language Learners," *The English Journal* 99, no. 1 (Sept. 2009): 44-49. While clearly not all FG students are multilingual learners, many are (such as at GGC). I believe Porter's strategies are widely applicable and would help students of all backgrounds more effectively unpack play passages.
31. See Curt Yeomans, "U.S. News and World Report names GGC as South's most diverse regional college," *Gwinnett Daily Post*, Sept. 15, 2017. http://www.gwinnettdaily.com/local/u-s-news-and-world-report-names-ggc-as-south/article_01460bba-e9b0-5b18-b70f-7cd326e015c9.html. See also "GGC at a Glance," Georgia Gwinnett College, <http://www.ggc.edu/about-ggc/at-a-glance/index.html>.
32. Stanley Preczewski, "Welcome to GGC" (presentation, Georgia Gwinnett College Bear Essentials Parent and Family Orientation, Lawrenceville, GA, Summer 2017).
33. Camelia Rubalcada, "Grizzly Book Club Scope and Objectives" (program document, Georgia Gwinnett College, 2017).
34. Rubalcada, "Grizzly Book Club Scope and Objectives."
35. Camelia Rubalcada (Student Success Advisor and founder of the Grizzly Book Club), interview with the author, July 16, 2018.

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36. Ibid.

37. I would like to thank Dr. Rolando (Roy) Marquez, Dr. Jeanne McCarthy, Dr. Rebecca Flynn, Ms. Jessica Via, and Mr. Thomas (Buddy) Shay for facilitating the Grizzly Book Club—Shakespeare Edition sessions and for sharing their insights on the students' preparation for and experiences in those discussions.

38. While conversations in this book group didn't end up engaging cultural literacy—Shakespeare's cultural capital—much at all, I agree with and appreciate Cassie Miura's point, "that Shakespeare can teach us about our own institutional histories and the ways in which power and privilege inform aesthetic judgement, ideas about authorship, and the circulation of cultural capital" ("Empowering First-Generation Students: Bardolotry and the Shakespeare Survey," in this volume). In the first session's discussion, the book group students indicated that studying Shakespeare held some extra cultural importance, even if they were unsure of what the qualitative nature of that importance actually was beyond his work being required reading in secondary school. However, similar to Stephanie Pietros' students finding that close study of the "problem plays" (and the problems in them) demystified Shakespeare as a cultural icon, I suspect the Grizzly Book Club students' increasing willingness to engage the text over time also was a function of them finding Shakespeare more understandable and approachable with effort and practice (Stephanie Pietros, "If we shadows have offended: Shakespeare's 'Problems' and First-Generation Students," in this volume). Kerry Cooke's reflection on how to deconstruct Shakespeare's canonicity and applicability to diverse audiences is also instructive ("Peripatetic Pedagogy: Teaching Shakespeare at a First-Generation University," in this volume).

39. Iyasere, "Teaching Shakespeare's *Othello*," 63.

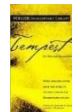
Catherine Thomas is Professor of English and Associate Dean for the School of Transitional Studies at Georgia Gwinnett College. She is co-editor with Jennifer Feather of *Violent Masculinities: Male Aggression in Early Modern Texts and Culture* (Palgrave, 2013). She has published articles in journals such as *Upstart Crow*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, and *Studies in English Literature*, as well as in edited collections. Her current research interest is the professionalization of early modern scholars in administrative roles in higher education.

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Appendix



Grizzly Book Club—Old School Edition



Broaden your horizons through reading.

Fall 2018

Fridays 2-3 PM, October 19-November 9, 2018

Text: *The Tempest*

Author: William Shakespeare

In a time when there are storms all around us—natural, political, cultural—come relax and discuss *The Tempest* with your fellow Grizzlies. We'll enjoy informal conversation about how a play crafted nearly 400 years ago still speaks to us in our complex modern world.

No previous Shakespeare experience needed—just a willingness to dive into the reading and bring your thoughts to the discussion.

Limited space is available—Please email Dr. T at cthomas30@ggc.edu to reserve your spot and get your book (it's yours to keep).

| Discussion Schedule | Facilitator | Location |
|---|--|---|
| Week 1 Friday, October 19 2-3 PM Introductions and Read: pp. xiii-lv. | Dr. Catherine Thomas, Professor of English, Associate Dean, School of Transitional Studies and Dr. Roy Marquez, Assistant Professor of Instructional Technology, Associate Director, Center for Teaching Excellence | Student Success Center study space Building W (newest part), first floor |
| Week 2 Friday, October 26 2-3 PM Read: Act 1 (pp. 2-49) | Dr. Jeanne McCarthy, Associate Professor of English | Kaufman Library Study Room L- 1128, first floor |
| Week 3 Friday, November 2 2-3 PM | Dr. Rebecca Flynn, Associate Professor of English | Honors Program Lounge |

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| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Read: Acts 2-3 (pp. 52-117) | and Ms. Jessica Via, GGC English Major | Building W, third floor, Room W-3256 (enter through main Honors office or exterior hallway) |
| Week 4 Friday, November 9 2-3 PM Read: Acts 4-5 (pp. 120-171) | Mr. Thomas “Buddy” Shay, AEC Coordinator | Student Center Building E, third floor meeting room, E-3150 |

Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: A Resource Sheet

Whether you’ve studied Shakespeare at length or this is your first time, you may find interesting and useful the information located in these various references. Browse and explore as you have time and curiosity!

The Folger Shakespeare Library <http://www.folger.edu>

The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC has one of the largest holdings of Shakespeare’s works in the world. It also offers extensive educational resources, such as those listed below.

- These pages are dedicated to *The Tempest* and include images of the first printed version, inspired later artworks, a play summary, and more: <https://www.folger.edu/tempest>
- The Folger Library offers most of Shakespeare’s plays and poetry in free, downloadable digital text format here: <https://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/>
- The Folger also has made available a lot of background information on Shakespeare’s life and times, as well as theater-going in Renaissance England: <https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare>
- Prefer to listen? Explore the Folger’s podcasts, recorded lectures, and documentaries here: <https://www.folger.edu/podcasts-and-recordings>

Shakespeare’s Globe <http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/>

Shakespeare’s Globe Theater is nestled in the heart of London and offers plays year-round. The Discovery Space area of their website is chock-full of entertaining and useful information about Shakespeare, his plays, early modern England, and different theatrical productions. Check out their interactive

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directing game, theater term glossary, fact sheets and more here:
<http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/discovery-space>

The California Shakespeare Theater <http://www.calshakes.org/>

Cal Shakes has a very useful and detailed resource guide to *The Tempest*, including a character map, plot summary, scene analysis and more. See:
<https://www.scribd.com/document/95501154/The-Tempest-Teacher-s-Guide-Web>

Are you a visual learner? Here are some great video resources at your fingertips via the Kanopy database (accessed through GGC's library database list or via <https://ggc.kanopy.com/>):

- **Dr. Marc Conner's "How to Read and Understand Shakespeare Course"** is a series of 24 30-minute episodes on Shakespeare's works and style. Several episodes explore how to interpret Shakespeare's language and stagecraft. Episodes 22 and 23 discuss the genre and artistic themes of *The Tempest*.
- **"The Tempest with Trevor Nunn" is part of the Shakespeare Uncovered series, sponsored by PBS.** From the series' website: **"*Shakespeare Uncovered* reveals not just the elements in the play, but the history of the play itself. What sparked the creation of each of these works? Where did Shakespeare find his plots and what new forms of theater did he forge? What cultural, political and religious factors influenced his writing? How have the plays been staged and interpreted from Shakespeare's time to now? Why at different times has each play been popular — or ignored? Why has this body of work endured so thoroughly? What, in the end, makes Shakespeare unique?"** For more on the series, see <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/shakespeare-uncovered/>
- **Director Derek Jarman's 1979 production of *The Tempest*.** View one director's take on the play.