

KATHLEEN M. PIERCE

## A SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL MIDWIVES COMPLEXITY

### FESTIVAL OVERVIEW

Shakespeare has no equal in our traditional English curriculum—or across the curriculum for that matter. With instant name recognition, academic cache, and themes inspiring universal and personal appeal, Shakespeare's texts invite compelling comparisons. Yet all too often, Shakespeare is passively admired rather than vigorously reckoned with in classrooms. Given his potency to ignite the imaginations of all kinds of students from vastly different backgrounds, Shakespeare can be reduced in the classroom to a curriculum cliché—something students are exposed to rather than a trigger for active exploration and invention. The Shakesperience festival aims to change all that.

The annual Shakesperience festival of learning and Shakespearean performance for secondary school students is based on two principles: Shakespeare is for everyone, and understanding Shakespeare requires actively playing with his words and ideas in the company of others. Called "Shakesperience" because of its emphasis on Shakespeare and active experience, the festival itself is held at my university and consists of interactive workshops in the morning and performances of Shakespeare in the afternoon. Groups of students and their teachers work for months to create original performances for festival presentation. University faculty have the festival's last word when they offer professional overall commendations to each group on their performance.

With metaphoric lenses borrowed from complexity theory, the activities surrounding a Shakespeare festival can be characterised as episodes of chaos, order, and emergent complexity. The participation of secondary students at an annual Shakespeare festival can be seen as engaged motion along the chaos-order continuum culminating in the creation of an original performance based on Shakespeare. The festival is not an acting showcase or drama competition but a "festival of learning and Shakespearean performance" with rules insisting that performances: derive from a Shakespeare play or plays, use Shakespeare's language intact, last no longer than 20 minutes, and rely minimally—if at all—on props, costumes, and electronics. The history of the festival and its design reveal that festival rules provide just enough stability off-site for diverse students and their teachers to create original performances. These rules also provide just enough stability for a festival day that is chaotic as well as organised, surprising as well as satisfying. From preparation off-site to the culminating festival day, human interconnections and feedback loops function

to engage diverse adolescents with each other, with teachers, with Shakespeare, and with the theatre arts to allow deep dives into meaningful intellectual work and its exuberant celebration.

The most important notion in complexity theory is the concept of *emergence* describing the transition state that occurs at the edges of chaos where the system develops or emerges into higher levels of organisation (Ambrose, 2009; Davis & Sumara, 2006; Mason, 2008). Students in their groups move along the chaos-order continuum like other complex adaptive systems forming relationships among each other, with text, with new ideas, and performance elements. As a group progresses through festival preparation, efforts become increasingly complex and dependent on group internal diversity, diversity that must be assumed no matter how homogeneous a group might seem (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 138).

Complexity theory lends an especially useful lens for understanding the festival process from invitation through culminating performance. Various groups of students and teachers function like deeply engaged satellites prior to festival. Within each of these groups, festival preparation is episodically chaotic and orderly—moving along a chaos-order continuum. Complexity theory explains relationships among elements in dynamic systems that emerge as something new or of a higher order because the system was able to organise without being trapped at either end of the chaos-order continuum. Too much order or too much chaos inhibits the development of a complex system according to Ambrose (2009, p. 41).

Secondary students' preparation for performance at the annual Shakespeare festival can be seen as engaged motion along the chaos-order continuum with extreme chaos at one end and extreme order at the other. At the edges of chaos, productive complexity emerges as a balance between order and chaos. This productive complexity is the accomplishment of the festival process wherein each group gives birth to an original, 20-minute Shakespearean performance. It is instructive to regard performance preparation as part of an overall festival process that culminates at the festival, a process that also shuttles along the chaos-order continuum with bursts of productive complexity.

#### THE FESTIVAL AS A PROCESS

For its first few years, the festival design imitated a well-known secondary school Shakespeare festival that features dozens of school groups successively presenting student performances of Shakespeare throughout a week. Formal and informal feedback loops helped me realise that Shakesperience did not have to be imitative and that I might be missing important opportunities for learning and fun. For one thing, the diverse adolescents who converged on festival day did not get to know each other when one group performance followed another onto the stage. And I followed a tradition of awarded prizes for noteworthy performances when the festival was expressly "not a competition." Beginning to fathom all the complexity of social interaction and learning that occurred within each group leading up to the

Shakesperience, I understood that the festival format needed revision. Complexity theory helped me appreciate that there are many festival processes at work prior to festival day among each group preparing for Shakesperience. Shakesperience needed complexity—or rather, the festival needed to be redesigned to accommodate the emergence of complexity and all the thinking and energy conjured in the process of preparation.

In curriculum design, a *culminating activity* pulls all the new learning together in some kind of project or performance. Students assemble the parts of their learning to construct something new as evidence of their learning and accomplishment. So it is with Shakesperience preparation. However, when seen as a dynamic process that emerges from months of slipping and diving along the chaos-order continuum, a 20-minute Shakespearean performance is not very satisfying—especially performed before other adolescents who are virtual strangers.

The challenge was to devise meaningful but playful festival activities where participants could meet each other and spend some nervous energy before performances.

Informed by my experiences as a teacher/curriculum designer and the frequent feedback from participants indicating they wanted to “get to know the other kids at festival,” I began festival reconstruction. With help from colleagues, the festival’s morning workshops emerged. Now diverse participants converge as strangers at the university on festival day and move into smaller, deliberately randomised groups. Each of the groups set out together through a series of five 20-minute workshops where they get to know other students as well as learn, play, rehearse, and perform a new theatre arts skill. After morning workshops in the theatre arts, participants eat lunch and prepare as both audience and performers for the main event.

When the festival was excessively ordered and merely imitative of another model, my work as festival director lacked creativity and satisfaction. Observational cues and formal feedback loops helped me see the festival as process not a product. Complexity theory and the chaos-order continuum offer useful metaphoric perspectives with which to explain the dynamic social learning brewing within and bubbling up throughout festival processes. The festival’s rules and design provide enabling constraints that instigate original expression and informed action in all phases of festival participation. Morrison (2008) explains how complexity thinking is useful for trying to understand and explain what happens among working groups off-site and why the festival day on campus must create deliberately the conditions for serious fun.

Complexity theory stresses people’s connections with others and with both cognitive and affective aspects of the individual person. ...The natural consequence of this view of learning is an emphasis on the *conditions* to promote emergence, including motivation, enjoyment, passion, cooperative and collaborative activity (p. 22).

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The festival workshops are extraordinary enabling constraints that achieve multiple goals. Rollicking rounds of interactive workshops like English country line dancing, Shakespeare's language, and combat choreography teach specific skills in speech, music, and movement and precede the afternoon performances. The workshops educate and entertain participants while everyone loosens up and makes new friends. In addition to learning new skills, participants develop empathy for each other during the workshops. Smart and focused, the workshops are extremely popular and create a fellowship and positive momentum for imminent roles as performers and appreciative audience.

The festival workshops help the university become a dynamic actor in Shakesperience too. First and foremost, the university's academic community provides wise and talented workshop instructors across various theatre arts as well as faculty who observe afternoon performances to offer astute, professional commentary. And the university's physical spaces open up amenably for workshop sessions. The art gallery, theatre main stage, dance rehearsal room, and lounges spaciously accommodate raucous workshop interactions and movement as well as create interesting contexts for secondary students from middle and high schools to experience.

#### INTERPRETING SHAKESPEARE AND CREATING A PERFORMANCE

Each group of students is under the guidance of a teacher attracted to the festival philosophy that encourages hands-on play or inquiry learning with Shakespeare to make sense and meaning of his work. Festival teachers work with their students for festival in varied contexts. Most of the festival teachers teach English or drama in the classroom, but the festival activity occurs necessarily outside of class. Participants include Shakespeare clubs or classes as well as groups who prepare a festival piece as a senior project together or because they are friends. Teachers play different roles with their student groups too; some are directors while others advise. Aside from managing all the tiny and huge details involved in getting 25 or so teenagers on a bus to festival, festival teachers help students immerse themselves in Shakespeare to experience and interpret his text in myriad ways. Inquiry learning is a way to solve problems, to interrogate a text or a situation and make connections to it and creating new learning. Little (2011) says that when literature is advanced and substantial, it encourages gifted students' "...deep thinking about the pieces...and creation of connections to other literature and to life" (p.167). The new English/language arts Common Core standards encourage use of high-quality source material to build knowledge through reading, writing, listening, and speaking. And drama is especially useful according to David Coleman, a lead writer of the English/language arts Common Core standards who says close analysis of specific scenes from drama provide a "particularly promising opportunity to explore at once textual evidence and visual interpretation" (Council of Chief State School Officers & National Governors Association, 2012; Robelen, 2012, p. 18).

Shakespeare's texts provide high-quality grist for the real work of festival—students' active contention with Shakespeare's words and ideas through, dramatic inquiry, and learning. Greene (1995) emphasised that mere exposure to art does not constitute an experience with art; she insists that the potency and experience of art require active engagement.

The point is that simply being in the presence of art forms is not sufficient to occasion an aesthetic experience or to change a life. Aesthetic experiences require conscious participation in a work, a going out of energy, an ability to notice what is there to be noticed in the play, the poem, the quartet. Knowing 'about,' even in the most formal academic manner, is entirely different from constituting an [sic] fictive world imaginatively and entering it perceptually, affectively, and cognitively. (p. 125)

Whether or not the curriculum is Shakespeare, dramatic inquiry is pedagogically generative because it requires students to actively engage rather than passively observe. Gray and Sanders (2010) used educational drama to help their students learn and understand the historical, moral, and practical complexities of the Holocaust, and they report students move easily into the drama world where they synthesise nonfiction through improvisation to understand underlying issues. The synthesis involved in performance includes physicality—speech, movement, gestures, postures, and dance. Engaging various modalities helps performers to interpret and "feel" issues and content. In this way, dramatic interpretation provides important kinesthetic pathways for understanding. Physical movement helps performers better and more deeply understand meaning through the characters they enact. Performance also helps the audience to understand issues and ideas through characterisation and emphasis (Flynn, 2007; Landay & Wootton, 2012; Weber, 2005).

The driving Shakesperience concept is that in order to understand and make meaning from Shakespeare, we must engage actively with his words and ideas. This actively engaged meaning-making drives festival preparation within school sites and throughout festival day itself. Teachers and teaching artists (Bate & Brock, 2007; Edmiston & McKibben, 2011; Flynn, 2007) advocate dramatic inquiry as a way for making meaning from text and exploring aesthetic as well as socially relevant elements within a work. Such exploration can occur as a transaction between an individual reader and a text of course, but creating a dramatic rendering or interpretation with others widens and intensifies learning.

#### *Dramatic Inquiry Assumes Collaboration*

Shakespeare's plays are catalytic in terms of content that provokes thinking and group cohesion. The sociocultural nature of learning is assumed in festival processes, and festival preparation requires students and their teachers work with Shakespeare's plays and each other to create their own original festival performance. As Edmiston and McKibben (2011) say, "the complex human dilemmas that abound

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in the world of a Shakespeare play” help to focus a group’s collaboration and in the process build ensemble (p. 88). Preparing a performance at festival represents an important milestone for each group, but the preparation requires group cultivation. For adolescents, there is something both playful and sophisticated in creating a performance based on Shakespeare. Working together in an inquiry, constructive learning mode encourages students to play with concepts in a deeper, more meaningful context. Such play also stimulates mental neural development (Ortlieb, 2010, p. 243).

The performance preparation is the foundation of the festival process, and each group finds its own way through inquiry and collaboration given the individuals in the group and unique school context. It is important that each group finds its own rhythms and purposes in evolving as learning community—not too focused or holding too tightly to their performance goal at first (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). To function as a learning community, students need to get to know each other as they play together with Shakespeare’s text, argue and decide on plays for performance, and create performance so that their intended interpretations of the piece are conveyed through elements like movement, words, actions, music, and props.

#### *Working Along the Chaos-Order Continuum*

The group process is inherently messy and chaotic, focused and confused. Complexity theory enables understanding and description of how student groups solve the *problem* or challenge posed by the following festival rules. The purpose is to interpret and explore Shakespeare’s text through these guidelines:

- Each group prepares and performs one scene or scenes from any of Shakespeare’s plays.
- Time on stage: 15-20 minutes
- Omit passages from text, but do not adapt text in any way, no modern language, no text mash-ups or reinventions.
- Play with context, and use brief modern English *bridges* if necessary.
- Limit costumes, props, and technical support. Music and/or sound effects must be performed live without electricity.

At first, the 20-minute rule chafes all participant teachers and students, but it helps students navigate the vastness of Shakespeare without dissolving into chaos on one end of their creative process or a mechanical line reading of Shakespeare text on the other end. Perhaps more than any other performance requirement, this 20-minute rule ensures students create a richly dense, meaningful festival presentation from the Shakespeare canon. Throughout the festival’s history, violations of this rule have created the few wrinkles in festival organisation and good moods. The tacit agreement among all participants is that they play by the same rules. How performances bend the rules without breaking them is the result of creative complexity. Some groups

returning to festival year after year enjoy the sublime challenge of working within the rules to explore Shakespearean themes in surprisingly novel ways.

If students collaborating to create a festival performance function as a complex adaptive system, then the idea of *enabling constraints* describes the imposed structural conditions like festival rules that help groups balance randomness and coherence while collectively processing their work (Davis and Suma, 2006, p. 147). This notion of enabling constraints provides a useful way to explain how certain festival elements provide the right doses of structure and freedom to an original 20-minute performance using Shakespeare's plays with unaltered text with limited enhancements. For instance, in a performance of *Julius Caesar*, all the performers donned white shirts and black pants with gold or maroon sashes; off stage, one performer pounded chillingly on his drum kit to emphasise a range of moods and complex emotions within the play.

#### ENABLING CONSTRAINTS OF THE FESTIVAL

The concept of *enabling constraints* borrowed from complexity thinking is useful for theorising about how the festival rules for performance and festival organisation modulate and encourage learning along the chaos-order continuum. Allowing for seriousness as well as silliness, the rules seem to enable rather than inhibit creativity. Some groups opt for performance of a single play, but many groups draw from more than one play to create thematic considerations like relationships with parents, the twisted course of love, and being unable to choose what's good for us—lessons that transcend time. Performance contexts vary too, from malt shops and television crime shows, primeval forests and psychotherapy sessions since Shakespeare's insights also transcend place. Gude (2010) says that in addition to giving students opportunities to engage in creative play, "...it is important to encourage students' capacities to make nuanced observations of inner experiences as they engage in creative work" (p. 36)

One of the most striking aspects of students' work along the chaos-order continuum is that they must reckon with each other in new ways. In order to interpret Shakespeare and create an original performance based on the interpretation, students dump and dive into modes and intelligences often dormant in the secondary classroom—interpersonal, intrapersonal, kinesthetic, musical-rhythmic, visual-spatial, linguistic, and logical. The festival time limit and electronic constraints force participants to integrate various arts into their performances to convey meaning. For instance, musicians played passages from Dvořák's *Ninth Symphony* during a fight scene and The Beatles' "When I'm Sixty-Four" as elderly characters waddled off stage to enhance mood and meaning that might not have been evident through characters' words and appearances.

Festival preparation requires students and their teachers to work with curriculum and each other in non-traditional ways—experiences that prepare students' festival performance and create deep bonds among participants. Students research their selected plays on film, on the web, with librarians and parents, with drama coaches

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and English teachers. One group, called “The Allusionists,” create their performances as required on Shakespeare text but develop a script with layered allusions to more contemporary movies and texts. Another group performs the entire play from which they craft their Shakesperience performance for a community Shakespeare in the Park event. Edmiston and McKibben (2011) suggest “the complex human dilemmas that abound in the world of a Shakespeare play” help to focus a group’s collaboration and in the process build ensemble (p. 88). This sense of group cohesion is evident in one student’s description of how her group “collaborated and debated” about Shakespeare’s words and their meaning: “...so it was really cool just hearing everyone’s interpretation and really getting to know Shakespeare’s language and finding a connection between our lives and Shakespeare’s words.”

During festival preparation, teachers play various but always crucial roles in preparing students for Shakesperience. Some are directors; others are club advisors, while still others are managers/advisors offering empty classrooms or off-campus spaces for rehearsals and steady consultations with student directors. For each group, teachers employ enabling constraints for their students to explore and create a festival performance that is a product but more significantly is meaningful to students. Erikson addresses the *just right* quality of pedagogical enabling constraints in his warning to avoid pedagogical extremes—excessive control on one hand and complete lack of direction on the other (Flum & Kaplan, 2012, p. 243). One teacher observes that the festival learning and preparation liberate her and her students from the classroom’s excessive preoccupation with grading and testing.

One of the greatest opportunities Shakesperience gave me was the chance to give kids the opportunities to be creative without any assessment or high stakes reward or penalty...to really experiment with what they were doing. And that doesn’t often happen in the classroom because we have to generate grades; we have to measure everything...It really frees kids up, and that’s just invaluable.

Festival preparation provides significant developmental opportunities for adolescents seeing themselves anew as agents capable of their own meaningful choices and contemplating the real-world dimensions of social and personal relationships. Bate and Brock (2007) explained the unique capacity of Shakespeare to help students examine point of view since Shakespeare teaches that for every position there is a counterposition and that we grow in intelligence and moral discrimination by continually going through the process of engaging with new problems and choices.

Students take deep intellectual dives as they make their own meaning out of the chaos of a Shakespeare play to create their own festival performances. One student says that the experience of working after school on their festival performance allowed the kind of opportunity that was a first in his school experience to:

... really examine the language in depth and really see how each individual word is acting because we were trying to pick it apart to get a specific idea—to know what it meant, especially if we were going to be performing it we had to understand it.



Festival study and survey results suggest that the Shakesperience design, organisation, and personnel combine to create the conditions that foster emergence. A collection of group and one-on-one interviews with students and teachers combine with written surveys to create a rich narrative of participants' festival experience for analysis (Leavy, 2009; Paton, 2002). The word participants most often use in response to festival survey questions is "fun." Additionally, participants often express gratitude for the experience. In response to a question about "any surprises at the festival," participants report: how good the other groups' performances were, how nice other kids were, how great the workshops were, how cool the kids were in the workshops. A frequent response to the question about "any disappointment with festival," is a variation on "Yes, I'm a senior. So I can't come back next year." Participant teachers say that students return every year and comment: "Shakesperience was the best thing I did in high school." Analyses of survey and interview data suggest areas for festival tweaking and fine-tuning. Overall participant responses inspire and encourage my festival direction efforts. As festival director, I have learned that I cannot script complexity—but I can create conditions for its emergence.

#### THIS BE MADNESS, YET THERE IS METHOD IN'T

The chaos-order continuum offers a useful lens for understanding social learning and the dynamics along that continuum throughout the process of preparing a festival presentation based on Shakespeare. During the festival itself, each workshop creates its own chaos-order continuum of dynamic, applied learning among diverse adolescents.

Eisner (2002) suggests that while the standard view of rational planning maintains objectives as constants, the arts can teach the "importance of being flexibly purposive in the course of one's work" (p. 205). Through quick yet focused workshop sessions with the festival's teaching artists, participants experience fresh lessons on how to be flexibly purposive in collaboration and in performance. Connected through morning workshop activities, participants play to each other in performance and observe intently as audience. One teacher says:

The one thing I really noticed was how they watched the other students perform. If they hadn't prepared a performance themselves, they would not have appreciated it. If they didn't get to meet other kids in workshops, they wouldn't have been as invested. But they completely got it!

While participants admire Shakespeare's depth and universal range, they are blown away by each other's diversity—within their own ranks and across the festival groups. Sometimes, participants write about themselves admitting that they "could never see myself understanding Shakespeare, let alone being on a stage." Teachers articulate the profundity of the experience and positive changes they witness among their student participants. Across the students' and teachers' interviews, the *unlikely kid* transformed by Shakesperience is a recurring theme and source of joy. The

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diverse students who starred on the girls basketball team, had difficulty reading, did not speak English in September, did not socialise, did not speak in class variously joined with their teachers and peers to create a festival performance.

I have witnessed unparalleled opportunities for inspired, authentic learning among a variety of students and their teachers during the festival processes. I have seen teachers weep with joy and affection for their students' courage and performances. Chief among lessons learned from hosting Shakesperience is the reminder of the lengths that wonderfully good teachers will go for their students—beyond prescribed curriculum, beyond the school day, beyond their personal budgets for pizza and snacks. One teacher said that she followed her students off the bus and was behind the group when they re-entered the school.

You know how it is after a field trip... 'Ah, well, that's over,' and the kids scatter. But after Shakesperience, the boys went back into the school and were glowing. Administrators and other teachers told me that the kids walked around the building just beaming, so proud of what they accomplished at the festival.

Empathy and appreciation emanate within small groups and extend to new friends in fellow ensembles during festival. The process that begins with preparing a Shakespeare performance months earlier culminates splendidly on the university stage. When performances are finished for the day, university faculty and teaching artists working as commentators confer backstage and develop specific commendations based on observations and professional insight. Commentators offer an overall commendation to each group as well and commentary on "commendable characterisations" and "commendable choices." The commentators' incisive observations hold the theatre in rapt attention. Their commentary validates performances and hard work, teaches new lessons, and specifically recognises unique ensemble and collaborative efforts.

Shakespeare is the festival's marquee name, but he is not the star. The festival's brilliance owes everything to the teachers and students who take the festival's challenge to *bring it* to festival—*it* being their diversity, understanding, intelligence, courage, hard work, and collaboration. Performances result from learning and working along the chaos-order continuum and the productive complexity that emerges from the edges of chaos during preparation, an intellectual feat so stunning that participants dazzle themselves and each other. When the Mistress of the Revels officially closes the festival, each participant's happy confidence from productive accomplishment fills the theatre, and no one wants to leave.

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