

Shakespeare in Taiwan: Teaching Online in a Global Community

by Brian Goedde

“**U**nless you’re in Taiwan,” I wrote in my introduction to my classes last year, “we won’t meet in person this semester.” I posted a picture from a trip my family and I took down the east coast of the island; behind me, steep mountainsides plunged into the Pacific Ocean. “This is my back yard,” I wrote. “Just kidding.”

I knew I was risking a bad first impression as a tourist in a t-shirt, but I didn’t know how to present myself to my students this semester. I could hardly believe what I was doing in the first place. As an educator, I want to have a “connection” with my students—I want to get to know them, listen to them, learn from them—but now I was as distant as I could possibly be, online and on the other side of the globe. When I look at this picture now, however, I see myself as yet unaware of how this unusual circumstance will change my perspective on what “connectedness” means, both as it regards my students, and as it regards the teaching and learning of my subject, Shakespeare.

PERSONAL NEED, PROFESSIONAL CONTROVERSY

What brought my family and me to Taiwan is that my wife, a Ph.D. student, got a grant to study Chinese. We have two children, a daughter who was then 15 months and a son who was then four, so this was the last year we could re-locate without the added question of where he would go to school. I don’t have any on-campus obligations as an adjunct faculty member, so my boss allowed me to spend a year teaching online.

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When you think of global, online education, the first thing that may jump to mind these days are MOOCs, the “massive open online classes” that are widely publicized (and criticized). My classes were not these, but rather, closer to what are now being called SPOCs—small private online classes. Enrollment is limited to the same number I’d have in the classroom, thanks to the efforts made by the college’s collective bargaining unit. This allows me to have frequent, personalized correspondence with my students—once or twice a week, at least.

This kind of class, argues Tim Goral in an article for *University Business* magazine, may actually outlive the MOOCs. The article quotes Anant Agarwal,

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the president of edX, one of the largest MOOC producers, expressing interest in small, private classes, which even he suggests is a more sustainable business model.¹ The British Broadcasting Company (BBC) has reported that edX, with Harvard University and University of California, Berkeley leading the way, are refining the SPOC model and plan this to be their next phase of online course development.²

Since their debut in fall 2013, there have been three SPOCs offered by edX. I contacted the company to ask what percentage of students completed the courses, but was not given access to the data. One edX professor, Brian White of the University of Massachusetts Boston, writes on edX’s blog that the results of his biology SPOC have been “extremely positive.”³ Otherwise, these few SPOCs have not been publicly assessed for retention rates or learning outcomes.

The SPOCs do seem promising, but much seems promising in the light of studies such as the one from the University of Pennsylvania, which found the dropout rate for its MOOCs was a staggering 96 percent.⁴ Also, as Natalie B. Milman suggests in the journal *Distance Learning*, SPOCs seem promising simply because they are what colleges like mine have been doing for years with online education: limiting enrollment, using teaching tools and methods that are known to work, and providing a good education by understanding and meeting student needs.⁵

As an online teacher, I appreciate this shift in the conversation around online education. In classes such as mine, the “massive” element is not the students, but the subject, the power and possibilities found in Shakespeare’s plays. The students, instead, not as a “mass” but as a collection of individual learners, can be the tight and narrow focus of the teacher’s attention.

That said, the question remains: What is exactly “in focus” in an online class, MOOC or SPOC, when the student is never seen? The answer, I found, is in the work that the students and I do together.

ONLINE TEACHING, REAL-LIFE CONTEXT

After a few jet-lagged weeks in the tropical heat of Taiwan's late summer, the semester started and so did my family's routines. In the early morning I'd ride my rusty-trusty bike alongside the enormous *Da An Gongyuan* ("park of great peace") to the public library, an eight-floor concrete tower filled with fake tropical plants and, on its upper floors, rows of four-person tables which, on the weekends, are filled by improbably quiet high school students poring over their textbooks. I find a seat, and *once more into the breach, dear friends*: another day of work. I log on to Blackboard to see how my Shakespeare students in Michigan are doing.

I had never felt like an international teacher. Now I was, and a surprising sense of feeling "connected to my students" came with it.

Except they weren't all in Michigan. On the second day of class, under my introduction, a student wrote that he was in the Philippines, about an hour's flight away from me. Another student was in Germany. Others were spread out all over Michigan and the United States.

I also got a response to my picture.

"Is it in Hualien?" a student wrote.

It was. She wrote that she was from Taipei, and currently lived in Ann Arbor.

This was my first eye-opening experience as an online teacher overseas: I thought I was doing something groundbreaking, unheard of, even daring. Well, it was all these things, for me, but actually, I was only catching up to what many of my students are doing, and really, I'm embarrassed to have been so surprised. Of course I had known that the student body at my college was geographically diverse. Students "live" at the addresses brought to the Student Center to "establish residency," but their capital-H *Homes* are another world away. The student in Germany was caring for her grandmother; the student in the Philippines was on an extended visit to his in-laws. My Taiwanese student had been in Ann Arbor for three years, she wrote, and added that having her instructor be from Ann Arbor but now living in Taipei was "so weird."

With my eyes newly opened, my perspective changed. I had been a teacher of international students, but I had never felt like an international teacher. Now I was, and a surprising sense of feeling "connected to my students" came with it. I had feared my year in Taiwan would make me the distant teacher I never wanted to be, but being so far flung from campus connected me to a common student experience I hadn't realized I had been missing.



“Rope Swing” is from *Swimming Holes*, a series by James Fossett, assistant professor at the State University of New York, New Paltz. For more, visit www.jamesfossett.com



AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE INFORMS PEDAGOGY

Becoming an “international teacher” influenced my Shakespeare pedagogy in one significant way: what I learned from, and how I have come to appreciate, ELL (“English Language Learner”) students. In large part this was because, for the second time in my life, I saw the world as a language-learner myself. I had taken Spanish from middle school through college, where it became my minor, entirely earned by a semester in Madrid. My experience in Spain and with Spanish however (and in America with English, for that matter), prepared me little for

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even the most basic, conversational Chinese.

To explain what I mean, I’ll only make a comment on one aspect of pronunciation. In Mandarin Chinese (the official dialect of Taiwan and mainland China), there are four tones: A high tone, a falling tone, a low or “dipping” tone, and a rising tone. Is the distinction important? Well, tāng is soup and táng is sugar. Mā is mother and mǎ is horse. If you don’t want to insult your mother or order sweet-and-sour soup for your coffee, yes, the distinction is important.

My ELL students in Shakespeare are at a much higher level with their English, of course; I was a beginner, and my students have to test into “college-level reading and writing” status on the ACT-devised placement test, along with native English speakers, to be able to enroll in any literature class the college offers.

Shakespeare, however, presents texts beyond what anyone has been mastering. For example, Othello says that Desdemona’s father,

[...] loved me, oft invited me,
Still questioned me the story of my life,
From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes
That I have passed.
I ran it through even from my boyish days
To th’ very moment that he bade me tell it,
Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances,
Of moving accidents by flood and field
Of hair-breadth scapes i’th’ imminent deadly breach,
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence
And portance in my traveller’s history....

(*Othello*, 1.3.128-138)

There are shortened words that are somewhat recognizable—“oft,” “i’th’,” “scapes.” There are words like “portance” and “bade” that may be clear in context—but maybe not, when the context includes words like “accidents,” “passed,” and “chances” in ways we don’t typically use them. There are also obscure words like “breach” and obsolete words like “thence.” It all adds up to a challenging read, to say the least.

Very few students come to the class with a good amount of experience with Shakespeare’s early modern English. One of my students was a middle-school English teacher who, with her students, staged Shakespeare plays every year, and

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she took my class for her teacher re-certification. She didn’t say that she struggled with the readings, but when I ask on the first discussion board of the semester what was challenging about the reading material, everyone but her understandably complains and commiserates.

The lexicon presents an added, formidable challenge to the ELL student. A Turkish student, for example, e-mailed me to say he doubted he had the language skills to stay in the class. For the first play we read, he used some “modern English” translations he had found online, but he struggled even with *that* text. He then found modern-day Turkish translations of Shakespeare, which helped with his reading, but not his writing, the text that is most important of all, because this is the text with which he earns his grade. So, his extra work meant he could succeed as a reader of Shakespeare, but not yet as a Shakespeare student in my class. To read, perchance to quote and analyze—*ay, there’s the rub*.

“How can they offer their own ideas about the play when we can barely read this language?” This was a question posed by a Kazakh teacher to Mary Jo Kietzman, an English professor on a Fulbright scholarship to teach literature in Kazakhstan. In an ethnographic personal essay of her experience, published in the journal *College Literature*, one of Kietzman’s responses is to have her students re-write passages of the play, both in their native language and colloquial English.⁷ If students are learning the language, in other words, as a teacher you can draw on the strength they already practice: translation.

Todd Heyden writes in *The Journal of Imagination in Language Learning and Teaching* that he too assigns his students to re-write passages or scenes from Shakespeare’s plays, and he even assigns ELL students to create additional scenes of their own invention. This, as he writes, allows students to make the “daunting” text “something of their own.”⁸

I’d like to keep in mind that this process of translation to generate an interpretation of literature does not level the playing field between native and non-

native English speakers. Clearly, my Turkish student who is working with three texts does more reading than the majority of my students who say they work with two—Shakespeare’s and a modern translation. Extra challenges persist for these students, but the progress is remarkable, and the process is illuminating for the rest of us. As Gisela Ernst-Slavit and her research colleagues write in their article, “Changing lives: teaching English and literature to ESL students”:

Perhaps it will take a while before Ana [a case study in the article] can learn to use rhetorical and syntactic conventions or for her to understand that Juliet’s line “O Romeo, Romeo. Wherefore art thou Romeo?” means “Why are you a Montague?” and not “Where are you Romeo?” Yet, the challenges she and her teachers will have to face dwindle when we examine what Ana has to offer and what she has accomplished in such a short time.⁹

This was my experience with my Turkish student too; he stayed in the class, our challenges dwindled, and he did quite well. I only conveyed to him what I must now add to the Ernst-Slavit article: native English speakers also have to learn that “wherefore” means “why,” and not “where.” To the Kazakh teacher I am compelled to respond, we native English speakers can “barely read this language.” In response to Todd Heyden, we too need to make the “daunting” text “something of our own.”

TRANSLATION BEGETS COMMONALITY

What came to light for me teaching Shakespeare in Taiwan was that translation, a necessary learning tool for ELL students, shows how my native and non-native English speakers have more in common than may first appear. In this light, my perspective changed to see how they also have something in common with me.

The articles I’ve mentioned focus on classes in which all students are learning English. My Shakespeare classes contain mostly native English speakers, but everyone, regardless of origin or background, I’d like to classify as a “SLL” student: a Shakespeare Language Learner. This is not to say that Shakespeare’s “early modern” English is another *language* from the one you’re reading now. It’s not. However, when students frequently encounter words like “doth” and “ere” and “wherefore,” the texts require translation.

For my students’ midterm and final essays I’ve offered the option of writing a personal, “modern-day” translation of a soliloquy or sonnet along with an analysis of the text, but I’ve found that you can use translation without even assigning it directly. Take my Turkish student’s situation: “to read, perchance to quote and analyze”—*ay, there’s the rub* not just for him but for all students. To write about any work of literature effectively, students have to quote and discuss the text they analyze. As they lead up to a quote like “Wherefore art thou, Romeo” and follow it, they have to contextualize the language and incorporate it in their writing. When this is done well, it demonstrates their understanding, their personal translation of the text.

It takes practice, and here is the great advantage of teaching literature online: everything they do in my class is written. Instead of having face-to-face discussions in a brick-and-mortar classroom, my students respond weekly to a prompt on a discussion board. They write their response and respond to each other, expanding on or debating with the ideas of their peers. I consider these “informal” assignments (I don’t take off points for organization, for example; I just want them to write out some ideas), but because everything is written, everything must contain quotations.

Earlier I asked what, in an online class, is “in focus if the student is never

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seen?” This is it: their writing, their quotations, their contextualization and interpretation of passages from Shakespeare’s plays, which is to say, their translation. This word itself, to “translate,” means to “carry across.” In my students’ weekly discussions, they don’t “re-write” Shakespeare as in the articles I mentioned above, but they carry his work across what often seem to be peaks and valleys of their learning process—their grasp of meaning and loss of it, their epiphanic interpretation and dismayed confusion—and into their own written work.

This awareness of translation also brings to light what my students have in common with me, and here again I found myself feeling a surprising connection to a common student experience. Those who have become reasonably accustomed to Shakespeare’s “language”—as my middle-school teacher was, and as I am—are still Shakespeare Language Learners in apprehending the great depth and variety of meaning found in his work. I’ve learned that “ere” means “before,” but with each reading of a play I continue to translate the staggering eloquence found in the lines he gives his characters. I’ll teach Shakespeare for as long as my boss will let me; I’ll be an SLL student for life.

CONCLUSION: A RENEWED HUMILITY

My first eye-opening experience teaching Shakespeare in Taiwan—or, more accurately, at a college in Michigan from a computer at the Taipei Public Library—is that my students were spread out all over the country and world. By the second week, I’m compelled to note, none of that really mattered. A few times I arranged video-office-hour meetings with students over Skype; this placed my students and me on the planet in real-time, because we had to accommodate the time zone differences. Otherwise, it didn’t matter what time zone anyone was in to discuss the problematic patriotism in *Henry V* and the idea that Hamlet may

be too insightful for his own good. We wrote each other about love and irony in Sonnet 18. We debated whether Lady Macbeth was an evil influence to her husband or gave him the murderous courage with which he thrived—tragically. We were students of Shakespeare, connected by the Internet, with no constraints to time and place. Because my online classes are “asynchronous” (that is, no one has to be logged in at the same time), our time and place was circumstantial, and inconsequential.

What was and continues to be consequential, as a function of time and place, are our backgrounds, particularly in regards to language. English Language Learners face a formidable challenge in a Shakespeare class, but this challenge casts light on a process that is integral to an appreciation of any literature. As writer and translator Eliot Weinberger writes, “every reading of every poem, regardless of language, is an act of translation: translation into the reader’s intellectual and emotional life.” In my life as a teacher, my online, far-flung year on an island in the South China Sea made me a student again: a student of Chinese, and an SLL student of Shakespeare. As both, my humility in the face of my students and my subject was renewed: a valuable teaching and traveling experience to have. [nea](#)

ENDNOTES

1. Goral, “Make way for SPOCS: small, private online courses may provide what MOOCs can’t,” p. 45.
2. Coughlin, “Harvard plans to boldly go with SPOCs.”
3. White, “An edX SPOC as the Online Backbone of a Flipped College Course.”
4. Stein, “Penn GSE Study Shows MOOCs Have Relatively Few Active Users, with Only a Few Persisting to Course End.”
5. Milman, “Out with MOOCs and in with SPOCs? Not so Fast,” p. 71.
6. Wells and Taylor, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, p. 825.
7. Kietzman, “Doing Shakespeare in a Kazakhstani College: Teacher Plays Ethnographer,” p. 103.
8. Heyden, “Shakespeare for ESL? *Hamlet* through Imaginative Writing.”
9. Ernst-Slavit, “Changing lives: teaching English and literature to ESL students: to enhance learning for ESL students the authors provide selected background knowledge and strategies,” p. 116.
10. Weinberger and Paz, *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei: How a Chinese Poem is Translated*, p. 43.

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