

Shakespeare Imaginarium: Workshop Information Pack 1 – *Hamlet* and potential: refusing closure

Aims

In this workshop we will discuss how *Hamlet* is taught in the classroom. This will be used to raise the issue of how freely the play may be taught within the formal structures imposed by the institution. *Hamlet* will be discussed as a character who refuses closure: he resists fully becoming a stock character in a revenge play and he resists giving in to the political machine of the Danish court. Just as *Hamlet* tries to preserve his potential to be and become whatever he wants, so the teacher and student can seek to preserve potential in the classroom by strategies that resist closure.

Readings

- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*.
- Lewis, Tyson Edward. 'The Architecture of Potentiality: Weak Utopianism and Educational Space in the Work of Giorgio Agamben,' *Utopian Studies* 23.2 (2012): 355-73. Subscriber access only.

Focus points

- Teaching *Hamlet*
- Institutional limits
- Provoking potential

Teaching *Hamlet*

This first focus point invites the group to share experiences and thoughts about the teaching of *Hamlet*. The questions below are to help guide discussion.

- What do you think *Hamlet* is about?
- Discuss how *Hamlet* is a play about individual characters versus larger systems, mechanisms and politics.
- In what ways is *Hamlet* a character who resists final definition, closure, stereotyping, solution, resolution?
- What do you do when teaching *Hamlet*? Why?
- What are your aims and how do you meet them when teaching *Hamlet*?
- Do you employ any problem-based, project-based, creative or open-ended learning approaches to teaching *Hamlet*?
- Once you have finished teaching *Hamlet*, how do you judge whether you have taught it well?

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Institutional limits

This second focus point foregrounds the fact that educators are embedded in complex institutional frameworks that limit and enable the sort of teaching and learning that may occur.

- In what ways do institutional demands shape how you teach *Hamlet*?
- How is your potential as a teacher limited by institutional demands?
- How does this situation limit the potential of your students?
- What is positive or valuable about the managerial environment of teaching? Consider the mechanisms of compliance, measurement, standardisation and professionalization.

Provoking potential

In this focus point we will discuss three ideas explored in Tyson Edward Lewis' article:

1. Strong versus weak utopianism;
2. Potentiality versus actualisation;
3. The notch in the classroom.

In building his argument, Lewis is engaging with four writers who address these issues: Giorgio Agamben, Joanne Faulkner, David Tyack and Larry Cuban. The main drift is this. We need a sort of utopianism in educational spaces that is not strongly predetermined according to a rigid set of rules, but rather is of a more open nature that allows greater freedom for learners (and teachers). Our current, managerial systems of formal learning are designed to enable students to actualise their potential, but in so doing, the students' potential is narrowly guided along a highly specified path to a predetermined endpoint that the formal system considers the appropriate actualisation. It would be better if we could protect students' potential from being transformed into an actualised selfhood that limits other possible futures. We need to find ways to preserve their potentiality in a present tense learning context that nurtures rather than forecloses possibilities. Lewis refers to this de-instrumentalised potential as the students' 'impotential'. We need to consider ways in which we might foster genuine learning and potential, even while we operate within formal educational systems that increasingly seek to actualise students in particular, emphatic and limited ways. As an architectural example, Lewis notes the importance of a very simple alteration in some schoolrooms. This was a 'notch' space that overtly upset the regular structure of the room and stood as a constant invitation to freedom, experimentation, creativity and potential.

If you do not have access to Lewis' article, here are four quotations from it to help you discuss the three ideas listed above:

'Weak utopianism is the experience of the potentiality of utopianism without the command to make this utopianism a determinate, materialized form or shape' (357)

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'In terms of educational renewal, the student must suffer an alteration that destroys the not yet in order to fully actualize a latent potentiality. Yet to fully actualize potentiality is to destroy it.' (357)

'In the messianic moment of weak utopianism, we experience a time of suspension where the rules prohibiting certain behaviours and decisions are left to idle. Suspension offers a time of free use wherein time is no longer held above or outside of our practices and thought is released from the injunction to continually actualize itself in terms of efficient and pragmatic action.' (361)

'Taking the square classroom as their inspiration [the architects] introduced a notch that created space for a new bay window as well as a small space for introducing new learning technologies, bookshelves, and so on...[t]he notch in the classroom wall is a clear example of weak, messianic utopian space suddenly appearing and disrupting the grammar of the schoolhouse....What emerges is a space to invent and experiment.' (369)

Some additional questions:

- Do these ideas make sense to you? Do they seem like genuine issues to be addressed?
- How could you – or how do you – create 'the messianic moment of weak utopianism' in your teaching practice?
- In teaching Shakespeare, and specifically *Hamlet*, how might you provoke potential in student learning rather than directing it to forms of officially approved actualisation?
- Can you devise a 'notch' (literal or metaphoric) that will work in your context?