Eileen Landay

Give Me Moor Proof:
Othello in Seventh Grade

Eileen Landay describes a project for drama study that culminates in a performance not of the play but of the writing and interpretive work the students completed. Immersed in art, students used "performance work to support the development of cognition, language skills, and a sense of agency as meaning makers."

Six weeks after Theresa Toomey Fox's seventh-grade English students first heard about William Shakespeare's *Othello,* all ninety-nine students stood on the stage in the cavernous auditorium at the Nathanael Greene Middle School in Providence, Rhode Island, performing their original work, *Give Me Moor Proof,* for an audience of fellow students, family, and friends. Fox created this project as part of her ongoing affiliation with the ArtsLiteracy Project, a curriculum and professional development initiative at Brown University that develops, documents, and disseminates methods of literacy learning through the arts. Fox's *Othello* curriculum is based on the ArtsLiteracy Performance Cycle, a set of general principles and a collection of model activities continually in development by project facilitators, teachers, and artists (see the project Web site, http://www.artslit.org). This article describes Fox's work and concludes with a brief review of research and theory that supports an arts integration approach to teaching and learning.

The ArtsLiteracy Project

In ArtsLiteracy Project curriculum, students work with one or more core texts to create a performance. It is not a traditional drama program that focuses on putting on plays. Neither is it process drama, which uses role-playing to deepen participants' understanding of content or develop skill in perspective-taking. While it combines elements of both approaches, its major focus is to strengthen students' literacy skills. The performance is an original work that "speaks to" themes students find compelling and that incorporates material from the core text, other relevant texts, and students' writing.
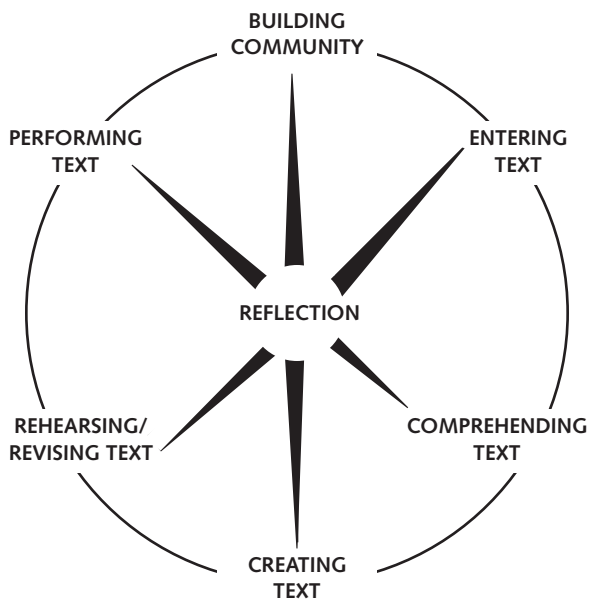
In Fox's *Othello* curriculum,[1] the final performance included a plot summary, modern retellings of selected scenes, character sketches through poetry and movement, recitations of monologues from the original text, and segments of analytical essays. Like others developed by the ArtsLiteracy Project, Fox's curriculum develops a strong sense of community and purpose for working with text and uses the arts to create effective, memorable literacy learning environments. In this classroom community, students willingly cross the bridge from their everyday lives into the unfamiliar world of new concepts and challenging texts.[2]

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Literacy Learning with a Purpose

While most ArtsLiteracy work involves an ongoing partnership between a classroom teacher and a professional actor, Fox, a veteran of six years with the project, now often works independently, incorporating performance in her classroom throughout the year. In introducing students to the tumultuous worlds of Shakespeare's Venice and Cyprus, Fox planned for students to know the characters, setting, and plot; to gain comfort with and interest in Shakespeare's language;

FIGURE 1. The ArtsLiteracy Performance Cycle. Developed by Kurt Wootton and Eileen Landay

analytical essays. The final performance merged students' language with the words of the Bard in an original retelling and commentary on the tragedy.

Building Community

ArtsLiteracy works to create environments where class members support one another's best interests and where students need not worry about what others will say and do.

The project's definition of *community* emerges both from education (Greene; Meier; Sizer) and from theater. "In theatre, emphasis is often placed on the need to create an ensemble, a group of actors, directors, producers, and designers who know one another and create a production together. Such a clear purpose asks that everyone work together and know one another on a level where they can offer themselves as artists and know that they will be respected and taken care of" (Wootton).

From the first day of school, Fox's students engaged in numerous trust-building activities, learning to work collaboratively and productively. When in December they first heard of *Othello,* they were comfortable enough to take the risks performance work required. Following the performance, the sense of community and accomplishment was such that students eagerly asked to do similar projects.

Entering Text

Entering-text activities inspire curiosity and create a climate of inquiry, helping students establish connections between their lives and the new material. A film clip; a story that pauses at a "cliffhanger"; a powerful problem, puzzle, or dilemma: all capture students' interests and awaken their curiosity.

At the start of the *Othello* unit, Fox gave students an opinionnaire titled "Breakin' Up Is Hard to Do" (see fig. 2). Students responded individually and then in small groups. Each then placed the survey in a new file folder that held their *Othello* work and that, at the unit's end, Fox evaluated and graded based on a rubric.

In the next class, small groups of students received a few lines of text spoken by a single character and were asked to discuss what the lines might mean, who might be talking, and what might happen. One group received lines spoken by Desdemona (see fig. 3) while others were given the words of Othello, Iago, or Emilia.

and to address a number of the play's most powerful themes. Loyalty and devotion, deceit and revenge are relevant topics to young adolescents. The high drama and elevated language of *Othello* added significance to issues they often addressed in their lives. Fox and student teacher Tasha Ferraro carefully led students through the steps of the ArtsLiteracy Performance Cycle (see fig. 1).[3]

Fox and Ferraro began by reaffirming the strong sense of community they had cultivated from the start of the school year. Next, they introduced students to the themes and language of the text, establishing the material's power and relevance. They used a range of literacy activities designed to help students develop fluency and construct meaning. Students read and discussed key scenes, created improvisations, and studied Elizabethan language. They watched and compared selected scenes from several film versions; explored and discussed characters' actions, motivation, and language; talked about and translated the play's themes into several other genres; and delivered memorized monologues. They composed paraphrases and modern-day retellings, created storyboards and other visual art, and wrote personal and

Students divided the lines among themselves, invented an accompanying gesture or movement, and presented each of *Othello*'s main characters in a technique called *character arcs.*[4] By the end of the period, they had read, rehearsed, discussed, and rendered lines such as Cassio's "O God, that men / should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains" (2.3.289–90) and Iago's "O beware, my lord, of jealousy. / It is the green-eyed monster that doth mock / the meat it feeds on" (3.3.165–66).

Fox continued to build student curiosity by showing the funeral scene of the Sir Laurence Olivier film in which Othello and Desdemona are borne to their graves with great ceremony. "So the people whose words you spoke are dead. How do you suppose that happened?" Fox asked. After discussing possibilities, Fox gave each student a copy of the Dover low-cost edition of the play, encouraging them to mark up the text. The time had come to work with the complete play.

Comprehending Text

In the next step of the ArtsLiteracy Performance Cycle, students work with a core text developing fluency, word knowledge, and comprehension skills. In the *Othello* class, students used several performance activities to become familiar with the arc of the play and to explore its characters, language, and themes. Readers theater helped them focus on specific scenes and speeches. In structuring readers theater, improvisations, and discussions, Fox always distinguished between a practiced reading and a cold reading and rarely asked students to do cold readings. During and after performances, students responded to focus questions to help them interpret characters' language, actions, and motives.

FIGURE 2. Breakin' Up Is Hard to Do

True or False:

1. _____It is better to dump someone than to have him or her dump you.

2. _____If someone lies to you once, there is no way you can trust him or her again.

3. _____To get to the top, sometimes you have to step on people.

4. _____It is OK to hurt people if they break the law.

5. _____Hate will make you crazy.

6. _____If you are angry with someone, you should hit him or her.

7. _____It is OK to hurt people in self-defense.

8. _____You should "stick to your own kind" when looking for someone to love.

9. _____If you love somebody you would never cheat on him or her.

10. _____You should have something in common with the person you love.

11. _____Wives should obey their husbands.

12. _____It is OK to hurt people if they hurt your feelings.

13. _____You can love someone and hate him or her at the same time.

14. _____Love will make you crazy.

15. _____You cannot love someone you cannot trust.

16. _____You can love someone from a different race or culture.

17. _____If someone takes something you own, you can use violence to get it back.

18. _____Sometimes things are too good to be true.

19. _____You can be innocent of a crime because of temporary insanity.

FIGURE 3. Lines of Text from *Othello*

Desdemona:

1. "I saw Othello's visage in his mind, / and to his honors and his valiant parts / did I my soul and fortunes consecrate." 1.3.252–54

2. "If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it." 3.3.21

3. "I wonder, in my soul, / what you could ask me that I could deny?" 3.3.68–69

4. "Sure, there's some wonder in this handkerchief, / I am most unhappy in the loss of it." 3.4.101–02

5. "I understand a fury in your words, / but not your words." 4.2.32–33

6. "Eyes do itch; / does that bode weeping?" 4.3.58–59

7. "Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight." 5.2.80

8. "A guiltless death I die." 5.2.121

9. "Commend me to my kind lord, O farewell!" 5.2.125

Students created plot summaries and used them to launch small-group and whole-class discussions. What happened in this scene? What did each character want? What lines from the text provided evidence? They compared key scenes from several film versions, such as act 3, scene 3, a pivotal scene in which Iago gains possession of Desdemona's handkerchief and explains that he will use it to "prove" Desdemona's unfaithfulness.

Developing an understanding and appreciation of Shakespearean language required the greatest effort. Fox called students' attention to language through what she called "window-shade quotes." On the blinds in her classroom, in large and readable type, she posted brief quotations from each of the characters and asked students to consider what they revealed about the character and how their words were important to the play. Examples included Iago's words: "I am not what I am" (1.1.65); "Trifles light as air / are to the jealous confirmations strong / as proofs of holy writ" (3.3.322–24); "Oh, beware, my lord of jealousy. / It is the green-eyed monster that doth mock / the meat it feeds on" (3.3.165–66); and "Men should be what they seem" (3.3.127). Studying these, students became familiar with

> **Students also wrote a fable based on a moral they extracted from *Othello* and an analytic essay responding to one of four prompts related to a central theme of the play. Many of their texts were woven into the final performance.**

vocabulary, syntax, and allusions as well as the pace and rhythms of the language.

Working with window-shade quotes, key monologues, and other sections of text, students explored the ways that language illuminates character. They compared Othello's language in the earlier and later portions of the play, and they discussed Shakespeare's use of figurative language. Later in the unit, students memorized and presented one of six key monologues to the class. These monologues became anchors for the final performance. The classes returned often to the central themes of the play. Midway through, they revisited the "Breakin' Up Is Hard to Do" survey, chose the three statements they considered most relevant to the play's themes, and explained their choices to the class.

Fox prepared students for the play's tragic end. She opened the class on act 5 by saying, "We're doing a very serious thing today. . . . I'd like us to take it very seriously." They did. Students performed the final scene in readers theater and then watched the ending of the Laurence Fishburne/Kenneth Branagh film. They then clarified aspects of the plot, related the ending to events in the modern world (honor killings), and discussed Othello's famous monologue, "I have done the state some service" (5.2.338–55).

Students also took part in traditional comprehension activities, including regular quizzes. In a final exam, they identified characters, attributed quotes to characters, and wrote two essays that included textual evidence.

Creating Text

Creating many, varied responses to the core text allows students to explore spaces around a text or gaps within it. Portions of these responses are incorporated into the final performance. In Fox's *Othello* class, students wrote paraphrases, did on-the-spot improvisations, and wrote and performed modern-day scenes. One group, for example, worked with this passage from act 3, scene 3:

> **Othello:**
> 'Tis not to make me jealous
> To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves
> company,
> Is free of speech, sings, plays and dances well:
> Where virtue is, these are more virtuous.
> Not from my own weak merits will I draw
> The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt,
> For she had eyes and chose me. No, Iago,
> I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt,
> prove; (183–90)

The following paraphrase became a key section of the final performance:

> If you say my wife is hot, it's
> Not gonna make me jealous.—
> She chose me! No—if you think she's
> Cheatin' on me, I need proof.

Students improvised scenes that placed *Othello* character types in modern-day settings. By creating paraphrases and improvisations, students solidified their understanding and made text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections (Raphael). They explored character by composing an "I Am" poem for each of the play's four major characters. Fox combined the strongest lines from individual poems into one poem for each character and returned the poems to the class for discussion and analysis.

Students used art to explore plot and character. In storyboards, they illustrated the "big events" of acts 1 and 2. They explored motivation by illustrating each character's "wants" with accompanying citations. They created a series of illustrations with selected quotes to trace the progression of Othello's emotions from love and trust to jealousy and suspicion.

In preparation for the battery of tests they would take during the spring, Fox drew on *Othello* to create prompts for in-class practice essays. One prompt asked students to consider the importance of trust in relationships. A student wrote, "In *Othello,* a play by William Shakespeare, deceit and betrayal is at the center of the plot. Iago, a revengeful and even evil character, twists the minds of many to create a game of mistrust and double crossing. . . . By the end of the second act, Iago has already turned Othello against his most prized lieutenant and plans to turn him against his wife."

A second prompt asked students to consider things they have done and later regretted, offering as examples Cassio's being persuaded to drink and Emilia's stealing Desdemona's handkerchief. Students wrote vividly about misunderstandings, intrigues, the negotiation and loss of trust and friendships—all modest, everyday versions of the play's grand themes. A third prompt asked students to consider two of the play's most famous and contradictory phrases: Iago's statements, "Men should be what they seem" (3.3.127) and "I am not what I
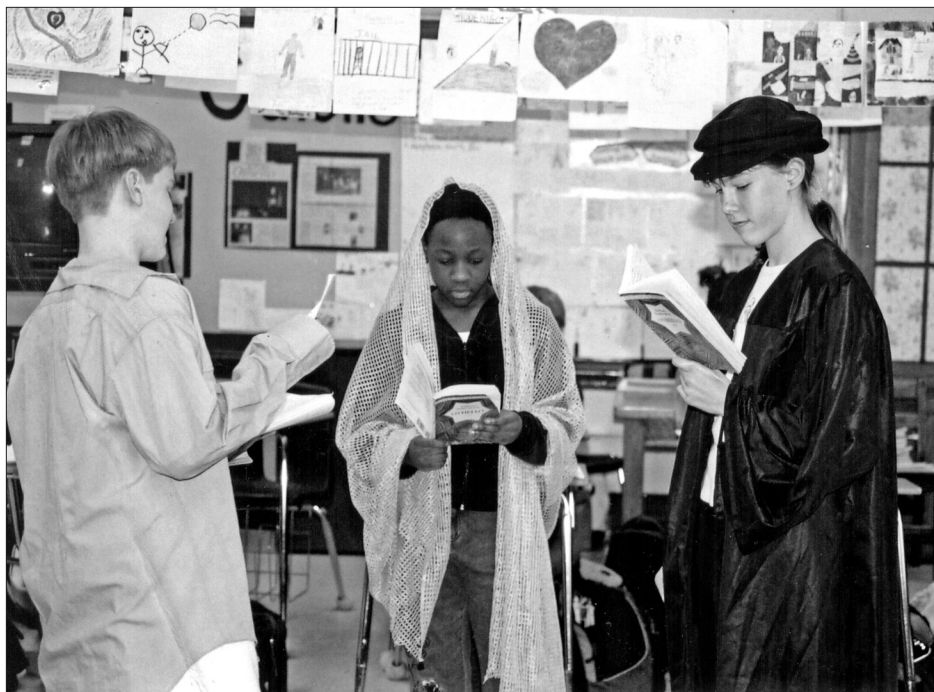
Students involved in readers theater work on act 2, scene 3, in *Othello.* Photograph by Theresa Toomey Fox.

am" (1.1.65), in relation to themselves and their experiences with others. Students also wrote a fable based on a moral they extracted from *Othello* and an analytic essay responding to one of four prompts related to a central theme of the play. Many of their texts were woven into the final performance.

Revising and Rehearsing Text

When instruction is designed around performance activities, students' understanding becomes visible and open for discussion and review. Feedback allows for continuous assessment and enables students to elevate the quality of their work. Students do repeated close readings and careful thinking about sections of the core text as well as their own responses. They speak and listen to one another. Attention, focus, and repetition improve their literacy skills. Though Fox designed the general structure of the final performance, students chose and perfected its component parts. They rehearsed their final performance in the classroom and as homework, performed for one another and, finally, performed on the big stage in the auditorium.

Performing Text

In many ways, the final performance is the engine that drives the entire cycle. Knowing they will be performing for peers, teachers, family, and friends
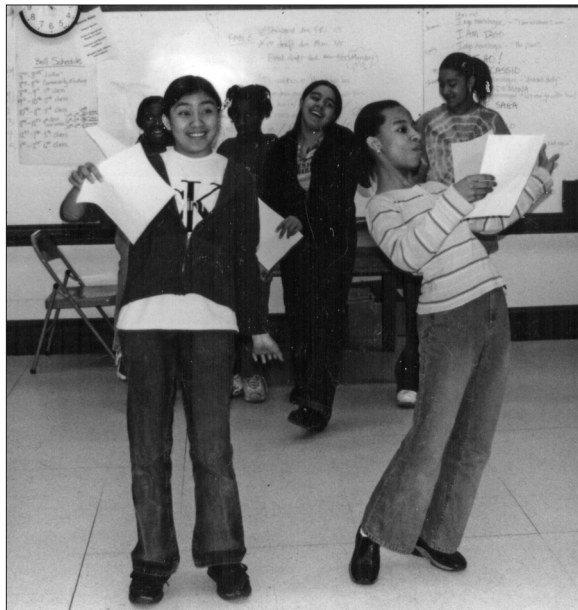
Students rehearsing a dance to a song they wrote based on *Othello,* act 3, scene 3. Photograph by Theresa Toomey Fox.

creates a high-stakes yet supportive classroom environment. Because it is public, serious, and real, the work is viewed by students not as a "dummy run" (Britton) but as an important and memorable event. In the printed program prepared for the *Othello* performances, Fox wrote, "Today's performance is not a production of the play itself. . . . The theatre work we have done is not really about acting but about understanding and interacting with difficult text. Our final production is a showcase of the students' understanding of the play and their interpretations of character and motivation in the play."

Reflection

Reflection is at the center of ArtsLiteracy work. End-of-class debriefings are common. Reflection highlights successes and areas for improvement and makes visible what everyone is learning. In end-of-performance "talk backs," students discuss their work and answer questions. Fox's students engaged in many forms of reflection. How fully and clearly did they understand the story? What was confusing? How was it connected to their lives? How accurately did their performances reflect the play's themes? How well did everyone work together? What was going well? What wasn't? Teacher and students reflected on the content and quality of their work and constructed and completed rubrics to record their achievements.

After the final performance, Jordan wrote, "Instead of reading the play (which we did but we had fun), we were the play. We performed monologues, discussed each scene, acted and other activities. It was fun how we did it. I also improved my acting skills when we performed the final montage. . . . Oh, and I understood the story." Anthony wrote, "My favorite was dressin' up. Boys dress up as girls. Soldiers, swords, stabbing and a lot of death. It was fun and cool."

Students wrote about the social worlds of the classroom and of the play. They remarked on the variety of activities, their liveliness, and their ability to work together to create an effective performance. They described how the activities helped them to understand a complex and compelling story set in an unfamiliar time and place and using unfamiliar language.

Hope wrote, "I didn't feel like I was reading something written by Shakespeare. I felt like I was

reading something that was real. It was amazing. I eventually got to believe the characters weren't just characters, they were people."

Connor concluded, "At first I thought, well, I'm just going to take advantage of a fun class. But by the end of it, I realized that even though I had a lot of fun, it was the most learning I'd done all year."

Making Meaning through Performance: A Look at the Research

Support for performance work in classrooms comes from at least four distinct areas. First is the work on motivation and learning. Bakhtin, Freire, Vygotsky, and others identify learning as collective and collaborative acts, attributes not of individuals but of groups of learners. Intentions are developed in relationships. Acts of meaning are constructed and practiced in social situations. In 1991, Lave and Wenger introduced the term *community of practice* to describe social groups within which learning and development are situated. This literature suggests that communities of practice incorporate shared purpose, supportive relationships and routines, activities and materials that actively involve students in learning.

A second body of research focuses on identifying and teaching students the strategies effective thinkers and learners use. This work recommends making inherently invisible processes visible and explicit. Research and pedagogy on the process of reading—especially adolescent reading—is quite recent but increasingly abundant. Among the many new studies and reports on this topic, a general level of agreement exists that skilled readers must develop fluency, word knowledge, and comprehension (Beers). Skilled comprehension involves constructing mental models, predicting, questioning, inferring, categorizing facts and ideas, determining their importance, and monitoring comprehension (see, for example, Keene and Zimmerman).

A related body of work focuses on the specific contexts, circumstances, and needs of adolescents. Summaries (NCTE Commission on Reading) point out that adolescents come to school with an extensive background in multiple literacies and that they must successfully link that background to work with an ever-wider range of academic discourses and disciplinary concepts.

Recommendations include working with diverse texts and holding authentic conversations about the contents of those texts and the relationships among texts. Students need extensive experience in analyzing what they read, thinking about how the material relates to their lives, and developing an awareness of their thinking and engagement with texts. These practices help all students, proficient or not.

Finally, new and compelling research explores the unique characteristics of the arts to support human cognition and memory. Studying and creating symbolic representations drawn from more than one symbol system deepens and transforms learning (Grumet). In coding experience in multiple verbal and nonverbal forms, memory is enhanced. Because emotion focuses attention, students who dramatize responses to texts establish deep and lasting understanding (Mandell and Wolf). Working with "art . . . ensures ample practice for learning to manage the mental work necessary to bring what is perceived to be disconnected into some kind of whole" (Heath, in press). Large-scale studies demonstrate significant correlations between arts education and student achievement, with the largest gains being made by low-income students and English language learners (Catterall, Chapleau, and Iwanaga). Recent work shows that the more fully and thoroughly arts are integrated into academic work, the greater the gains in overall achievement for students (Rabkin and Redmond).

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Beyond Strategy Instruction to Arts Integration

In Theresa Fox's classroom, students use performance work to support the development of cognition, language skills, and a sense of agency as meaning makers. Students read and write both *extensively* and *intensively* in ways that are appropriate to adolescent learners. They use multiple literacies, link texts to one another and to their lived experience, think deeply about texts' form and content, and consider their own thinking and responses.

Arts immersion of this sort goes beyond the literacy strategy instruction that is coming to be routine in English language arts classrooms. While strategy instruction has obvious value, in itself it may not provide the kind of environment

that students find compelling. By contrast, classrooms such as Fox's involve authentic intellectual work within a vibrant community of practice where the purpose is clear, the responsibilities real, and the risks substantial. "[W]e learn what thrills us with risk, what warms us with applause, what beckons us to lean just over the edge of the familiar, what comforts us with harmony and resolution" (Grumet 61). As Hannah wrote in her final reflection on *Othello,* "The final performance was awesome. To take a play that is hundreds of years old and modernize it into language I can understand seemed hard at first. But seeing everybody get on stage and actually do it made me know that it's not impossible."

Notes

1. The *Othello* curriculum was developed by Fox in collaboration with Trinity Repertory Company actor Fred Sullivan and Brown University student teacher Eleanor Davis. It was refined and repeated with Brown University student teacher Tasha Ferraro.

2. Of Fox's five classes, three are identified as academically advanced and two are not. Students in all classes participated in the *Othello* unit with equal success.

3. This "cycle" is intended as a general set of guidelines to be used creatively and flexibly by teachers and artists as they construct curriculum.

4. A full description of ArtsLiteracy activities, including character arcs, readers theater, and many others, is given in the Performance Cycle Handbook on the ArtsLiteracy Web site (http://www.artslit.org). Many activities were inspired by the work of others. The character arcs activity, for example, was introduced to ArtsLiteracy by Mary Hartmann of Shakespeare and Company.

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