A brief description of the Shakespeare in the Schools unit on *As You Like It*

The Shakespeare in the Schools model that I am using is one that I have created over six years in consultation with teachers, colleagues, and experts, including the Education Department at the Folger Shakespeare Library.

For the *As You Like It* unit, I introduce the plot using a prose version that I have written. The incorporation of a few quotations from Shakespeare’s text into the prose story helps students to gain ease with Shakespeare’s early modern English, so that they recognize it as their own language with a few unusual words, phrases, and syntaxes. Usually it takes two days to read the story to/with the class. The graphic organizer may be used at the beginning of Day 2 to review the plot. Other scaffolded formative assessment exercises may be used as well. The classroom teacher is encouraged to develop a vocabulary unit of key words that help their students to understand the plot and themes.

Once students are familiar with the plot, they are given parts in seven scenes. The scenes remain in Shakespeare’s English, with a great deal of cutting and minor editing. Six years of piloting these units has produced plenty of evidence that students in grades 3-8 can achieve remarkable levels of fluency, clarity, and comprehension with Shakespeare’s English, while having fun performing scenes in a low-stress environment. Students do not memorize the scripts, but unlike most readers’ theater, they do get into the action and act out the scenes.

During the first two days that students have scripts, encourage them to ask about words and phrases. Put any words and phrases that are difficult on boards or kraft paper. I’ll help with these! A second vocabulary unit may grow out of the words that they define and recognize as important to the meaning of each scene. Each day, introduce the words “fluency,” “clarity,” and “comprehension.” Review their meaning, and remind students that they are working to master all three in their parts, no matter how large or small the parts they are assigned. The goal is the “mini-festival,” the day in which they perform their scene as part of the play – all seven scenes performed chronologically, creating a short version of the play. Students always have scripts in hand!

Students will need 4-6 class periods to get comfortable with their parts and work toward fluency, clarity, and comprehension. Two or three days before performance day, discuss props and costuming with them as a group. Props are those props needed to make the play make sense: Rosalind needs something to disguise herself as a young man – a hat?; Senior and Jaques need a picnic feast. Many props are optional: the Dukes MIGHT have crowns; the shepherds MIGHT have sheep. Costuming should be kept to a minimum: if the shepherds want shepherd costumes, they’re not hard to come by, and if the noblewomen want fancy dresses, ok, and it might be good to put “Ganymede” and “Aliena” in costumes. Costumes aren’t necessary, though.

I use a circle of classmates as the stage space for performance day, and I introduce students to this stage space the day I give them their scripts. I use “theater in the
round,” since Shakespeare’s stage was a “thrust” stage that projected out into the audience, and the “main stage,” under the “proscenium arch,” had Lords’ and Ladies’ chairs on it for nobles attending the play. Either the auditorium stage or the classroom, with the desks pushed to the sides, makes an adequate stage space. To enter a scene, a student merely stands up and moves into the acting space, the center of the circle. To exit, she or he simply sits back down in his/her place in the circle.

An average class should be able to perform all seven scenes on performance day.

A summative assessment like an open response is a great way to assess their comprehension of the play as a whole. You might post the prose version on the homework site; some teachers have even posted the complete play script on their sites.