

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* (c. 1600): A DIDACTIC APPROACH THROUGH AN ESCAPE ROOM ACTIVITY

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Abstract

The tragedy *Hamlet* (c. 1600) is one of William Shakespeare's most widely studied and researched plays in its exploration of themes of political intrigue, revenge, existential doubt, and the nature of madness. Deeply entrenched in the intellectual and cultural context of the English Renaissance, the play reflects anxieties about power, succession, and human mortality, while simultaneously showcasing the complexities of Shakespearean language and dramaturgy. To enhance students' engagement with *Hamlet* as part of a bachelor's degree course on 16th-century Renaissance Literature, an Escape Room activity was designed as a complementary session to the study of the play. The activity required students to work in small teams to solve a series of interrelated challenges located around the campus of the University of Almería (Spain). These tasks included deciphering excerpts from the text, identifying key historical influences (such as Renaissance humanism and the Elizabethan worldview), and uncovering the thematic core of the play's dramatic structure. The objective was to facilitate a deeper, more interactive exploration of *Hamlet* while promoting critical thinking and collaborative learning on the part of our students. To assess the impact of this methodology, students completed pre- and post-activity surveys measuring their comprehension of the play's historical and literary context, as well as their previous engagement with the material. The findings suggest that integrating gamification into the study of early modern drama not only improves retention of key concepts and themes but also fosters a more dynamic and participatory classroom environment in a course which has traditionally been perceived as dense content-wise, as well as linguistically challenging. This paper will outline the design and implementation of the Escape Room activity, analyze its effectiveness in meeting major and minor curricular objectives, and discuss its potential for broader applications in literature education.

Keywords: *William Shakespeare, Hamlet, escape room, 16th-century English literature, higher education.*

1. Introduction

This report compares student responses collected before and after participating in an educational Escape Room activity inspired by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The activity was titled "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" and it took place as part of the curricular objectives of the course 16th-Century English Renaissance Literature (Literatura Inglesa del Renacimiento: Siglo XVI), course code 31104221, inscribed in the fourth year of the English Studies degree (fifth year for Double Degree in English Studies and Spanish Philology) curriculum. The purpose of the pre-activity questionnaire was to assess students' baseline knowledge, interpretive challenges, and attitudes toward innovative teaching. The post-activity survey measured perceptions of the activity's relevance, execution, and pedagogical impact. Together, these instruments provide insights into how gamified learning strategies can enrich literary education amidst rising interest in gamification as a pedagogical strategy.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

In recent years, active learning methodologies have gained significant traction in higher education, particularly in the humanities, where traditional lecture-based models often dominate. Active learning emphasizes student-centered approaches that promote participation, critical thinking, and deeper cognitive engagement. Among these, gamification—the integration of game elements into non-game contexts—has emerged as a particularly effective tool for increasing motivation and involvement (Santamaría and Alcalde 2019). Gamification leverages elements such as goals, feedback, time constraints, and narrative immersion to transform passive learners into active participants, and this has been posited as a possible solution to lack

of engagement on the part of students (Cronk, 2012; Deterding, 2012; Stott and Neustaedter, 2013). In literature classrooms, it offers a means to revitalize canonical texts by situating students within meaningful, often collaborative tasks that require both interpretive and contextual thinking. One form of gamification gaining popularity in educational settings is the Escape Room, a team-based, problem-solving game where participants solve clues to “escape” a fictional scenario (Wood & Reiners, 2012). In educational contexts, escape rooms have been shown to enhance engagement, encourage collaboration, and foster content retention (Dorado Escribano, 2019; López Secanell & Ortega Torres, 2020; Armie & Membrive, 2022, 2025). Their narrative structure aligns particularly well with literary studies, allowing students to experience story elements interactively and deepen their understanding of plot, character, and historical context (Armie, Fernández, and Membrive, 2021, 2022). Applied to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a literary Escape Room can bridge the gap between early modern texts and contemporary learners by transforming complex content into an immersive, experiential learning challenge. This study builds on this pedagogical model to assess how gamified learning affects student comprehension, engagement, and appreciation for contextual knowledge.

3. Methodology and materials

3.1. Description of participants

The participants in this study were university students enrolled in the course “16th-Century English Renaissance Literature”, part of the Degree in English Studies and Double Degree in English Studies and Spanish Philology on offer at the University of Almería. Specifically, the activity was implemented with 47 students in the fourth year of the English Studies degree and fifth-year students from the Double Degree in English Studies and Spanish Philology. Of these, 64.8% identified as female and 35.2% identified as male, aged 21-23. These students had prior academic exposure to literary analysis and historical contexts, making them suitable for a content-based gamified activity. Students were arranged in a total of eight teams made up of six students per team, except for two teams, which were made up of five students.

3.2. Structure of the Escape Room

The Escape Room, titled “Something is Rotten in the State of Denmark”, was designed as a collaborative and immersive educational activity based on William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

3.2.1. Format. The activity consisted of a series of puzzles and challenges that required participants to solve literary, historical, and interpretive tasks in groups. These were adapted to the plot of *Hamlet* and required synthesizing information from class content and additional resources. A total of eight stations strategically and thematically located around campus were created, all of which contained a scannable QR code redirecting students to the task hosted in the Escape Room website. Upon successfully completing the html-based riddles (word searches, crosswords, and fill-in-the-gaps, among others) in each station, the students received a numerical clue which, added to the other numerical clues obtained in the remaining stations, they needed to translate into letters using a cypher (a=1, b=2, c=3, and so on) to then complete the anagram that would solve the mystery of the murder of Prince Hamlet.

3.2.2. Location. The Escape Room was implemented within a 0.5 km radius on the university campus, using various locations to simulate settings from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. For example, the university gym was used for a task related to Laertes, symbolizing his physical strength, while a pond with water lilies represented Ophelia’s scene. The students were asked whether they had any physical disabilities impeding their participation in the activity. There were no recorded disabilities and the activity was carried out as originally devised. All students convened in their usual classroom (Classroom 01, Faculty of Humanities), which was used as the activity’s headquarters. After solving one of the riddles, students had to return to headquarters to receive another clue pointing them in another direction. Both the opening and the closing ceremony of the activity took place in Classroom 01.

3.3. Assessments of motivation and performance

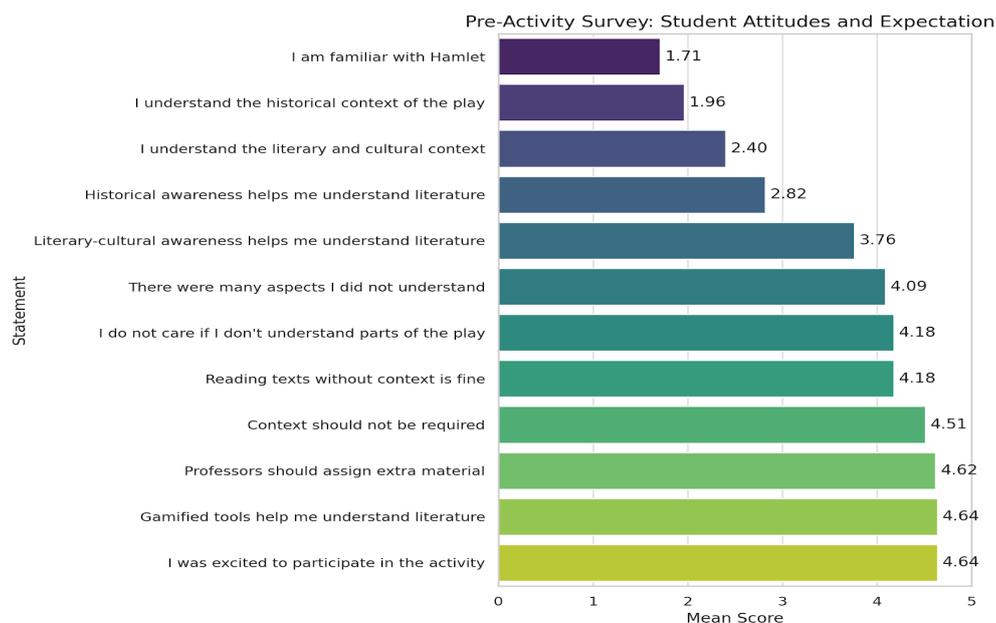
The improvement in students’ motivation and academic performance in their literature class following the implementation of the Escape Room was assessed through two questionnaires sent to the participants. One questionnaire was distributed prior to the activity and the other afterwards. Both were created using *Google Forms* and included Likert-scale items focused on four main areas: contextual knowledge, interpretive challenges, enjoyment, and perceived educational value. In the following section, we present a quantitative analysis of the data collected (see appendix). They have been analysed by combining *Google Sheets* and *ChatGPT*.

4. Analysis

4.1. Prior knowledge and attitudes (pre-activity)

Students entered the activity with strong prior knowledge and a thoughtful approach to literary interpretation. A majority had read *Hamlet* in full (mean score: 4.56/5) and rated their familiarity with both the historical (4.18) and literary-cultural contexts (4.09) quite highly. More significantly, they believed that these contextual elements greatly enhance textual comprehension, assigning particularly high importance to literary-cultural awareness (4.64).

Figure 1. Pre-Activity Survey: Student Attitudes and Expectations.



Despite their confidence, students acknowledged certain interpretive barriers. The statement “There were many historical or cultural aspects I did not understand when reading *Hamlet*” received a moderate rating (2.82), suggesting students were aware of some knowledge gaps. Yet they rejected a dismissive stance toward these difficulties—scoring just 1.96 on “I do not care much if there are aspects I do not understand.” This indicates a responsible attitude toward textual interpretation and a willingness to engage with complexity.

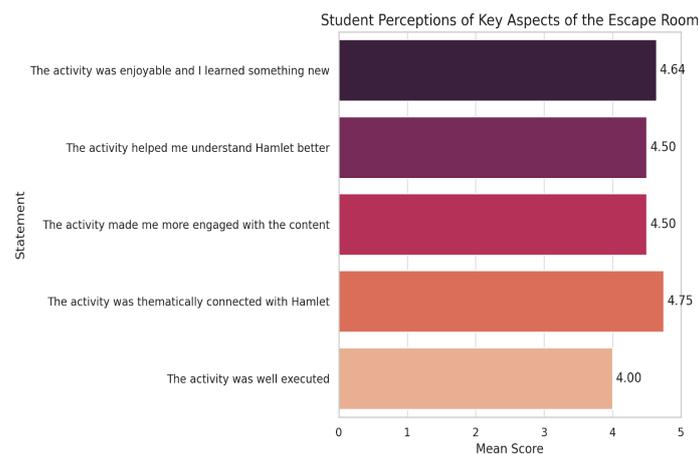
Furthermore, students disagreed with the idea that early modern texts can or should be read without context, with scores of 2.40 and 1.71 on statements rejecting the value of contextual information. These attitudes suggest that the student group already valued depth, historical framing, and critical inquiry prior to the activity.

Lastly, they expressed openness to both independent learning (3.76) and gamified pedagogy. When asked whether tools like Escape Rooms could enhance literary comprehension, students gave a strong endorsement (4.62). Their enthusiasm for the upcoming activity—“Something is Rotten in the State of Denmark”—was even stronger (4.64).

4.2. Post-activity reflections and perceived impact

The post-activity survey confirmed that the Escape Room met or exceeded students’ expectations. The thematic connection between the activity and *Hamlet* was rated extremely highly (4.75), indicating that the narrative and puzzles were perceived as relevant and meaningful. In terms of educational outcomes, students found that gamification enhanced both their comprehension (4.50) and engagement (4.50). These scores aligned closely with pre-activity expectations, demonstrating that the activity fulfilled its pedagogical promise.

Figure 2. Student Perceptions of Key Aspects of the Escape Room.

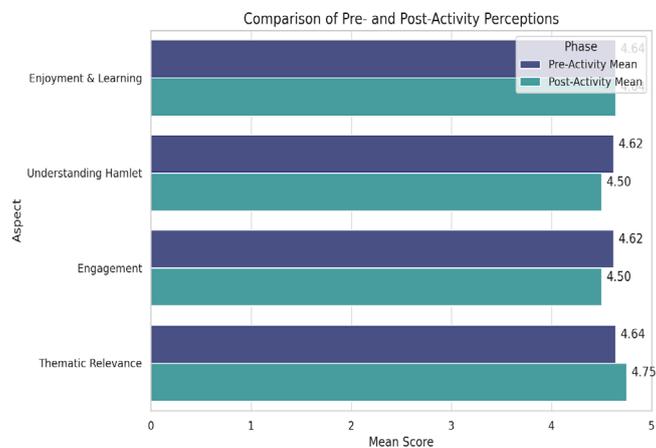


When asked about overall enjoyment and perceived learning value, students again responded positively (4.64), suggesting the experience was not only fun but also academically worthwhile. Execution of the activity was rated as solid (4.00), and the evaluation system—awarding one point for participation—was considered fair (4.18).

4.3. Comparative insights

The comparison between pre- and post-activity responses reveals alignment between expectations and outcomes. Students began the activity with a strong knowledge base and a receptive attitude toward contextual learning and innovative methods. Post-activity results suggest that the Escape Room succeeded in deepening their appreciation of *Hamlet*, reinforcing the importance of historical and literary-cultural understanding, and enhancing engagement through interactivity and play.

Figure 3. Comparison of Pre- and Post-Activity Perceptions.



The continuity between high pre- and post-activity scores on items related to gamification, thematic relevance, and learning benefits validates the Escape Room as a viable educational tool. The activity served not merely as entertainment but as a meaningful bridge between classical literature and modern pedagogy.

5. Discussion

Through indirect observation throughout the course, it has been noted that students have, on average, demonstrated ample interest in Shakespeare's play. Lectures have been conducted following a two-tier model: on the one hand, theory lectures in which the students were taught aspects related to the play's historical and literary context, intertextual and intratextual references, main topics and themes, and symbolism. On the other hand, seminars have been structured in a book club-like manner, with students being able to offer their views on different fragments and sections of the play and debate these thoughts with other students. In designing this Escape Room activity, it was our intention to ensure that this theoretical and practical engagement was sustained and materialised through a gamified activity in which

their knowledge about the play could be tested and enhanced. One of the most valuable outcomes of the activity was the reinforcement of student agency and interpretive responsibility. Unlike traditional assessments where meaning is often seen as fixed or instructor-led, the Escape Room placed students in the position of literary detectives. They had to make connections between scenes, interpret metaphorical language, and decide how to apply textual evidence to solve thematic and character-based challenges. This dynamic empowered students to trust their own readings of the text and to defend their interpretations collaboratively—practices that are essential to the study of literature at a university level.

The implications for teaching canonical literature through active learning are significant. *Hamlet*, like many classic texts, can be intimidating or abstract for students when confined to lecture-based formats. However, this activity demonstrated that active learning strategies, especially those involving narrative-driven, problem-solving tasks, can revitalize student engagement with the canon. They make space for exploration, dialogue, and creative thinking while remaining grounded in rigorous academic content.

6. Conclusions

The present research demonstrates that Escape Rooms, as a form of gamification, can be an effective tool for enhancing student motivation, performance, and collaborative work in the context of literature education. As part of active learning methodologies, this approach encourages narrative immersion, transforming students from passive recipients of information into engaged and active participants. The design based on *Hamlet* successfully connected literary content with creative problem-solving, giving rise to deeper contextual understanding and greater motivation for course material.

The data collected from pre- and post-activity questionnaires show a high level of student interest in this type of activity, with expectations being met or exceeded after the Escape Room experience. Students reported increased enjoyment, perceived educational value, and improved interpretive confidence. These findings suggest that gamified activities like this one represent a powerful and adaptable pedagogical tool for teaching literature at the university level. As such, Escape Rooms can be considered a valuable resource to complement traditional instruction and promote meaningful learning in higher education settings.

Acknowledgments

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