Focus Group 1, 10/1/24 [10 students]

RY: I think what we might do to start off with is just go around the group and introduce ourselves using our pseudonyms - the name you want to be called for today's session. I will use my actual name, though, because you know who I am anyway. So: I'm Becky and my pronouns - if you want to give your pronouns, also, please do so at this point - my pronouns are she/her. So shall we go round?

Jack: My name's Jack. And my pronouns are he/him.

Sophie: I'm Sophie and my pronouns are she/her.

Evie: I'm Evie. My pronouns are she/her.

Zee: I’m Zee, my pronouns are she/her.

Millie: I'm Millie. My pronouns are she/her.

Olivia: I’m Olivia, my pronouns are she/her.

Claire: I’m Claire. My pronouns are she/her.

Jayne: I'm Jayne. My pronouns are she/her.

Dan: I'm Dan. My pronouns are he/they.

Poppy: Poppy, she/her.

Sophie 2: Sophie, she/her

RY: Brilliant, thank you, everybody. OK, we're going to talk a little bit to start with about Shakespeare, your experiences of studying Shakespeare, and then we'll move on in the second half of the session to talk about content warnings more generally. So again, what we might do to start with is just go around the group, just get a sense of what plays you've previously studied, thinking particularly about the violent Shakespeare plays - the tragedies, so *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet,* *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*. Those are the ones that the project’s particularly focusing on. Can we go around and just share which Shakespeare we've either studied or read in school or college, but it could also be if you've read or watched any of these plays in your own time, that’d be interesting to know about. So if we start with…

Jack: *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.

Sophie: *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Evie: *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*.

Zee: *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*.

Millie: *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet.*

Olivia: I’m studying *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, but I’ve read *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* and I’ve seen *Titus Andronicus*.

Jayne: *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Dan: *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Poppy: *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Sophie 2: *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

RY: OK, that's great. It's quite nice that there's so much overlap, which I assume is because you're all at college together so you’ve studied some of the same things but… Yeah, that means we can focus particularly on the violence in those plays, though obviously it’ll be interesting – [to Olivia] you were saying you'd, you'd read *Titus*, which is an interesting one in terms of violence. Obviously, if you've got any thoughts on that, you might want to jump in at some point. *Titus*, for those of you who don't know, is a *very* violent play by Shakespeare. So, I think most of you probably, if not all of you, completed the paper survey a few months ago about the violence in Shakespeare's plays, and there was a question there which was about whether you found any of the plays disturbing in their treatment of violence. It was quite interesting looking at the survey responses because some people said ‘I wasn't disturbed by the plays because the violence isn't graphic.’ And some people said the violence *was* quite graphic. I found that interesting because there's obviously a difference in opinion of people. So can I maybe just ask as the first, open question whether you think the violence in Shakespeare is graphic but also, what does ‘graphic violence’ mean to you – when somebody uses that phrase, what does it make you think of? How would you define ‘graphic violence’?

Zee: I don't think it's very graphic. I think it's more like, cause I feel like graphic’s where there's like more blood and like things like physical violence. And Shakespeare, it's more like swords and stuff. So I don’t really think it's that graphic.

RY: Yes, I suppose with Shakespeare, you'll read it as words on the page, but you also might be studying it as films, or you might go to the theatre. So I suppose that the question might depend on what's written versus what you might see in a production of the play. Any thoughts from anyone else about graphic violence? You might want to think about, you know, if you've seen any of these - we'll talk more about film in a little bit - but if you've seen any of these these plays or whether there's anything else that might feel graphic to you when you just read them.

Olivia: I would say that Shakespeare plays are quite graphic with their violence. Because ‘graphic’ to me, it's just like intense violence. And one quote that always stuck with me in *Macbeth*: when he says he ‘unseamed him from the nave to the chops’. When you say ‘unseamed’, that seems quite graphic to me. You can kind of picture it in your head like, literally cutting a man open. So, I think it seems quite graphic most of the time.

RY: Yeah. That's interesting. And again, we've immediately got a disagreement over whether it’s graphic versus non-graphic. Anyone else have thoughts? Apologies to people on this side of the room, so I can't quite see you as well, just given the angles we're at, but yeah, does anyone else want to share their thoughts…? Do they feel these are graphic plays - things like that moment in *Macbeth* - or whether you feel that, reading them, they're not particularly intense…?

Jayne: I think they definitely are intense, but, kind of like Zee said, like 'cause it's sword violence, sometimes it's… There's a lot of distance between like us today, reading it, and it can seem a bit medieval in comparison. So you don't really relate to it the same way.

RY: Yeah. I think perhaps it links to a question about the films of Shakespeare that you might have seen - or to some extent when it’s put on stage as well, but perhaps particularly with film, because film is in some ways a more realistic-looking medium. It’s the question of when Shakespeare is filmed and set in the modern day versus when Shakespeare is filmed and set in the past, hundreds of years ago, clearly not contemporary to us. Do you think that makes a difference? Perhaps actually step back from that question. First of all, can we go around and say what films of Shakespeare we've seen? Did your teachers show you films of Shakespeare while you're studying these plays?

Olivia: I've seen *Romeo and Juliet* and – the one with Leonardo DiCaprio ­– and I think that one has modern violence things, because it had guns and stuff, but I don't think that had the same effect on me, really, as the older ones do, like that really old *Titus Andronicus* one, that’s really graphic violence, I think. And it's like set in the contemporary time and in comparison, I think that the modern ones, I don't know, they're just… They don't seem as graphic to me as the older ones.

RY: That's interesting. The Baz Luhman/Leonardo DiCaprio *Romeo and Juliet* seems very, very popular in schools. Can we maybe just have a show of hands? Show of hands for people who've seen the Baz Luhrmann/Leonard DiCaprio film? Is that…? – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. So that's - yes, 6 students have seen that one. Was that shown as part of class or did you see that outside of school or college?

Evie: I saw it as part of class.

Sophie: Mine was both. I saw clips in class, but I went away and watched it on my own.

RY: Right. And was that because you liked it or…?

Sophie: Yeah, I just enjoyed the story. I watched like the older version and the Leonardo DiCaprio version. And I preferred the older version. Like Olivia said, it made… It was more true to the story. It didn't really have the effect on me that it did with the older one.

RY: Right. Yeah. When you say the older version, do you remember any details about which film version that was?

Sophie: I can't recall. I'm bad with actors’ names as it is. I just. I can’t. No, I have no clue.

RY: It's OK. I mean, it's just, there are quite a lot of films of *Romeo and Juliet* so I'm not sure which other one you might have seen. There are various older films, some of which set the play kind of in the time it's set by Shakespeare - so kind of vaguely medieval/Renaissance-y. And then obviously, the Leonardo DiCaprio one is set in a version of the modern day, as you say, with guns and so on. Any other films of Shakespeare that people have seen apart from the *Romeo and Juliet*?

Jayne: I saw *Macbeth*, 'cause we, we studied it at GCSE, so… That, that's quite violent, to be honest. I think, 'cause it's kind of like warring countries, you expect that. You know, not like *Romeo and Juliet*: you kind of expect the romance more than the violence, but… Sometimes it can be like kind of an important part of the story, you know, like the drama of it and… Yeah, I think if you argue that Shakespeare's too violent then you can argue that about a lot of literature and a lot of entertainment, so… Yeah.

RY: Yeah, I suppose that’s another question: ‘Is Shakespeare violent in comparison to other things?’

Jayne: Yeah, it’s almost tame today. Because we're so, like not numb to it, but we're really used to like horror films and… So it doesn't seem so extreme to me.

RY: Yeah. That's something that came up quite a lot on the survey, the idea that there are lots of things out there - if you're looking for violence and even if, perhaps, you're *not* looking for violence - there are a lot of much more graphic shows nowadays. But yeah, so I suppose… That was an interesting point you raised, I think, about *Romeo and Juliet*: you say you're kind of not expecting the violence so much. Do you think that makes a difference if you're going into a play not expecting it to be violent, versus where it's, you know, as far as you’re aware it's mainly a love story or something like that? What do people think about that issue?

Evie: I think it does make a difference, because if I'm going in to watch something and I know that it's going to be violent, then I'm expecting it. But if, for example, I sit down and I watch a romcom and like, someone's being blown up, it's a bit like, ‘Oh, wow, that's a bit of a shock.’

RY: Yeah. Anyone else have any thoughts on that in terms of how much what you’re expecting, how that might affect how you respond?

Sophie: I prefer knowing, like if there's sensitive topics, I prefer knowing because then I can actually prepare myself for it. Like if I have a bad reaction, it's gonna be embarrassing if everyone looks at me. But otherwise, I can prepare myself and, you know, if I don't want to watch that because of that, then I don't have to. But if I go in, I can't really be like, ‘You know what? Never mind, I actually don't want to watch it. I'm just going to, like, walk out of the cinema or something.’

RY: Yeah, that sense of knowing what you're in for and being prepared for that. Again, I think that came up quite a lot in the surveys, that… Sometimes it's just that people don't want to be caught off guard. They're fine with violence if they've been prepared for it.

Sophie: I heard that it, like, ruins the movie and like, whilst I do agree, I would just prefer to know, even if I do get spoiled.

RY: Mm hmm. Yeah. I mean with *Romeo and Juliet*, that strikes me as an interesting example because in some ways it's such a famous play and I think pretty much everyone here seems to have read it or studied it. Going into *Romeo and Juliet*, did you…? Clearly, you knew it was a romance, because it's so famous in popular culture, we know what kind of play *Romeo and Juliet* is - but did you know how violent it was going to be? Were you familiar with that as an idea?

Sophie: The way it was described to me, it felt more like less violent, more verbal. I thought it was just families not liking each other, not actual violence. So, I was a bit caught off guard by that, but I don't think it was that bad for me, compared to, like, *Macbeth*.

RY: Right, yeah. With regards to *Macbeth*, it's about war, so in some ways you expect perhaps a bit more violence, so it’s interesting that you found *Macbeth* more upsetting in certain ways. What do other people think about *Romeo and Juliet*, though, in terms of your expectations of it? If you can remember back that far, before you read or watched the play? How did it live up to your expectations? Was it, was the violence a surprise? Were you kind of prepared for it?

Evie: It wasn't necessarily a surprise, but I wasn't expecting so much of it. Personally, I felt that there was more violence than there was love in *Romeo and Juliet*. Whereas I thought that, like, obviously it will be reversed because it is advertised to people as a love story.

RY: Yeah. How about also the fact that… - so, obviously suicide is a sensitive topic. How about the fact the lovers end up committing suicide at the end of play? Is that something you knew about going in? In general, do people think that the end of the story of *Romeo and Juliet* is something that they know about, even if they haven't read the play?

Sophie: I was aware of it.

Evie: Yeah, I was aware of it.

Sophie: It was like quite a famous ending, so…

RY: Yeah.

Millie: It's known as a tragic love story. So you can kind of tell something bad’s gonna happen at the end. Especially *with* the love story. Because if the two families don't get along, and they want to get married, something's going to happen. And I just think the ending of *Romeo and Juliet* really makes sense. For a lot of couples and a lot of fights between those kind of different cultures. So I think it's kind of expected.

RY: Yeah.

Millie: I don't think the intensity, the intensity of their, like, death is expected. But I think the attempts, the cause of their death, like the suicide, just it was either going to be like… I was expecting, like, suicide or Romeo and Juliet kind of running away. So I think the tragic love story was expected and, like, the violence with that.

RY: So just to clarify what you were saying there, so you're saying you were expecting the suicide…?

Millie: Yeah.

RY: What do you mean about Romeo and Juliet running away? Did you think that was an option?

Millie: I think, like, the way the play was set out, it was set out about: two families don't get along, but the children are in love. So either, obviously they don't see each other, or they sort of run away. But obviously since it's a tragic love story, there would be some violence involved.

RY: Yeah. You're expecting… Well, whatever happens, it's obviously not going to be a happy ending. I think it's interesting also with a play that contains such sensitive stuff as, you know, suicide, which is is an area that’s always kind of difficult for everybody o talk about and deal with. When you studied the play in class, do you remember, did your teachers address the suicide aspect of the play? Did they talk about that directly? Or do they focus more on the kind of: ‘this is just the plot, this is just what happens’ approach to the play? Did you talk about suicide as an issue when studying?

Sophie: I was never given any warnings. I just sat down and I got told everything. I wasn't warned like, you know, ‘This might be a sensitive topic, if you need to talk to anyone.’ It was just: ‘This happens. This happens. Basically, get over it.’ I wasn't given any warning.

RY: So just treated quite in a quite matter of fact way, would you say?

Sophie: Yeah.

RY: Sorry, I don't want to put words in your mouth obviously. But yeah…

Sophie: There was no sensitivity towards the subject.

RY: Right. What were other people's experiences? Do you remember? Again, I'm asking you to recall back to when you were taught this play.

Zee: We got like, we got specifically taught about the suicide. Like, it was like a separate topic. It was related to *Romeo and Juliet*, but, like, they talked about the suicide, like how it affects you, things like that.

RY: Right. So, you were studying *Romeo and Juliet*, but they had a separate session…?

Zee: We were aware of the suicide. Like we knew the link of it in the play.

RY: Do you remember anything about how they did that? What kind of materials they used or…?

Zee: They told, they told the basics about the suicide in *Romeo and Juliet*, and then they kind of like asked us how it affects, like how we would feel affected by it.

RY: No, that's interesting. What do people think about that? It's obviously two very different approaches to teaching the play that people have mentioned: treating the suicides as ‘this is just a plot element’ versus focusing on them as a kind of theme that actually is relevant to our lives, perhaps linking up to your point earlier about whether we feel connected with the play’s violence in some way versus where it feels quite distant from us. What do other people think about that? Do you think it's a good idea to make violence an issue, to make it something that relates to the real world in certain ways? How about people down this side of the room? As I said, it’s more difficult for me to see you guys clearly, so I hope you don't feel left out. But any thoughts?

Dan: I think it's like very important to look at. It's a very important part of *Romeo and Juliet* and… So, it deserves that attention, I think. To be looked at, like, in depth.

RY: Yeah.

Poppy: I think that no matter what you do, because Shakespeare's such a renowned playwright, that because we have to study him, the violence can't be avoided. So, I think the way teachers address it is important. But I also think that some of that shock factor has to be retained for you to understand how the audience would have seen it at that time, because that's always something they focused on. ‘How would the audience see, how would this be shown on as a play?’ Because, obviously, it was never designed for us to *read* it. It was always designed for us to see it. So I think having that part of the shock factor is important. So when we had it explained to us, we just got told, ‘If anyone needs to leave, they can. Obviously, sensitive topics are going to come up.’ But they didn't exactly tell us every little detail of what was going to happen.

RY: Yeah, it's interesting how they flagged it for you, though, and did say, ‘This is a sensitive topic.’ Which again sounds like…

Sophie: I didn’t get that.

RY: You didn't have that. I mean, again, do people, do you remember whether it was flagged for you as, ‘This is a potentially sensitive topic’?

Sophie 2: They gave us a warning that it was a sensitive topic and we were allowed to leave if we wanted to.

RY: Right, yeah. I mean, in general… Again, maybe a show of hands for those who've done *Romeo and Juliet*…. Remind me. Show of hands people who have studied *Romeo and Juliet*. Just hold your hand up. And of those people, if you can put your hand down, if you didn't get a warning. That's what… one… So: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 people did *Romeo and Juliet*. And hands down if you didn't get a warning. So, 1, 2, 3, 4 people did get a warning. So that's interesting. We’ve got about 50/50 in terms of teachers giving warnings, teachers not giving warnings. So, I suppose, as a teacher, there is that decision you have to make about keeping the surprise element in these plays versus letting students know that something upsetting is coming up, or potentially upsetting is coming up. Let them step outside or whatever they need. How about with, with other plays that you've studied? I mean, things like the violence of *Macbeth* or the violence of *Hamlet*. Do you remember getting content warnings for that? Do you remember teachers focusing on the possible emotional effects of the violence as well as just, ‘This is what happens in the play’? A few people shaking their heads. Does anyone want to expand on shaking their heads in terms of how those plays were taught to you?

Zee: I feel like because *Macbeth* was a play about war, it's kind of pointless to give warnings about it because like, it's just like what Poppy said, you won't be able to, like, emotionally relate and connect with it. And if you already know it's about war, you know there's going to be, like, tragedy and violence in it. So if they're, like, going to sit you down and be like, ‘Oh, yeah, there's going to be this, someone's going to die, someone gets stabbed.’ Like, you just… There's no point of it. Like, you're not going to emotionally connect with anything that’s happening, because you already know what’s gonna happen.

RY: Yeah, that's interesting. What do other people think? Do other people agree with that or are there any different views? I suppose with *Macbeth* you get… there's different kinds of violence. There is the descriptions of battle. We don't actually see battle scenes, we get descriptions of battle. But there's also the one-to-one violence, like the murder of King Duncan and things like that. So, any thoughts on those scenes? Do you feel that the things that are outside the war, where you'd expect violence - any thoughts on how those are taught or whether you think you’d like warnings for those, got warnings?

Olivia: In *Macbeth*, I think there's not… Obviously, there's a lot of violence and there is suicide. But the suicide, when you read about it, the suicide isn't actually described. It's not like a scene. And I think most people nowadays, you want warnings for types of violence such as like rape or suicide. People don't typically want more violence warnings. Like if it's just like murder, obviously it's a sensitive topic, but I feel like people are much more sensitive towards things such as suicide and rape and because that's not described in *Macbeth*, I wasn't given any warning for *Macbeth*. But in, obviously, *Hamlet* here, when it was the scene that suggested that Ophelia was raped, we were given a warning. So yeah, I think there's just different types of violence people want warnings for, more than they would for others.

RY: Yeah, that's something that came up a lot during the questionnaires. If it's the kind of violence that people might have a personal relationship to - domestic violence and rape and sexual assaults and suicidal feelings or acts. Those seemed to be the thing in general that people thought needed warnings. But I suppose the other thing with *Macbeth* that might come up as an issue potentially people feel is a sensitive one is the murder of a child, the murder of the Macduff child. Any thoughts on that? People seemed very mixed on the questionnaires in terms of, ‘Is violence against children different to violence against adults?’ Any thoughts now on that as an issue? Is it different? Is it more likely to upset people, do you think? Does it need a warning?

Poppy: I think emotionally it affects people different because a child is seen as a vulnerable person. They haven't fully grown. They don't know everything that an adult knows. So I think that it affects people differently emotionally, purely because of the vulnerability that a child represents as opposed to an adult.

RY: That's interesting. What do other people feel? Because, as I say, it was a kind of fairly evenly split in the questionnaires between people who thought violence against the child warranted warning (if you're going to provide warnings at all) versus people who thought, ‘No, it's not particularly…’

Sophie: I agree, because a child can't really defend themselves, so it feels a lot more brutal, as opposed to an adult who can defend themselves. It's, it just, it did affect me quite a bit. It's just sad to think about, especially if you're like a mother. I'm not. But if you are a mother and you can just put your child in that position, it's not really an enjoyable thing to think about.

RY: Yeah. I mean with *Macbeth*, in general I got the sense that because it's a play about war that teachers were less inclined to give you content warnings than they might with *Romeo and Juliet*, which involves various types of violence, but mostly more kind of personal violence, violence against the self in that. Did anyone get warnings for any aspect of *Macbeth*, do you remember?

Sophie: No.

RY: No, you didn't…?

Sophie: I didn’t get much warnings from my teachers [laughs]

RY: OK, we'll talk in a minute perhaps about what we think teachers *ought* to do with these plays. If you're the ideal teacher, what do you do? And I think you were nodding. Did you get some kind of warning?

Sophie 2: I got warnings for everything. Even, even if, like, like, how the camera was directed, even if you couldn't see what was happening, you, we will still get warned about what was going on in the background.

RY: You talk about the camera so I’m assuming that’s when you were watching these things on film. And did you get warnings when you were also reading the text or was it just for the film version? Do you remember?

Sophie 2: When we were reading, we did get like a sort of warning. It said like this was a suggestive read. We get one like that.

RY: Right, OK. Anyone else get warnings for *Macbeth* as far as they remember? No. So yeah, it doesn't seem particularly common to do that. But, again, interesting, we've got the extremes there of seemingly never getting warnings for anything versus it sounds like [to Sophie 2] yeah, your teachers were quite sensitive about that. That maybe brings us on to that question of what do you think teachers *should* do with these plays? When do you think warnings might be a good thing? *Do* you think warnings are a good thing? A very open question obviously, but anyone want to jump in and start us off?

Jack: I think if you can relate to the character like in particular with Ophelia’s suggested rape. If you could maybe relate to how she might be feeling at the time, and then maybe you can use that as a content warning for how you might or the audience might react to seeing it. Possibly.

RY: Yeah. That's, that's interesting about ideas of… Again, don’t want to put words in your mouth, but when it's a character who seems - perhaps think also of the child in *Macbeth* - that they're particularly vulnerable, particularly somebody that you emotionally feel for, that might be one place where a warning is helpful. What do other people think? There’s also the question of how you give a warning. Do you give an explicit warning? Do you sort of say ‘This is what happens and this is what happens and this is what happens,’ stage by stage? ‘We’re about to read Act 3, scene 2, this is what happens’. Or do you think a general, blanket, ‘Overall in this play, these are the kind of things you'll encounter’? What do people think about that?

Poppy: I think a broad sort of warning is expected and should be given. But I think that if you then need to maybe elaborate on that for other certain students in smaller groups. Maybe like give a class warning, something broad saying, ‘This is a sensitive topic.’ And then allow students in small groups maybe to come up to you and ask, just in case they think they might be triggered by something. Because I do think in some places it is… that shock factor is needed, otherwise you know exactly what's going to happen. It doesn't hit as hard, it doesn't affect you in the same way it would have done.

Poppy: Personally, I don't go after… If I'm reading - which I do, I read a lot - when I'm reading, I don't go out of my way to find trigger warnings. Because I know that if I know what'll happen, I won't have the same emotions that I would. And I'm never affected as much by the storyline, so I don't look at trigger warnings personally. But I think that it's good to have that availability there for people who would get affected and triggered by these things.

RY: Yeah, it's an interesting balancing act between… you don’t want people to be upset, but also there are maybe people who want to be surprised, who even kind of want to be a bit shocked, a bit taken aback. And that's actually something very difficult for teachers to balance: the different needs of different students. If you were teaching these plays, do you have any thoughts for the best ways of delivering content warnings? Is it important to preserve the element of surprise in the plot?

Olivia: I think when you're studying them, I think it is necessary to give content warnings because then… When I'm studying a book, it's a little different to when I'm just reading it for myself. When I'm reading it for myself, I'm definitely just reading it for the plot, so I don't want like it to be spoiled. But when you're studying a book, you read it so many times. If I get told what happens in a book that I'm studying before I've read it, I don't mind because I'm going to… It's not like I’m just reading it for my own enjoyment. I'm going to be looking at this book, like, so many different times, so I don't think… I don't think the shock is exactly necessary to be fair. Because I think even if… Like, content warnings aren’t gonna tell you the plot. Like they'll tell you, like, the sensitive topics, that doesn't mean you've got the whole plot explained to you. So I think they are necessary because it's just, yeah, maybe people could get triggered, especially if you get like… Cause I feel in, in literature, especially in Shakespeare, a lot of people because he's such a great writer, a lot of people feel, like, connected and involved in the plays. So if you're really, like, invested in it and then something really deep happens, then it's going to affect you if you don’t have any proper warning.

RY: Yeah, that's interesting - different perspectives on the plays. Anyone else want to want to jump in? For studying the plays: anyone particularly pro warnings? Or thinking that, actually, even when studying, it's important to be a bit surprised?

Jack: I think because some of the issues that are, that occur in Shakespeare plays, like rape and the murder of a child, they were quite taboo topics in that time, and I think if you're studying it, particularly in the Elizabethan era, then you can… And I don't want to say you can… I don't know, I can't… I think because it was a taboo topic back then and it is more… Now, I don't want to say accepted because it's not accepted. It's more aware.

Poppy: We’re more exposed to it.

Jack: We’re more exposed and aware to it now, in modern day society, where we… As opposed to Elizabethan or Jacobean era. I think, to know that it was a taboo topic back then is… When we're studying it, it’s important because then we can sort of interact with the characters rather than…

RY: Just to clarify 'cause that's really interesting: What do you mean by ‘taboo topic’? So obviously, killing a child, isn't…

Jack: Yeah.

RY: …really accepted at any time.

Jack: I think rape was more accepted back then because it was less… It wasn't criminalised back then, whereas now it is, so… People, it just… It was just part of people's lives, because you have no choice to do otherwise about it.

RY: Yeah, that raises an interesting question, which is, how much do you think it helps to be given historical context with these things? I mean, if you have a scene of sexual assault or something like that, do you think it's helpful to be told, ‘In Shakespeare's time, this was the attitude towards sexual assault; this is how common it was; these were the legal things surrounding it’? Is that helpful at all in terms of processing the play or the scene?

Poppy: I think a big part of studying anything, any sort of historical text, is looking back at the history, what it was like at the time, what it was like specifically for women. A lot of the cases when we're studying a book or a play or something, we have to look back a lot of the time at the role of women, especially when we were doing *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth having that powerful role was highlighted a lot for us. It was repeated over and over again. What would the audience expect? What would it be like for someone who's sitting watching this play? What would it be like for people at the time? So, I feel like because that was so engrained to us, that was what we were told so much to think about and write about and what I enjoyed exploring, I think that that's why it's so important to me.

RY: Yeah. And it's always interesting, to think about what we find unusual in these plays or shocking and what might have been taken more for granted at the time. What do other people think in terms of the role of historical context in teaching these plays? Do you think it’s useful, helpful to know about what Shakespeare’s time thought about murder, about sexual assault?

Jayne: I think it gives it some, like, context or, like, purpose in the play, like. It gives it a reason, so say, like murder of a child or something, or rape. Then it, you know, it can be thought-provoking. And instead of just involving it for the sake of involving it and maybe upsetting some people, it kind of… it can be like a reminder of something. So giving it some context is, yeah, I think it's helpful. But I think it's good as well, you know when, like, say there was a suicide and then at the end of the, the play or the film or something, it'll say like, ‘If you're struggling with suicidal thoughts or something, call this number or go on this website.’ I think that's quite good because it kind of… it hasn't ruined anything in the plot, but it hasn't… You haven't, like, watched the movie and then been left feeling really, I don't know, isolated or triggered or…

RY: So I suppose that's interesting: that kind of highlighting when you're given not so much, not exactly a warning afterwards, but a kind of sense of what to do if you are upset.

Jayne: I think it just kind of… not ties a knot in it but it just, it doesn't leave anyone feeling like, if it does apply to them or it has upset them, it doesn't leave them, like, alone.

RY: Yeah. No, I think, I think that's a really interesting point. Content warnings, typically you give them up front, you say in advance: ‘There’s going to be upsetting material in this.’ But there's also the technique of, once somebody has read or watched something, at that point saying: ‘If you want to talk about this more or if this has disturbed you, here's what to do.’ What do people think about that as an alternative approach to content warnings? I’m thinking about your point about wanting to preserve the surprise, versus warning people in advance. Would people like a chance to talk about it after they've read something? Would that be as good as getting a content warning, or do you think it needs to be beforehand, you need to be prepared?

Zee: I think it would be better if you got it afterwards because, that way, you like can read or like watch the story. You can still like emotionally connect with it and you can have that shock factor. And if it's actually really triggered you or upset you, you can talk about it. Because if you're going to get a content warning and you're still going to watch it, the way it affects you after or before is the same effect. So if you were given a content warning before and you still watched it, you would still feel the same way that you would. So you would want to speak about it after anyways. So I think it would make more sense to be able to speak about it afterwards, because even if you had a content warning, you’d still feel the same.

RY: That's interesting. What do other people feel, in terms of content warnings before versus some kind of support afterwards? I mean, obviously, in real life you could have both, but if you had to pick between those two…? Is there anyone who thinks they *would* rather have it definitely in advance?

Evie: I feel like, if you had it in advance then you wouldn't need help afterwards because you wouldn't have watched it. So, having help afterwards, yes, is a very good thing, but you wouldn't feel that way if you were told beforehand.

RY: Yeah, though that leads onto a question I want to ask in a minute, which is about how content warnings work in terms of your point about: you might not *choose* to watch something, if you've been given the warning in advance. We’ll come back to that, because I think that's an interesting point also. Before we get to that, any other thoughts from people about preferring warnings in advance versus preferring discussion afterwards? How about this side of the table?

Dan: I think I’d prefer in advance because I think, after, it's, it's just… it's already happened and it could have been avoided if it had been in advance. And it's just too late really. And it's good that there’s help there afterwards, but it’s better to stop it before it happens, so.

RY: Yeah. That kind of links into that question of what a content warning *does*, and what it’s for. And maybe this is a good moment to move from explicitly thinking about Shakespeare to generally your experiences of content warnings. How would you say it changes your experience of a text if you get a content warning versus if you don't? If you’re studying something in school. We talked a little bit about this already, but…?

Jack: You might make the impact of seeing violence less important when you're studying it, rather than… If it's not, if you're not made aware of it beforehand, you might not be thinking it's very important when you're watching it, rather than if you were, then perhaps you are thinking it is important.

RY: So you’re suggesting that possibly getting a content warning makes you more sensitive to the violence? Do other people have views on that as a position? If a teacher tells you this might upset you, does that make you more likely to be upset? What do people think? As I say, there are no right or wrong answers. You can absolutely disagree, if you want, or agree.

Sophie 2: I feel like when you get warnings, you sort of lose that connection with the characters. So I feel like it'd make you overall like less sensitive to the topic 'cause you wouldn't feel the same emotions you would with the element of surprise.

RY: So just to expand on that… Why do you feel less connected with the characters if you have a sense of the violence that’s going to happen to them?

Sophie 2: I feel like… I feel like when you watch a movie and you get a warning, you sort of remember that it's a movie and you, like, lose the emotion that they have kind of created and would want you to expect.

RY: Hmm, that's interesting. Do other people have views on that, in terms of whether content warnings have a negative effect on their experience of watching or reading something?

Olivia: I think if you're studying a text, there's going to be two types of people in the room, and when you get content warnings, there's going to be people who it wouldn't affect them anyway, so they don't care about content warnings and other people who it would affect. I feel like maybe people who it wouldn't affect them if they just read it – I feel like if you give them a content warning then it might make them feel more sensitive to it, because they’re thinking, ‘Oh, clearly this is something I should be sensitive to, because I'm receiving a warning.’ But I think they're never going to be like… If it wouldn't affect them anyway, getting a warning is not going to really deeply affect them and make them really sensitive to it. It's not going to damage them. But people who do need the warning, because it would affect them anyway, it's better to give it because it's not really going to affect the other people that much, but then they can prepare themselves because they know it will affect them. So I think it's, it's better to give them, because even if it does influence some people into feeling more sensitive, if you were going to be sensitive to it in the first place, then… No, if you *weren’t* going to be sensitive to it in the first place, it's not going to affect you too much and it will just help the other people.

RY: Yeah. And how about you? What were you going to say?

Evie: I was gonna say that I agreed with what Sophie said. And it's the fact that, like, if you're watching something, you're going through it with them. But if you already know what's going to happen, then it kind of… you kind of lose that sense of experiencing what they're experiencing, because you know what's going to happen. But then again, like, if you need a warning, then you need a warning.

RY: Yeah, and I suppose that raises the question of what warnings involve in terms of how specific they are, which is always again a tricky thing for a teacher to decide. Do I say just ‘this contains violence and scenes some people might find upsetting’ or do I say ‘this specifically contains this particular type of violence’? Do you also say *where* in the play this appears? Do you say that - you know – ‘it is in act three where this particular act of violence happens’? Any thoughts on that in terms of how specific you think teachers should be when preparing students?

Jayne: Sometimes I wonder whether, if you're a bit too specific, maybe it can create some, like, anxiety or anticipation because, like, say, you knew it was a particular act, wasn't it, and you knew it was suicide or something, and then you're anticipating it for like 3 acts or something. It might really stress people out, so. Yeah, I don't know. Maybe you should just give kind of a blanket thing. They can know to expect it at some point but… So it's not a massive shock, but it, it's also not, like, hanging over them for ages.

RY: What do other people think about that? Do you think that knowing specifically when something happens…?

Jack: I think if you’re reading it as you’re going along, maybe giving like a brief beforehand, just… And then do it as a like more of a broader topic rather than quite one minuscule topic, because I think of how teachers have done it in this group, how people have been warned about it and then told that they can either leave the room or talk about it in small groups. I think that's quite a good idea, because then you're not, you're addressing the whole group. And you're addressing the fact that, if it's a GCSE in particular, people in the room… Like, as directed by Olivia's point, there are two people in the room, two groups of people in the room. But, at the same time, if it's GCSE, you've got people who don't want to carry on at A-level so they aren't going to be as interested in it as the people who are. I'm not saying that they aren't going to be as impacted by the emotional aspects of it or… But because they aren't going to be studying the topic further on, then they aren't going to be as bothered about it.

RY: Right, that's interesting. With all this, maybe just a question about how you actually read these plays, what your experience is of reading them for the first time. How does it work? Do you kind of get set: ‘read the first act of this play for tomorrow’ or do you do any reading in class? I’m interested in how you encounter whatever scene it is for the first time. Are you on your own? Are you in a group setting? How do you study the plays? This is partly just me not knowing how it works in schools or colleges.

Olivia: Well, here, I just, I read *Hamlet* by myself first. But I don't think everyone… You don't have to do that. What we do in the class is we go through the whole play like act by act as a group and we read it together and analyse it together. So yeah. As a group.

RY: So when you say ‘read it together’, are you actually doing the reading itself in class?

Olivia: Yeah.

RY: Right. Is that…?

Jack: Yeah.

RY: Yeah. That’s the same for everyone. So potentially, therefore, somebody could be encountering… For the first time, they read a particular scene of, I don't know, Lady Macbeth’s suicide, for example. They might be encountering that for the first time in a class setting with other students. Is that how it works?

Olivia: Yeah.

RY: Right. OK. So, that, that is interesting because… When you're on your own, you can obviously step away if you need to, but in a class setting that's a bit more difficult. So that does perhaps affect the experience. Any other thoughts about the kind of explicitness of content warnings versus keeping things vague? Anyone else in favour of being quite precise about what happens versus just the general ‘Brace yourself, nasty things are coming’ kind of warning?

Evie: I think that if it's a frequent thing that's happening repetitively throughout the play, then it should be like: ‘There are frequencies of violence or sexual violence throughout.’ But if it's more just like a one-off thing, then I don't think it needs that specific, like, time frame.

RY: When you say it doesn't need that specific time frame, do you mean you just have something at the beginning of the play or…?

Evie: I feel like if it's happening throughout the entire thing, it should say like ‘this has frequent, like, mentions of this topic’. But if it doesn't, then I don't think it needs to be addressed on how like… where it is or something.

RY: So with that, you could just say that there is this specific violent act at some point in the play, do you mean?

Evie: Yes.

RY: Yes. So, give you a heads up, lots of violence versus specific isolated bits of violence.

Evie: Yeah.

RY: And that would be enough detail for you?

Evie: Yeah.

RY: Yeah. And at this point, I might circle back to the point actually also… the point that Eve made earlier. You made a point about how if you're given the content warning in advance, you might choose to not watch something, and that interests me because of the question of what content warnings are *for* in certain ways. Cause I think we've had various different ideas coming up in this group, and also in the questionnaires. Are content warnings about just being prepared – ‘this is going to happen, be aware of it’ – or are they about maybe, you know, allowing you to, say, step outside the classroom for a few minutes if you need a little bit of time, but with the assumption that you're going to come back in? Or should they be about, you know, if this is really going to upset you, you shouldn't have to watch it or you should be allowed to skip that entire discussion? Obviously skipping an entire discussion can be tricky if it's in a learning situation. What do people think: when a teacher gives a content warning, what should be the expectations of *you* in response? What should you be allowed to do as a result of that warning?

Poppy: I think when you're doing it in school, because it's so vital to your learning… In a lot of cases, it's something you explicitly have to study because it might come up as a topic on an exam question or something like that. That, just the ability to step out of the room would… or maybe, if it's really that bad, to be able to do it with the teacher one-on-one, to be able to get that extra support or to be able to study it when you're alone, like, at home. It's important. But I think that overall we need to take into account that they do have to study it overall, otherwise their grades might be affected by their decision to step back, which I don't think they should be punished for. So I think that there should be extra precautions taken for the people that it might be affecting.

RY: Yeah. What do other people think about that? Do you agree? Do you have other views in terms of what you should be allowed to do if you get a content warning?

Sophie: I agree. If I’m like watching a movie in my room, I can just avoid it, but if it's in a class setting we're learning about it for a reason. You can't really just ignore it. I would just prefer to be prepared and to know it's going to happen so I'm less sensitive towards it. Or maybe read it by myself first so I know what's going to happen.

RY: Yes. So, I suppose that also is to do with the *way* you get the content warning… There’s a difference perhaps between getting a content warning, ‘All right, we're going to watch this or read this *right now* and here's your warning’, versus the day before. What do people think about that, in terms of when content warnings get delivered? Do you think it should be immediately before the reading or the watching? Or do you think a bit of notice so that you could potentially prepare yourself, Google it, read in advance, that kind of thing, would be helpful?

Olivia: I think there should be a bit of a notice, not just right before because sometimes in classes, it will be like: ‘Oh the next scene we're about to read can be quite hard-hitting for some people’, but then you just have to read it straight away. You just… Some people might be panicking in their head, like, ‘Oh, I don't wanna read about this but…’ Like, the teacher thinks that they’ve given them time to prepare. They think they’ve given a content warning. But really, they've given 30 seconds, 30 seconds to prepare and then they have to read it straight away. So, I think if you're giving it like maybe a few days in advance, you can actually prepare yourself, you might… You can read it yourself at home, go over it. So I think… I think content warnings if they’re given, like, literally a minute before, I don't really think they’re that helpful.

RY: That's great. What do other people think about that? Do people agree that having a bit more time is useful? Or do you think, actually, it's fine having them just kind of five minutes before, whatever, just as a kind of ‘brace yourself’ approach?

Evie: I think you need them in advance, just to like emotionally prepare yourself for what is going to happen. Because, as she said, like if you have a scene that supposedly is going to happen, you can't fully process what they're saying before it's just like, ‘Oh, yeah, that's happened.’

RY: Yeah. What do other people think? Do people in general agree with that or any disagreements? Anyone who feels differently?

Jayne: I think it's good to give a bit of time probably. Because it gives a chance like just to go home and talk to your parents, if you, if you’re not comfortable with it. And like even make different arrangements. You know, it might be that you don't want to read it in a class setting. You will read it, you will study it, but there'll be some kind of other kind of, just it kind of gives the… It prepares for, like, every eventuality so that everyone feels like they're catered for.

RY: Yeah. So allowing students to make their own arrangements if they need to.

Jayne: Yeah, it’s just time. Like, when it gets kind of thrown in your face, there’s not really time to think about it, I guess.

RY: Yeah. I mean, again, with the content warnings you've been given, do you tend to get them a decent amount in advance? Do you tend to get them just immediately before?

Jayne: It's usually immediately before for me. They never really happen in advance. Like sometimes the very start of the page, like when you're like, ‘Oh, we're gonna start studying the play now.’ They'll say it has some violent scenes but you forget about that. And then if you're like, you're reading and then you get to Act 2, the teacher won't usually say, ‘Tomorrow we're reading this and it's got this.’ They'll just tell you like 2 minutes before.

RY: Right. How about other people's experiences? Are they similar to that or different? Does anyone remember having content warnings, you know, a day or so before?

Dan: I was told directly before or just not at all. And I think it should be a lot earlier so you can create a comfortable environment to read it yourself if you’re not...

RY: Right.

Dan: Because like the classroom isn't the best for, like, emotional situations.

RY: Yeah.

Dan: It’s better to do it at home and have that warning, to know to read ahead and read that bit at home for the first time.

RY: Yeah. So, it's a very similar experience. Does anyone remember ever having had one more than fifteen minutes in advance, except for the, kind of blanket, at the start of the play, ‘This is a violent play’? But has anyone had any more in advance? No?

We're beginning to come towards the end of the questions here. But I do also want to think about your point from earlier… Sorry, I can't see your name from, from here. Poppy. So Poppy's point from earlier about preserving the surprise factor, because again, that came up in the questionnaires, there are people who like to read things without knowing in advance too much what will happen. In terms of how that might work… obviously content warnings tend to be just that the teacher *says* something. And I was thinking: what do people think about a way of giving content warnings where, say, you could choose to be aware of them or not? Say, if the teacher gave out something and you could look at it. Like a bit of paper with: ‘Here are some content warnings; you've got the option of looking or not looking.’

Poppy: I know that a lot of the books I read have like a link or something, like have like in the, on the first few pages. It won't give a list of the warnings, it'll give a list of… It'll say something like: ‘Here's a website you can visit to look at said content warnings.’ In order to maintain that surprise factor for people like me who want to be taken aback, want to be shocked, but also create a safe space for people to be able to seek out both the warnings themselves, so that they can prepare themselves, but also it has lists of, like, places they can visit if they're uncomfortable afterwards. So I think that that's a good way of doing it.

RY: Right. Yeah. So a version of that is done already in certain areas. What do other people think about that as an idea? Would you prefer to have the option of seeing a warning or deciding ‘I do not want to see this warning’?

Sophie: I think it's quite useful because it keeps the shock factor. And if you don't want people knowing what could trigger you, you don’t have to tell anyone. It's just for you. You can decide. If you don't want to get spoiled, you don't get spoiled. That's quite useful and it kind of solves all of the problems people have with content warnings.

RY: That's interesting, yeah. What do other people think? Anyone who doesn't think that would be a good idea? Again, no right or wrong answers at all with this. Does anyone think it's actually important that the content warning is stated directly for everybody? Maybe a show of hands? In terms of personal preference, would you rather have… Put your hand up if you would rather have a contact warning that is in some way optional - as I say, like a piece of paper you can look at or not look at. So that's 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 people. The people who didn't put their hands up. Can you maybe share why you didn't put your hand up? Why you prefer not to have the option in content warnings?

Olivia: I think some people will think… If some people are gonna get triggered by one type of violence and it's like not a common type of violence, like violence against children, then they wouldn't think to read the warnings. I mean, when you initially said it, I thought that it would be better to give out that option just so people can maintain the shock. But I just think no one really ever knows what, what could be… If you don't read the content warnings, you have no idea what could be in there. And it could be something really that will affect you and you don't think, you don't think of it. So I think that it would actually be better if everyone saw.

RY: Right. Yeah. That’s interesting, makes sense as a position, yeah. How about the other people who didn't put their hands up?

Dan: I think it's… It needs to be said to these people and like a lot of people… If you like, give them the option and the majority say no to the option, you’d almost feel embarrassed to say yes to it, I think. In my classroom environment at least. And the… Just a lot of people wouldn't take the warning, the option to see the warnings, even if they need it.

RY: I mean, I think what I'm suggesting is more… Say everyone gets given, you know, a bit of folded paper or a link online or something like that, and the idea is then you could access that if you wanted to. I absolutely see your point about you wouldn't want it to be a sort of ‘individuals have to go to the teacher and say, “Could you give me a warning, please?”’ But it's more making it something that everyone could access but they can choose not to.

Claire: Becky, I’m just aware of the time.

RY: Yes, I'm aware of the time as well. So I think probably, yeah, given your own timetable, we need to wrap up now. Just a couple of quick things to say at the end. Hopefully you've enjoyed the session, hopefully you've found it interesting. We've found it massively helpful. So thank you again so much everyone for participating. If there's anything you're unhappy with, you can let me know now - you know, if anything about the way the session was conducted or any of the questions you were asked, let me know now or, on the information sheet, you've got my contact details so you can get in touch with me. As I say, we will keep you anonymous in the transcripts. If you decide you don't want us to use your data, you can get in touch with us for the next two weeks and we will remove your information from the transcript. All of this is on the information sheet. Also, if you feel upset about anything we've discussed today - obviously there has been a little bit of touching on sensitive topics - do please speak to a parent or a guardian or a teacher at the college, if you think you'd like to speak to anyone about this. But otherwise, as I say, I hope you've found it interesting and thanks again for everything. I hope you have a good rest of the day.