As a critic of the early modern period interested in the relations between texts and histories, I use my final-year undergraduate seminars as a means of introducing students to the joys and perils of interdisciplinary approaches. Because, for me, knowing how to read a play is inseparable from knowing how to deploy historical evidence and to mobilize a theoretical frame, I continually flag up in class three principles of critical engagement – textual, historical, theoretical. Most recently, such an approach has been facilitated by the arrival of EEBO, the online resource that makes available the wealth of early modern literature and culture, and this fundamental change proffers infinite possibilities for contextualization and scholarship in our teaching. In short, changes in resources have precipitated a transformation in attitudes towards, and the methodologies that surround, the teaching of the period, not least at the level of advanced courses on Shakespeare.

At Queen’s University, Belfast, I teach a final-year research-led module on ‘Reading Shakespeare Historically’. As subsidiary aims, the course is directed towards a de-canonization of Shakespeare: firstly, ‘Shakespeare’ and ‘History’ are equally prioritized and, secondly, the range of texts studied goes against expectations created by survey modules in earlier phases of the curriculum. Hence, we bypass the tragedies, concentrating instead on the histories, comedies and problem plays.

Given these aims, orientation is essential. The opening session accordingly is proactive from the tutor’s point of view. ‘What is history, and where can we find it?’ are some of the questions posed as I discuss and distribute the relevant course materials. The context pack – which comprises extracts, illustrations, citations, lists of further reading and so on – is a first port of call, but there is always the proviso that this represents a starting point only. I also direct attention to pertinent areas
of the library, to collections of facsimiles, to early printed book holdings
and, most importantly, to Early English Books on Line (EEBO), with
group exercises being organized in relation to their applications. Vital,
too, is how we might learn from, and put to work, our two core texts,
the Norton edition of Shakespeare and Russ McDonald’s frequently
reprinted Palgrave collection, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*.
Throughout, I spend part of each seminar focusing attention on particular
passages or on suggestions for reading in these texts, the idea being
that the information provided is a springboard for subsequent analysis.
In this way, a question that frequently occurs – that is, how, exactly, do
we historicize at the level of an argument? – is confronted via practical
examples of the application of the relevant methodology.

Orientation is inseparable from the assumption of certain kinds
of student responsibility. In years one and two, the general teaching
structure is organized around tutorials with the addition of lectures, an
arrangement that makes for a two-prong ‘go’ at a particular text. By year
three, however, students are allowed to take a free-standing seminar,
with the result that time needs to be spent on easing the way into a
new – and more individually oriented – teaching situation. The seminar
presentation (a module requirement) is designed to encourage students
to take responsibility for what they learn. The presentation takes the
form of two to four pages of questions/comment that are distributed, in
advance, to the rest of the class. At least two examples of early modern
historical contexts are to be provided (that is, a copy of a title-page or
a one-paragraph quotation from the historical document) in order to
illuminate the Shakespearean example; the principle is not to reward the
verbal rendition but to register the importance of the material itself.
The significance of the provision of material to the other members of
the class is explained as follows: each presentation represents a potential
body of evidence to be taken up in later endeavours. If each student
completes his/her presentation, the class will possess, by the end of
the semester, a file of references and positions that can be marshalled
in the assessed essay. The individual value of discrete pieces feeds into
this final compilation; each member of the class can shape, and have
an effect on, the writing process. Students, I try to show, are working
for themselves and for each other. A 10 per cent mark for participation
and attendance also helps: student-led seminars, it is recognized, are all
the better for maximum input.

Where is theory in all of this? Implicitly and explicitly, the dislodgement
of a canonical Shakespeare – he is always already implicated in other
discourses, practices and frameworks – invites theoretical readings and