Educating Rita

By Willy Russell

The Context

Willy Russell was born into a working-class family just outside Liverpool, England and first worked as a hairdresser. To pursue his desire to become a writer, he worked at night to save the money for college fees. Russell uses his class and work background to create a highly amusing and thought-provoking play that is accessible to all people, regardless of class and education.

The Open University is a British University open to students of all ages, irrespective of educational level. Learning takes place through television and radio lectures, reading at home, and contact with a local tutor. A similar program was established to provide opportunities for Australian students.

What is the text about?

Educating Rita is about a 26 year-old hairdresser who rebels against the social and family pressures of her working-class life. She is bored with her life and marriage and wants to learn more about herself and how to appreciate the world of books, so enrolls in an Open University course.

Frank is the university lecturer, very bored with his life and lost enthusiasm for his career, who is assigned as Rita’s tutor to earn extra money. Frank has become disillusioned by the streams of conforming students, all saying the same things. He finds his existence confining and seeks escape, like Rita.

Although Rita gains her liberation and a broadening of her perspective, her personality changes and-she is no longer so vivacious as an individual. Frank too is changed by their relationship, because his interest in teaching is rekindled by her enthusiasm.
### Step 1: Orientation to the text

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### Step 2: Content relevant to Belonging

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### Step 3: Textual features and their effects

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| **Dramatic conflict through dialogue** | ▪ Colloquial, working class Liverpool dialect: includes lots of slang and swearing:  
  - “You’re bleedin’ mad you, aren’t y?” (Act I Sc 1, p. 7)  
  ▪ Contrast with Frank’s formal educated English  
  - “…a more comprehensive studentship (Act I Sc 1, p. 4)  
  ▪ References to offstage characters, Denny and Julia | ▪ adds realism as illustrates differences in class and education  
  ▪ enables us to empathise with Rita  
  ▪ provides insight into characters’ attitudes and motivations  
  ▪ provide depth to Rita and Frank’s worlds |
| **Humour**                | ▪ Misunderstandings between Frank and Rita – role reversal, Act I Sc 1  
  ▪ Wit – Frank  
  ▪ Sarcasm - Frank | ▪ emphasises their differences  
  ▪ reveals their wish to belong  
  ▪ depicts his character  
  ▪ adds variety and human interest |
| **Set design**            | ▪ Only one set – Frank’s room, Act I Sc 1, p.1  
  - bay window, 2 desks piled with papers, lined with books | ▪ focuses attention on interactions between characters  
  ▪ highlights changes in characters |
| **Stage directions**      | ▪ Precise directions for delivery of dialogue and movement:  
  ‘hurriedly’, ‘conspiratorily’, ‘jubilantly’, ‘appalled’ | ▪ build the characters  
  ▪ create the dramatic conflict |
| **Symbolism**             | ▪ Bay window of Frank’s room  
  - physical barrier between Rita, Frank and the world  
  - never opened by Frank  
  - Rita tries to open it  
  ▪ Lawn visible: Rita looks down at the proper students | ▪ highlights the distance between academia and the real world  
  ▪ symbolizes Rita’s ideal of proper students |
Writing a paragraph using the above notes

Question: Why has the playwright chosen to use only one setting?

Sample answer

Every scene takes place in Frank’s study at the university. It is on the first floor of a Victorian-built university in the north of England. There is a large bay window, two desks covered in papers and books, and walls lined with books, behind which we later learn are hidden bottles of alcohol. The dramatic technique of using only one set and two characters leads to greater intensity. Our gaze is held totally by these two characters and the changes in them are highlighted because nothing else changes. This makes it easier to produce a fast-paced play with quick scene changes.

Questions

1. Why is Rita motivated to change her life and what does this tell us about belonging?

2. Identify THREE examples of dialogue that reveal Rita’s class and education.

3. How does the writer convey a sense of the world beyond Frank’s study?

4. How does Frank’s life change through his contact with Rita?

5. What are Rita’s choices at the end of the play?
Educating Rita
By Willy Russell

About the author

Willy Russell was born into a working-class family just outside Liverpool, England. He first worked as a hairdresser and used quiet times in the salon to write songs, sketches and poetry. To pursue his desire to become a writer, he worked at night in a dangerous job in the Ford car factory until he had saved the money for college fees.

Educating Rita was first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1980 and was voted Best Comedy of the Year. Russell uses his social and work background to create a highly amusing and thought-provoking play that is accessible to people regardless of class and education.

What is the text about?

Educating Rita is about a 26 year-old hairdresser who rebels against the social and family pressures of her working-class life. She enrolls in an Open University course because she is bored with her life and marriage and wants to learn more about herself and how to appreciate the world of books.

Frank is the university lecturer, very bored with his life and his career, who is assigned as Rita’s tutor.

Although Rita gains her liberation and a broadening of her perspective, her personality changes and she is no longer as vivacious as an individual. Frank too is changed by their relationship, because his interest in teaching is rekindled by her enthusiasm.

Context

This play was written at a time when adults from working-class backgrounds, women in particular, wanted to improve their education and were encouraged to do so.

The Open University is a British University open to students of all ages, irrespective of educational level, in which learning takes place through television and radio lectures, reading at home, and contact with a local tutor. A similar program exists in Australia.

What aspects of Belonging are presented?

- Searching for a place to belong
- Potential to enrich or challenge
- Changed sense of belonging.
These three aspects of belonging and the way they are communicated in the text are outlined below.

**SEARCHING FOR A PLACE TO BELONG**

Rita and Frank connect at their first meeting even though they come from totally different social backgrounds. They share a number of characteristics. Both Frank and Rita feel out of touch with their peers and uncomfortable with their social groups. They seek ways of coping with their sense of disorientation and alienation. Frank does it with drinking and Rita with education, as they try to make sense of their worlds and identities.

Their differences in ideas and expectations create much of the conflict that propels the drama. In the end, they are bonded together by accepting and helping each other through a painful period and can now move on to another chapter in their lives.

**Characterisation - Rita**

Rita had realised for some time that she was different from those around her, 'slightly out of step.' (p. 12). She tried to fit in when she was at school by not studying, because "studying was just for the wimps." (Act I Sc 2, p. 17).

RITA: See, if I'd started tak'n school seriously I would have had to become different from me mates, an' that's not allowed. (Act I Sc 2, p. 17)

After she left school and became a hairdresser, she filled her life by buying records and new clothes, clubbing and dating. However, she did not feel she really belonged in this environment. Rita now longs for freedom from what she perceives as a dreary and mundane lifestyle:

RITA: There was always somethin' in me head... tellin' me I might have got it all wrong. (Act I Sc 2, p. 17)

In the first scene Rita explains to Frank in detail her desire to search for a place where she feels she belongs. She is determined to change from the inside and become an "educated woman" (Act I Sc 2, p. 18). Her intention is repeated again at the end of Act I:

RITA: I want to change! (Act I Sc 8, p. 48)

She feels she no longer fits in with her working-class upbringing and does not want a child, preferring to discover herself first. Her social group cannot understand her reasoning and why she continues to take contraception. This is a constant source of arguments with her husband, Denny.

RITA: ... I told him I'd only have a baby when I had choice. (Act I Sc 5, p. 34)

Midway through Act I Rita is excited to feel that she is changing and the Rita that Denny knows has gone:

RITA: But she can't, because she's gone, an' I've taken her place. (Act I Sc 5, p. 33)

Initially, Rita admires Frank because she sees him as a fount of great knowledge. She thinks she has entered a better, more cultured world than the one she grew up in. She feels that if she can learn to talk in a more educated way her prospects in life will improve:

RITA: ... boring, irrelevant detail all the time ... I don't want talk about irrelevant rubbish anymore. (Act II Sc 4, p. 64)

As Rita's education progresses, we see her internal conflict deepen as she finds herself even further removed from a sense of belonging either with her family and friends, or with Frank's friends, or the fulltime students:
RITA: I'm a freak. I can't talk to the people I live with, anymore. An' I can't talk to the likes of them on Saturday, or them out there, because I can't learn the language. I'm a half-caste. (Act I Sc 7, p. 45)

Shortly after this, Rita leaves Denny, unable to concede to his demands to give up the course and have a baby. She agrees with Denny that she has betrayed him but is determined not to betray herself. The exciting new experiences and young people she meets validate her decision to discover herself:

RITA: I'm havin' the time of my life. (Act I Sc 8, p. 48)

**Characterisation - Frank**

Frank had been a successful academic for several years until he became disillusioned by the streams of conforming students, all saying the same things. He is bored and has lost enthusiasm for teaching. He finds his existence confining and seeks escape, like Rita.

For Frank, tertiary education has been accessible and easy. After years of teaching at university, however, he is disillusioned—he has lost his energy and drive and feels he has become a failure. His internal conflict leads him to be cynical about his job, his colleagues and his personal relationships. He is tired of hearing the same ideas and quotes coming from his students. Frank has a very low opinion of his ability as a teacher:

FRANK: ...I'm actually an appalling teacher
... You want a lot, and I can't give it.
Everything I know ... is that I know absolutely nothing.
(Act I Sc 1, p. 13)

Frank deals with his poor self-esteem and his view of his role in the education system by drinking alcohol heavily. He hides the bottle of alcohol among the books in his university room. He is even reported by students for delivering a lecture whilst drunk (Act II Sc 3, p. 59).

In the opening scene he is forced to acknowledge and defend his beliefs and this highlights his sense of failure and indicates how shallow his professional life is. Rita's questions about his private life force him to consider the flaws in his personal life:

FRANK: I like her enormously; it's myself
I'm not too fond of.
(Act I Sc 2, p. 22)

From their first meeting Frank is revived by Rita's enthusiasm and honest, down-to-earth approach. Although his life is taking too many bad turns, he sees Rita as a breath of fresh air in a stale world and he is sustained throughout the play by her vivacity. She gives him back some interest and belief in the reality of his role and enlivens his teaching.

As their relationship develops he is dismayed to see Rita lose her refreshing individuality and 'fit in' as she becomes more comfortable in the academic student world. At the beginning of Act Two Frank recognises that his role in Rita's search for a new world is coming to an end. Rita feels refreshed and rejuvenated and is ready to leave the comfort of his study. He comments on her talking with the students on the lawn (Act II Sc 2, p. 57), a symbol that she now feels part of the academic world.

In addition, Frank evaluates her latest essay as being worthy of comparison with other students. Rita feels triumphant that her ideas and understanding fit in with the accepted approach. However, Frank believes that she has changed too much.
**Offstage characters**

Denny and Julia, the respective partners of Rita and Frank, are integral characters in this play, although we view them only through the words of Frank and Rita. Through these partners we are able to glimpse the very different worlds in which Rita and Frank have operated until now.

The partners are content with their current lives and do not understand or accept the changes happening to Rita and Frank. In particular, Denny does not see the value of Rita pursuing an education; he believes her time to study has passed and that they should be trying to have a baby and save for a house. He does not support Rita at all and in fact at one stage he impedes her from entering a new world by burning her books, including those that Frank lent her (Act I Sc 5).

In a sense the partners act as controls to show how Frank and Rita change. They also serve another dramatic purpose in that their attitudes create further conflict for Rita and Frank.

Rita's flatmate Trish is only spoken about in Act II. Trish is held in high esteem by Rita because of her youth and passion about issues, and Rita even refines her voice because of Trish's comments. Trish has considerable influence over Rita, evident in the way Rita quotes her, and in cutting short a class with Frank to attend the theatre with her. Frank becomes annoyed as he can see Trish's affectation and pretentious manner, in particular as Rita starts to parrot others' views rather than her own.

As Rita gains more knowledge and confidence about voicing her opinions, she spends more time with Trish. It is only when she finds Trish has tried to kill herself that Rita reassesses how she wants to fit in to her new world, realising that education does not necessarily bring happiness.

Similarly, Rita is very attracted to Tyson ("Tiger"), finding students like him interesting:

RITA: They're young, and they're passionate about things that matter. They're not trapped – they're too young for that. And I like to be with them. (Act II Sc 4, p. 65)

Although Rita finally agrees with Frank's disdain of Tyson, she contemplates going away to France with him to extend her search for a sense of belonging.

**Study Activities**

- Refer to Act II Sc 5, pp. 68-9, starting with the following lines and reading to the end of the scene:

RITA: I'll tell you what you can't bear. Mr Self-Pitying Piss Artist; what you can't bear is that I am educated now.

1. In what way does Rita now feel she belongs?
2. Why is Frank so critical of Rita?

- Find TWO more examples of Denny's unsupportive attitude.
POTENTIAL TO ENRICH OR CHALLENGE

For Rita, education leads to her liberation and a broadening of her perspective but in this process she challenges the attitudes of both those from her own background and those of Frank. Her husband and working-class friends remain unmoved and unchanged by this challenge, and so Rita separates from them and goes her own way. On the other hand, although Frank is initially unsettled by his contact with Rita, eventually he is enriched by it.

In the opening scene Rita is presented as a very individual character as she explodes onto the stage - loud, assertive, brash and talkative. Her dynamic personality is disconcerting for Frank and unsettles him.

The dramatic technique of role reversal focuses the audience on the potential nature of their relationship and provides humour. Rita does not understand Frank's pretentious questioning and so there is confusion. Frank tries to regain his role as teacher but Rita will be not quietened and she continues to ask personal questions.

RITA: Do you live on 'y own then?
(Act I Sc 2, p. 21)

Trying to hide her nervousness, she wanders around as if she is in control and at ease, looking at everything and commenting. At times she appears insolent and her dialogue is almost rude:

RITA: Are you takin' the piss?
(Act I Sc 2, p. 21)

Frank is overwhelmed by her lack of respect for his position. Her behaviour should be seen as a mask for her own feelings of inadequacy.

Determined to change herself and be like the other students, she changes her name from Susan to Rita.

RITA: I don't wanna be charming and delightful ... I don't wanna be funny. I wanna talk seriously with the rest of you.
(Act I Sc 7, p. 44)

RITA: I wanna write essays like those on there (She points to essays on the desk). I wanna know and pass exams like they do.
(Act I Sc 8, p.48)

Dialogue

The language of their initial interaction highlights the differences between Rita and Frank, including their accents. While Rita asks blunt questions, Frank is reluctant to respond with direct answers:

RITA: Why did 'y split up?
FRANK: Perhaps you'd like to take notes.
(Act I Sc 2, p. 20)

Through their contact with each other, both main characters change. As Rita becomes more confident in an academic environment, we see her language and speech change. She strives to extend her vocabulary to fit with her new learning. Her conversations with Frank become less individual and less questioning, but more didactic and assured.

While Rita's language style becomes more definite, Frank's becomes more questioning and insecure. In developing a great appreciation for her direct way of saying exactly what she thinks, he begins to relax his turn of phrase a little to a less sarcastic tone. He even incorporates some of Rita's favourite terms, such as "off my cake" and "dead honest".

This highlights the changing relationship between Rita and Frank, which is a major dramatic element in the play.

Speech patterns

The play is set in Liverpool, a large industrial city in the north of England that has its own distinct style of speech and accent. Russell conveys everyday life in Liverpool through the use of vivid and
realistic language. His use of a regional dialect is an important feature of the text. Accents in Britain immediately show where a person comes from and what social class they fit into. This is important for understanding the difference between the two main characters, who come from different social worlds.

Rita speaks with a strong local, Liverpudlian accent and her terminology is very working-class. This contrasts with Frank’s accent and way of speaking.

Rita’s language is very distinctive and involves a directness of speech and a use of colourful images and words, as well as frequent slang and swearing. Her working-class background is reflected in her words: “Y’ wanna be careful with that stuff, it kills y’ brain cells.” (Act I Sc 1, p. 5) It is also shown through her use of swearing, eg, “You’re bleedin’ mad you, aren’t y’? (Act I Sc 1, p. 7)

Frank, on the other hand, speaks a more educated, upper-class, cultured English and carefully chooses his words for effect. For example, at the beginning of the play he is talking to his girlfriend Julia:

FRANK: ... Look, if you’re trying to induce some sense of guilt in me over the prospect of a burnt dinner you should have prepared something other than lamb and ratatouille...”
(Act I Sc 1, p. 2)

Even when he is angry, Frank maintains a strong grasp of descriptive language. He uses words to impress others and control conversations:

FRANK: ... this clever, pyrotechnical pile of self-conscious allusion is worthless, talentless, shit and could be recognized as such by anyone with a shred of common sense.
(Act II Sc 5, p. 68)

For Frank, sarcastic language is a tool to stir up and challenge accepted thinking and ideas.

We observe how Rita’s and Frank’s use of language changes during the play. After a few months, Rita changes her accent and explains to Frank that she had decided to “talk properly”. (p. 56). As her confidence develops, she starts to speak with students on the lawn, having grown so much within herself that she can comment on their thoughts critically by using literary argument:

RITA: I said tryin’ to compare ‘Chatterley’ with ‘Sons and Lovers’ is like tryin’ to compare sparkling wine with champagne (Act II, Sc 2, p. 58).

CHANGED SENSE OF BELONGING

By the end of the play Rita’s search for a sense of belonging has been satisfied to some extent. She has successfully managed to move into an academic world and feels that an education has provided her with a range of choices.

Through her university experiences she is able to view academic achievement and education in a more realistic way, and in so doing she re-evaluates her own worth.

Rita’s studies take her from a lack of belief in her own ability and self to an admiration for academic society. Yet events allow her to see both worlds from a more objective perspective and she begins to see merit in her own world and faults with the academic world. In the end we can see that the real growth for her has been the realisation that she has choices.

RITA: I can do things on me own now ... I know what I’m doin’ ... I understand now.
(Act II Sc 3, p. 63)

Rita’s veneration of Frank changes as she glimpses his human frailties and weaknesses. She comes to believe that he has squandered his opportunities and intelligence.
After her exam, near the very end of the play, Rita returns to Frank to personally thank him and tell him how he had helped her and that he was a good teacher:

RITA: I had a choice, I chose me. Because of what you'd given me I had a choice. (Act II Sc 7, p. 72)

Rita has shown too that she has learnt to follow the rules to be able to belong to this other world. By the end of the play, we see that Rita is wistful about the life she has left but is also aware that she no longer fits into it. She has finally achieved a sense of belonging through having the power to make choices in her life. When Frank asks her about her plans she replies:

RITA: I dunno. I might go to France. I might go to me mother's. I might even have a baby. I dunno. I'll make a decision. I'll choose. I dunno. (Act II Sc 7, pp. 72-3)

The playwright also presents Frank as having a changed sense of belonging. Frank learns as much from Rita about life as she does from him about literature. Frank's life changes as a consequence of his contact with Rita. He is led to reassess his personal life and career and to make choices for the future.

Unlike Rita, he does not have the impetus to initiate change. It is only at the very end when he is punished and sent to Australia for two years that he seems to regain some interest in his life.

FRANK: It'd be good for us to leave a place that's just finishing for one that's just beginning. (Act II Sc 7, p. 72)

Frank's move to Australia offers him an opportunity to find his own place where he could belong:

FRANK: ...Aussie? It's a paradise for the likes of me. (Act II Sc 7, p. 71)

There is perhaps a suggestion of a sense of escaping rather than moving to fresh challenges.

**Set design**

The dramatic technique of using only one set and two characters leads to greater intensity. Our gaze is held totally by these two characters and the changes in them are highlighted because nothing else on the stage changes. This also makes it easier to produce a fast paced play with quick scene changes.

Every scene takes place in Frank's study at the university. The stage directions describe his room as being "on the first floor of a Victorian-built university in the north of England" (p. 1). The first-floor setting is a metaphor for education as it represents access to a higher level.

**Motif**

The motif of the large bay window is an important one. The window serves as a physical barrier between Frank, Rita and the world. During the course of her studies, Rita looks out at the "proper" university students from Frank's windows. At one point Rita tries to convince Frank to have a tutorial on the grass (Act II Sc 1), showing how much she wants to move out from his stagnant surroundings into the world of fresh ideas. When her increased confidence allows her to join the students on the lawn, it is Frank who peers through the windows, searching for where he belongs.
Film version

It is important to remember that the drama text and not the film is the prescribed text for HSC study.

Watching the well-known film version may help you to understand the play, but you must remember that the film is not exactly like the play. For example, the characters of Denny and Julia actually appear and have speaking parts in the film, whereas in the play we only know about them through the dialogue between Rita and Frank.

Practice Exam Questions

1. 'A sense of belonging can emerge from the connections made with people, places, groups, communities and the larger world.'

To what extent is this statement true in relation to the text *Educating Rita*?

2. You have been asked to write a magazine feature article on why it is important for people to feel they belong.

In your article refer to *Educating Rita* and ONE other text of your own choosing.

Lorraine Antonini and Lesley Fitzpatrick