

A Short Introduction to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in the Faculty of Classics

People come into Classics from all sorts of different directions and with their own ideas about what to expect from reading for a Classics degree. The same can be said about those who are involved in teaching and research. This plurality is one of the strengths of the subject; if, in fact, Classics in its variety can be seen as a single subject. In what follows, we have tried to sum up what seem to us to be the key features of the teaching and learning process for undergraduates as practised in our Classical Faculty. Although much of this might seem to be self-evident or common sense, we hope it may prove helpful to pass on to students our reflections on this central aspect of our activity as a community of scholars.

The experience of studying Classics in Cambridge is enriched by the interplay of Faculty and college teaching. The following account necessarily concentrates on the Faculty side of the process. In practice, the distinction between Faculty and colleges is blurred by the participation of virtually all those involved in college teaching as Members of the Classical Faculty.

Attributes of Cambridge Classics Graduates

Our overall aim is to encourage students not only to acquire a sophisticated understanding of Greek and Roman cultures, but also critically to engage with them, developing an informed awareness of similarities and significant differences between the ancient and our own cultures. At the heart of this process is the acquisition of the Greek and Latin languages, to a level at which students consider themselves to be ‘confident readers’ in both languages. Alongside language skills, students also gain a broad knowledge of what are traditionally the main areas of classical knowledge: Greek and Latin literature, ancient philosophy, ancient history, Greek and Roman art and archaeology, and philology and linguistics. But our Classicists are also encouraged to pursue theme-based topics which cross over conventional subject boundaries. This might happen incidentally (e.g. in the study of religion or gender issues), or in courses consciously constructed to unite diverse subject areas (the ‘X Papers’ offered in Part II). For Part II of the Tripos there is also available a schedule of papers with classical affinities which have been ‘borrowed’ from other Triposes.

An increasingly important aspect of our teaching involves the reception of the Classics through time. We believe that this assists our students in understanding the characteristic qualities of the discipline of Classics and also its changing role in society beyond school and university.

In the course of their studies, Classics students acquire familiarity with a variety of primary materials requiring their own techniques of interpretation; mainly literary and other texts, but also inscriptions, and the evidence of art and archaeology. They also come to command a range of approaches and methodologies: library- and IT-based research skills, informed reading of texts, visual skills, and techniques of argumentation. This necessarily includes the ability to assimilate and critically evaluate a variety of viewpoints. In this way, students are able to arrive at and present their own, individual syntheses of ideas.

We hope that our students will be assisted by their classical studies in acquiring a range of adaptable skills. Learning the classical languages forms a firm basis for acquiring or developing knowledge of many modern languages. So far as time permits, learning of additional languages is encouraged and, in the case of Modern Greek, actively promoted through a ‘borrowed’ Paper available in Part II. A range of Classics papers (mainly but not exclusively language papers) is available to students

reading Modern and Medieval Languages. So far as possible, they are taught alongside their classical counterparts.

Among the most valuable skills gained by Classics students is a developed critical judgement, coupled with a high degree of intellectual autonomy, assisted by the capacity effectively to manage time spent in learning. At a more detailed level, these skills involve the collection, organizing and deployment of material, the extraction of crucial elements from complex information, and the selection of appropriate methodologies. Also distinct to the discipline of Classics, driven by the diverse nature of the subject, is the ability to make lateral connexions between information and ideas in different fields of study. Where appropriate, teaching and learning are given a strongly comparative focus.

At every stage, we wish to assist our students in acquiring the ability to marshal their thoughts and arguments concisely and cogently, in both thinking and writing. This might also involve presentational skills, whether in writing or in addressing an audience directly, using appropriate audiovisual aids. Both call for the acquisition of at least a basic familiarity with IT resources. This includes word-processing essays and dissertations with footnotes and basic formatting, using Powerpoint to make presentations, searching databases and text-files, and locating, evaluating and exploiting websites.

Methods of Teaching and Learning

We believe that the modes of teaching and learning adopted and developed by our Faculty encourage and assist Classics students in acquiring the attributes and skills described above. We are keenly aware that students enter the Classical Faculty from a wide range of educational experience in terms of subjects studied. That is reflected in our various modes of entry: the Preliminary Year for those without Latin and Greek; Intensive Greek for those with only Latin. On arrival, all students are assessed in terms of their specific language needs, and there are regular reassessments thereafter.

What almost all students do have in common is the experience of a pre-university educational regime that has been heavily taught, working to highly specific examination syllabuses. Our aim is to provide a supportive environment which enables individual students to acquire over time the self-confidence necessary for taking responsibility for their own learning, gaining maximum benefit from the expanding element of choice as they progress through the Classics course. Part IA aims at least to introduce students to the central areas of classical learning; choice of options is therefore limited. For Part IB the scope for choice of and within options is increased. When students arrive at Part II, they are given an almost completely free choice to specialise within one area of Classics or constructing their own programme of papers. In particular, the possibility of writing a dissertation for Part II provides a fresh kind of educational challenge, which combines skills already acquired with a strong element of independent research and writing. Frequently, third-year dissertations provide a valuable stepping-stone between undergraduate and graduate work.

In terms of study methods, the Faculty aims to gain the maximum benefit from a combination of traditional techniques (lectures, classes and seminars) with new and ongoing developments (databases, websites and computer-assisted learning). Overall, there is a balance between more formal teaching and types of learning that depend on active input by students.

It would not be particularly helpful to include here an exhaustive list of the range of study methods that students might encounter through their three or four years as

undergraduates in the Classical Faculty; not least because the whole experience is enhanced by learning and teaching within the college environment. But the major methods would include the regular writing of essays; normally, but not exclusively, overseen by the Supervisors appointed by the colleges. Those new to Supervising (typically, but not exclusively graduate students) are encouraged to take up the training in their subject-area offered by the Faculty. Assistance in the reading of Greek and Roman texts is shared by Faculty and colleges, as is guidance in unprepared translation and prose composition. Lectures and classes provide support in source analysis and practical literary criticism. For those pursuing courses in art and archaeology, there is specific training in the identification and analysis of art objects and archaeological artefacts. Where possible, students are offered the opportunity to handle artefacts. All students are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the topography and ecology of the Greco-Roman world and to visit sites of specific interest. To these ends, the Faculty provides generous assistance for those with suitable plans to visit Mediterranean lands.

Computer-assisted learning plays an increasingly fruitful part in the acquisition of language skills; key texts are available on-line, with accompanying vocabulary and commentary on grammar and syntax. Modern art and architecture, music, film, radio and television programmes are an established aspect of exploring the reception of classical themes.

Methods of Assessment

The variety of study methods is reflected in the range of techniques of assessment. It may be helpful to draw a distinction between formative assessment (frequently informal, with feedback), and that which is summative (more formal, with optional feedback, typically used in grading students).

Classics students at Cambridge are fortunate in their opportunities for formative assessment: both within the Faculty and through their college. Supervisions arranged by the college provide excellent occasions for detailed assessment of work and progress. Where written work is produced it will typically be read in advance of the Supervision and be the subject of detailed written comment and discussion. At the end of each term every Supervisor submits to his students' Director of Studies formal reports of the progress in their studies. The teaching may be one-to-one; it is more likely that two, three or four students will be involved. Where more than one student participates, there is scope for co-operative learning. A similar sense of co-operation prevails in the classes and seminars organised by the Faculty. Although classes are run alongside lecture courses (especially for Part II), they form the staple method of language teaching. For the Preliminary Year to IA and for IA itself there are termly assessments of linguistic learning. Again, teachers pass on to Directors of Studies written reports of students' progress. Directors of Studies will also ask students for their feedback on the term's teaching.

Summative assessment largely consists of formal examinations at the end of each year. Revision classes are provided where appropriate. The Pass List for the Preliminary Year is undivided; for Part IA the Second Class is undivided. All students are supplied with details of marking criteria. Students have returned to them a full account of the marks gained in each paper: alphabetical and numerical marks awarded by each of the two examiners (all papers are double-marked) and an agreed numerical mark. The dissertation for Part II combines formative with summative elements. Supervision for this is provided on a one-to-one basis and every candidate is given a

half-hour viva examination, providing an opportunity to discuss his or her work with the two examiners.

Future Developments

We are always anxious to consider ways of improving our methods of teaching, learning and assessment. Suggestions may be made informally to teachers, or passed on via a member of the Student-Staff Joint Committee (which meets three times each year), or through the Undergraduate Academic Secretary of the Faculty.