

\*\*\**Teaching the Classical Reception Revolution*\*\*\*

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## 2. Classical Reception Pedagogy in Liberal Arts Education

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Liberal Arts degrees, sometimes called Bachelor of Arts and Sciences degrees, represent one of the fastest growing programmes in British universities.<sup>1</sup> The courses aim to combine a breadth and depth of study, allowing students to gain a broad, interdisciplinary education within the arts and humanities, and sometimes also the social sciences, with a depth of expertise focused around a specific major, or pathway. In addition, they encourage students to build links between their degree and wider culture and society, incorporating internships, language modules, and study abroad trips as the norm rather than the exception and often as credit-bearing, compulsory elements. Interestingly, classicists have played a remarkably prominent role in the development of these courses.<sup>2</sup> I myself have taught on two such programmes, and in both instances have used the Liberal Arts remit as a framework for classical reception topics. Here I discuss the pedagogical strategies I have employed in Liberal Arts modules, providing a template for other academics wishing to find homes for classical reception topics within non-classics degree structures. In addition, I demonstrate the potential that the interdisciplinary Liberal Arts curricula hold for early-career scholars wanting to engage in research-led teaching. Such teaching provides crucial formative training for junior scholars seeking to progress their academic careers, and I argue that the experience has a flow-on effect in preparing scholars for teaching in a more traditional, single-honours environment.

The rhetoric surrounding British Liberal Arts degrees revolves around the importation of a US-style Liberal Arts college model. However, the concept of a Liberal Arts education goes back much earlier, as is evidenced through the depiction of the seven liberal arts in the *Hortus Decliciarum* manuscript illumination.<sup>3</sup> The illumination shows the significant role that the classics have played within the history of liberal arts education; Plato and Socrates, along with a personified Philosophy, sit at the centre of the illumination, with the liberal arts emerging around their periphery. Today, however, the classics play a role within Liberal Arts programmes due, perhaps, more to happenstance than conceptual necessity. Out of the two

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Turner, N. (2016) 'Liberal Arts in the UK: how are students finding the model?', *Times Higher Education*, available at <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/liberal-arts-in-the-uk-how-are-students-finding-the-model> [accessed 29 May 2017], and Reisz, M. (2014) 'Liberal arts builds momentum in the UK', *Times Higher Education*, available at <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/opinion/liberal-arts-british-style/2005765.article> [accessed 5 April 2017].

<sup>2</sup> The current Programme Directors of the relevant programmes at Bristol University and the University of Birmingham, for example, are both classicists, as is Deputy Director of Liberal Arts at Kings College London.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Gombrich notes that the idea of a liberal education can be traced back to Cicero, and even arguably Socrates. See Gombrich, C. (2015) 'Liberal Education for a Complex World', available at <http://www.carlgombrich.org/liberal-education-for-a-complex-world/> [accessed 5 April 2017].

programmes that I have been involved with only the UCL Bachelor of Arts and Sciences (BASc) had a specific classical reception subject, which, notably, is an elective unit. In contrast, the Bachelor and Masters of Liberal Arts at Bristol require students to take four core interdisciplinary modules across their first and second year, two of which I have taught. In neither module is a classical component required; however, the programme structure encourages lecturers to adapt the content to their own disciplinary areas, and allowed me to incorporate my own research on classical reception topics.

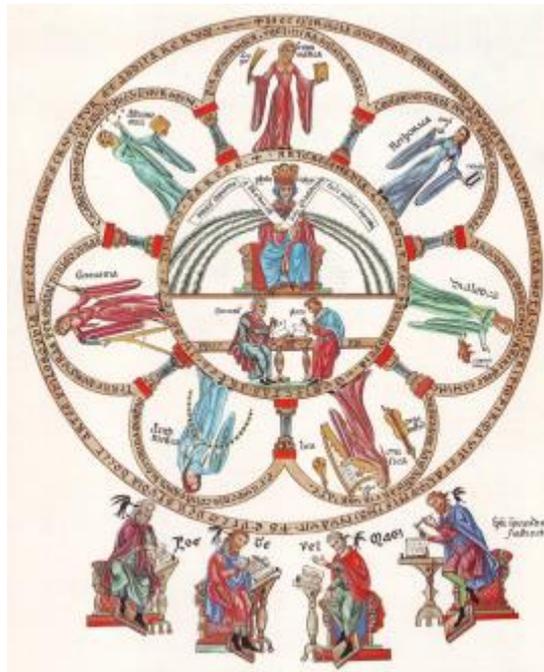


Figure 1: Hortus Deliciarum manuscript illumination. Public domain image. Author: Herrard von Landsberg. Photographer: Dnlor\_01.

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The UCL Politics: Ancient and Modern module is a first year subject structured around four core topics, delivered by four specialist lecturers. The lectures are coupled with weekly seminars, which are led by the same tutor each week. I ran the weekly seminars for the unit in the 2014-15 academic year. Given the team-taught nature of the course it was important to offer consistency and progression across the seminars, and to make clear links between the content being delivered by the visiting lecturers and the BASc degree. The focus on creating progression throughout the ten weeks, and on linking the subject matter to the BASc focus on breadth, depth, and the concept of a global society helped ensure that I structured the lessons to engage the students' higher order thinking skills. To link the content to the idea of a global society students had to synthesize the ideas presented to them in class, and reach original, critically-informed conclusions in their coursework. Although this may be the aim in all learning environments, the explicit Liberal Arts remit ensured that I kept this at the forefront of my mind.

To facilitate higher order thinking in the Politics: Ancient and Modern tutorials I crafted a ten-week plan in which each week progressively required further independence from the students. For example, in the first week I led the students through a comparative analysis task, followed

by a structured class discussion. The lesson spoke broadly to the role of political speeches in society whilst looking in depth at two specific examples, namely Cicero's *On the Agrarian Law* and David Cameron's first speech as Prime Minister, before linking to the Liberal Arts idea of a global society through the questions around which I structured the class discussion. In week four, I progressed the learning activity into a jigsaw-based system, which involved splitting the class into groups of three or four, and having them assemble the available evidence and reach their own conclusions about one specific element to do with the topic under discussion. The lectures that week focused on ancient imperialism, and in the seminar each group researched Athenian attitudes towards imperialism in a specific source, such as Thucydides 3.36-50. At the end of the lesson each group presented their conclusions and joined their research together in a figurative jigsaw of information. By week seven I required the students to contribute independently via a 'fishbowl' debate. A fishbowl exercise involves the entire class standing in a circle around three chairs. Two students occupy chairs, leaving one empty, and begin arguing for and against the topic for debate. When an observer feels inspired to contribute, they occupy the vacant chair, triggering one of the original students to stand. One chair must always remain vacant, and everyone must contribute. If the discussion falters the tutor can enter the debate, either to play devil's advocate or change the topic to spark fresh ideas. Choosing a topic that immediately inspires the students is crucial for a fishbowl activity, and the figure of Spartacus and the institution of slavery in antiquity and modernity proved ideal. By the final lesson, thanks to this integrated curriculum and the Liberal Arts ethos, the students had the confidence and capability to run the seminar themselves, with me present as a participant rather than a leader.

The pedagogical strategies that I employed in Politics: Ancient and Modern are not exclusive to a Liberal Arts programme. However, without this context I doubt that I would have explicitly structured my course to offer progressive opportunities for individual participation, which by the final week revolved around quite complex ideas from political philosophy, such as the concept of the noble lie. Holding the responsibility for tying the course to the Liberal Arts ethos forced me to conceptualise the relationship between the course content and wider society in a particular manner, and put the burden on me to ensure that the students displayed the ability to evaluate, analyse, and create independently before the conclusion of the course. Furthermore, although each activity was conceptualised as part of a specific learning system the pedagogical strategies have proven applicable to a range of other small-group teaching environments. The seminar structure demonstrates the methods through which classical reception topics can inspire active, student-driven learning in any degree programme.

My experiences teaching on core Liberal Arts modules at Bristol are vastly different to my involvement with the BAsC at UCL. I was the first appointment in Bristol's Liberal Arts programme, and joined at the commencement of the programme's second year.<sup>4</sup> Coming on board at such an early stage of the programme's development gave me the opportunity to develop new modules and experiment with innovative forms of assessment from day one. Since joining Bristol I have taught on two core Liberal Arts units, which currently run on a two-year cycle as combined first/second year modules. The first of these courses, Experiencing the

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<sup>4</sup> From September 2017 Bristol will have three designated Liberal Arts lecturers (Lecturer in Liberal Arts and Classics, Lecturer in Liberal Arts and English, and Lecturer in Liberal Arts and History), alongside the Programme Director. Several other members of the Faculty of Arts are seconded to the programme to teach on select modules.

Aesthetic, focuses on introducing students to the arts and the unique nature of aesthetic experience, while the second, Critical Writing in the Humanities, explores clarity, correctness, and cogency across a range of written genres and enhances students' ability both to write and to evaluate the quality of the critical writing they encounter throughout their studies. In such core, interdisciplinary modules lecturers are invited to shape the course content to their research areas. Such opportunities are rare for early-career academics who are more likely to spend their first years of teaching covering for colleagues on leave and teaching on pre-existing courses with specific disciplinary Intended Learning Outcomes. Liberal Arts programmes can consequently give junior staff a unique opportunity to engage in research-led teaching.

Experiencing the Aesthetic was co-taught by myself and a colleague from Art History. I gave four lectures on the subject of art and emotion, two of which I considered through the lens of tragedy and its reception. I again took the Liberal Arts concept of breadth and depth as my starting point, and in this instance used the idea of aesthetic experience in the theatre to consider specific case studies.

The first lecture, titled 'Emotion and the Mind, considered the question 'do characters in ancient tragedy experience emotion?'. The lecture drew together recent classical scholarship, cognitive neuroscience research, and theatre productions of ancient tragedies where the characters were performed in a psychologically realistic style. The second lecture, titled 'Emotion and the Body', explored the question 'how do we account for the bodily experience of watching tragedy?'. Specifically, we focused upon the idea of catharsis, and the benefits of different definitions—both academic and practitioner—alongside select methodological frameworks for writing about 'cathartic' tragic experiences, such as a phenomenological framework. The first lecture was based upon research conducted for an article that came out in 2015,<sup>5</sup> while the second incorporated current research into Jan Fabre's 24-hour production *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy*, a production which will form the basis of a central chapter in a forthcoming monograph. Consequently, the course provided me with the opportunity to engage in both research-led teaching and teaching-led research, and helped me forge interdisciplinary connections between my own projects, the sciences, and the wider professional theatre industry.

Critical Writing in the Humanities, which I co-taught with a colleague from Classics, explored different genres of critical writing through the themes Politics, Gender, Atheism, Corruption, and Identity. Classical reception topics infused the course; for example, we explored Ciceronian rhetoric in Michelle Obama's 2016 Democratic National Convention speech, and oratory in the age of the sound bite via Donald Trump's Twitter timeline. More commonly, however, we compared and contrasted examples of critical writing in classical texts with modern texts. Examples include pairing Pericles' funeral oration with the Gettysburg address, and excerpts from the Hippocratic corpus with journalism on intersex athletes. Whilst less research-orientated than my teaching in Experiencing the Aesthetic, the course nevertheless gave me the opportunity to contemplate how I conceptualise my discipline in the classroom, helped me to develop mechanisms for adjusting the gender ratio of primary texts within reading lists through contemporary comparisons, and provided me with the chance to experiment with new forms of assessment, which here included a peer-review task. The interdisciplinary course

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<sup>5</sup> See Cole. E. (2015) 'The Method behind the madness: Katie Mitchell, Stanislavski, and the classics', *Classical Receptions Journal* 7: 3: 400-421.

focus will consequently have a direct feed-on effect into my teaching within Classics and Ancient History.

All teaching within Classics is, to an extent, interdisciplinary, often combining literary, cultural, theatre, and political studies, art history, and philosophy, just to name a few. As such, Classics will always be at home in a Liberal Arts curriculum. However, this should not invite classicists to be passive when invited to contribute to these growing programmes. As I have detailed in this paper, the Liberal Arts remit offers classicists an exciting opportunity to rethink how we situate our discipline in the modern university, the balance of breadth, depth, and links to wider society and culture that we build into our modules, and the means through which we engage our students in active learning to stimulate higher order thinking. Crucially, the programmes provide key opportunities to develop classical reception pedagogy outside of Classics. These, I have suggested, are particularly beneficial to early-career academics who may have fewer opportunities to develop their own modules or engage in research-led teaching, as they provide formative training vital to long-term career development and offer opportunities to develop research even while coping with heavy teaching loads. Liberal Arts degrees are only showing signs of increasing popularity, and classicists should seize the opportunity to contribute to these programmes and further develop their own disciplinary and interdisciplinary teaching practice.

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