

REACHING OUT VIA PLINY

Classical Civilisation lessons for London school students at the University of Roehampton

by **Matthew Mordue**

I am a PhD student in Classics at the University of Roehampton. In addition to my research, I teach Classical Civilisation outreach lessons to visiting school children via the university's Schools and Colleges Engagement Team. This 'Taster Lecturer' programme is designed to give a glimpse of university life to a range of children in London and offers a variety of subjects: from dance, law to the humanities. I have been on this programme for over a year now and have taught fifteen lessons in total. Each session is run by one tutor and lasts for forty-five minutes, with tours typically being hosted on campus every few months. The subjects are adapted for each session, as the classes are varied: the students' ages range from fourteen to eighteen and there can be anywhere from ten to thirty students. However, all the students I have taught have never heard of Classics before, which is something I can relate to, as I knew absolutely nothing about the classical world when I first took Classical Civilisation as a wildcard subject for A Level (which was only offered once in the history of my state comprehensive school). As someone who is passionate about Classics and diversity, I would love it if some of the students go on to take Classical Civilisation at undergraduate level. However, I also believe that the experience of studying the classical world has encouraged children to think differently about cultural issues, related subjects such as English and History, and the films, games and books they will continue to consume.

All of my lessons are dedicated to Pliny the Younger's *Letters*, which is the topic of my PhD research. When I tell my friends that I try to promote Classics through Pliny, they usually joke that he would be far too boring to engage students. However, while Pliny can sometimes be maligned by classicists as unbearably smug and pompous, I find that he is usually popular when I teach my lessons. I pick an immediately gripping topic, slavery in the Roman world, and introduce extracts directly from the *Letters* to show what a high-class Roman man thought of his own slaves. This isn't without its challenges: sometimes the students struggle with the difficulty of the English translations in some of the extracts for example, but I find that teaching directly from ancient sources has great benefits, as it really brings the world of Rome to life. The feedback for my lessons is overwhelmingly positive and the students tell me that they particularly like close readings of ancient texts because it's unlike anything else they've ever studied before.

Pliny the Younger

Pliny was a Roman lawyer and politician.

However, we know about his life because of his *Letters*.

These *Letters* were intended for publication by Pliny himself and were designed to present a certain image of himself to his community.



Figure 1: An early slide of the presentation, where I explain who Pliny was and the context of his *Letters*.

What is most remarkable about my lessons, though, is the ability of the students who attend. It would be easy to strip the *Letters* down just to its historical insight, but Pliny's literary techniques and self-fashioning is consistently brought up in the classes. I tell the students that Pliny edited and published the correspondence himself, and they ask me great questions, such as: "is Pliny speaking positively about his slaves to make himself look good?", "isn't he just trying to promote himself among his elite friends?", "I don't believe a word of it" and my personal favourite, "Pliny just seems very shady to me". The students show a great grasp of Pliny's self-fashioning in their first hour of encountering him. This topic has been extensively examined in works such as Stanley Hoffer's *The Anxieties of Pliny the Younger* (Scholars' Press 1999) and John Henderson's *Pliny's Statue: The Letters, Self-Portraiture and Classical Art* (University of Exeter Press 2002). Of course, not everyone dislikes Pliny: the students are typically split 50/50 on his sincerity. Consequently, the pupils usually begin to debate amongst themselves about how we should interpret his persona.

The students also show a stunning perception of the collection's structure (specifically, the links between individual letters). I give two extracts far apart in the *Letters*; one is Larcus Macedo's death by his own slaves in Book 3 and another is Pliny's lamentation of his own slaves' deaths in Book 8, and ask why Pliny's attitude to slaves differs between the extracts. Initially, I was expecting the students to talk about Pliny's presentation of himself as an ideal slave master, and while that is usually brought up, they also often claim that his opinion about slavery may have changed in the passage of time between Books 3 and 8. Some even go as far as to claim that Pliny might have been influenced by other members of the elite while composing Book 8. While these statements are very speculative, they do show the beginnings of an engagement with high-level literary analysis of the *Letters*. The structure of the *Letters* has been addressed in Roy Gibson and Ruth Morello's *Reading the Letters of Pliny the Younger* (Cambridge University Press 2012).

Roman Slavery

Slaves were considered property in Rome and were at the mercy of their master's actions. They had no legal rights.

Slaves could buy their freedom or be freed by their masters (typically if their masters gave them freedom in their will).

Unlike Ancient Greece, freed slaves (freedmen) could become Roman citizens. However, they could not hold political office.



Figure 2: In this slide, I cover the history of Roman slavery and its characteristics.

Of course, the lesson isn't all about Pliny! The students also demonstrate great interest in the historical context underpinning the *Letters* and ask about the rights, status and role of slaves generally in the Roman world. American slavery is inevitably brought up as a reference point because it is relatively recent and its consequences can still be strongly felt throughout the US, but we eventually move onto details more specific to Rome, such as freedmen and citizenship. Each class typically shoots off into different directions on this topic and I've been asked about questions ranging from ones concerning Spartacus and slave revolts, whether any Roman writers condemn slavery as an institution, how people became slaves in Rome and how Roman slavery differed from that of contemporary civilisations. I love that the pupils inquire about so many different topics, as it really shows how Classics can spark the imagination in different ways for each student.

To conclude this brief overview, I believe the outreach lessons have been a benefit to all students, including those who don't go on to continue in the study of Classics. By examining ancient sources and looking at evidence in a fresh way, I believe the students have grown more confident in approaching texts and entertainment with a critical lens. Additionally, in their engagement with the classical past, the students showcased a desire to learn more about the cultural differences between different societies.

Moreover, I think that such outreach teaching is not only beneficial for school children, but also for myself as a PhD student, as the points which the pupils have raised has directly benefited my research. As an example, a student told me that "Pliny seems to change his attitude to slavery so to look good for certain readers". This is obviously speculative, but the link between Pliny's ambiguity to villainous slave masters and his readers' expectation is something which I will now examine in my thesis. Additionally, my experience in structuring outreach lessons around group work and interactivity has

been a great benefit in my approach to undergraduate teaching. I would thus encourage other PhD students to engage in outreach teaching and would also be delighted to see all classicists offer their skills in such classes.

For those interested in outreach work, there are various resources online which are useful in getting started. A few years ago, my supervisor Kathryn Tempest coordinated a piece for the *Bulletin* titled '[So You're an Outreach Officer – What Next](#)', which gave an overview of various programmes and case studies for new outreach officers. [Classics for All](#) and the [ACE Project](#) are examples of initiatives which are dedicated to introducing classical subjects into schools.

Matthew Mordue
University of Roehampton
morduem@roehampton.ac.uk