

Teaching Greek tragedy: a critical analysis based on the views of some year 12 students on the impact of different teaching approaches on examination proficiency, subject understanding and engagement.

Introduction

Within this assignment I will be considering the impact, as perceived by a group of year 12 students, of different approaches to teaching Greek tragedy in translation in relation to three key outcomes: examination proficiency, subject understanding and subject engagement. I will be looking specifically at the relative effectiveness of what might be described as 'passive' and 'active' approaches to teaching and learning.

As part of my second PGCE professional placement, I was set the task of teaching Greek tragedy in translation to a Classical Civilisation class of year 12 students. Of course I was at the same time assuming the responsibility of trying to equip them for success at the summer examination. As I planned and delivered lessons to this class, I became increasingly of the view that there exists a potential tension between examination-centred approaches and the development of the students' own capacities to appreciate and evaluate literature. This case study explores that potential conflict and in particular gives voice to students' own reflections on the balance between learning (and being taught) for an examination (and therefore a qualification) and learning (and being taught) for personal growth and satisfaction.

Though my focus is inevitably fairly narrow and specific, this study cannot help but give some, albeit limited, consideration to such lofty questions as 'Why study literature?'; 'What do exams examine?' and 'Who or what is education for?' It is clearly beyond the scope of this study to (even attempt to) answer these questions but some consideration of the values and principles that underpin teacher and student choices and attitudes cannot and should not be avoided.

After presenting details that give the context of this case study, I will go on to examine the tension between what Gibson (1998: xi) would typify as 'passive' and 'active' approaches to literature teaching (and learning) by exploring the values that appear to lend support to each approach. A review of the relevant literature will follow this. Next I will give consideration to the research methodology applied, including acknowledgement of its many limitations. I will then outline the range of teaching approaches which I employed and give attention to the students' own reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches. Informed by these reflections I will conclude that a balanced diet of 'active' and less active approaches are a feasible compromise in an environment where doing well at an examination and growing as a confident and creative thinker are both of significant value.

### The school

The school in which this case study was carried out is an independent school for girls in the Midlands, which 'provides excellent facilities for approximately 550 girls of good academic ability' (School website accessed 06.04.2011). The school draws its pupils from more than 100 schools across a wide area of the Midlands and is highly selective. In 2010 the school's A level results were that, excluding general

studies, 28.41% of grades were awarded A\*, 77.65% of results were at A or A\* level and 92.8% were A\*, A or B. An inspection by the Independent Schools Inspectorate in 2010 reported that:

“The quality of pupils’ achievement throughout the school is excellent. Their attitudes to study and the standards of their learning and skills are outstanding. In all subjects, the pupils are keen on their work, they are excited by their learning and they seek eagerly after understanding and success.”

(ISI report 2010)

The Classics department consists of four teachers, including the Head of Department. Latin is compulsory from year 8 to GCSE. Greek is also available at GCSE and A Level. Classical Civilisation is offered as a subject at 6<sup>th</sup> Form for AS and A Level.

### The course

As part of the Classical Civilisation AS level, ‘Greek Tragedy in its context’ is studied. The OCR specification states that ‘ the principal focus of this unit is on literature, society and values. The unit is also concerned with history, philosophy and religion’ (OCR, 2008: 21). Literary, social and cultural contexts are all within the scope of the unit and relevant literary topics include:

- use of the chorus;
- attitudes towards the portrayal of violence and death;
- characterisation, including the role of minor characters;
- language;
- dramatic irony;
- the nature of tragedy, including concepts such as hamartia, peripeteia and katharsis;

(OCR, 2008: 22)

The set texts for the 2011 examination and therefore for the class which I was teaching were Aeschylus' Agamemnon, Sophocles' Oedipus the King and Euripides' Medea and Bacchae. The two texts which I taught over the term concerned were Oedipus and The Bacchae, though all four plays were considered during the final revision phase.

Later in this study, when considering values, I will look in some detail at what the examiners appear to want and expect from students but how this does not appear to be fully consistent with how students tend to prepare for examinations or with how papers tend to be marked.

## The class

“Professionals do not seek a universal recipe, a sequenced series of steps to be followed slavishly and exactly. The professional teacher’s skill lies in the subtle and thoughtful adaptation of content and method to suit the actual circumstances and the unique nature of his or her own students.”

(Gibson, 1998: xi)

Whilst the class which I was teaching does have some unique characteristics including the ‘unique nature’ of the individual students that make up that class, some general points can be made. Firstly it was a small class (of six students), secondly all were female and thirdly all were sufficiently academically able to be in the Sixth form of an academically successful and selective school. All had chosen to take the subject as AS level, though it was clear that motivation towards and engagement with the subject were in fact mixed.

The class members are as follows: student A is a very able student who appears strongly motivated by her love of theatre. She has acted in plays by Shakespeare and Euripides. She is interested in theatre direction, is confident, socially skilled and knowledgeable. Student B sits beside her. She is similarly able and motivated. She is confident as a debater and happy to argue from a minority, even solitary position. Students C and D sit together and are less able orally and in written work. Also they appear slightly less motivated than students A and B. They are, however, relaxed, engaged and generally happy to voice opinions and volunteer for tasks. Student E who sits at the back appeared initially to hold back during my

classes and sometimes seemed frustrated, preoccupied and bored. However after a month or so she became one of my most actively engaged students and whilst her oral and written contributions were sometimes unorthodox or off-topic, she showed enthusiasm, moments of originality and insight. She appeared most reflective in the class when asked questions and would sometimes articulate two sides to an argument as she tried to work out her own position. Student F sits beside her and is the quietest in the class. Initially she would appear to sulk if asked to contribute and would only do so with clear reluctance and generally monosyllabically. Yet her written work often showed good understanding and engagement. Over time in class she did appear more engaged but never to anything like the level of her fellow students.

In spite of, at least initially, these three tiers of ability and motivation, all students were expected and expecting to perform well at examination in the summer. Indeed all had 'predicted' A grades for the examination. In the 'mock' examination, taken two months prior to the actual examination, all except for Student D achieved A grades. Student D achieved a high B and it was felt that, once she applied herself fully to the revision process, she would fill any 'gaps'. I marked these 'mock' papers in part and clearly even those students who appeared less actively engaged in class were able to compose well argued essays and show good understanding of the material involved.

### Other relevant experiences

There are a number of relevant classroom experiences that feed into this study. I have to confess that I cannot draw on any personal experience as a student as I was never taught Classical Civilisation. However, prior to PGCE training I did

spend some days observing a very experienced pair of teachers teaching Classical Civilisation at a Sixth Form college in Cambridgeshire. As this was in May the focus was largely on examination preparation and the drawing together of themes was central to each lesson. One such lesson had students working in groups to order themes written on coloured paper and hung up on a clothes' line and then debating within the class as to the importance of each theme relative to one another. Another exercise encouraged comparison between a video rendition and the students' own perceptions of characterisation. A third lesson involved a lively debate on the (im)morality behind Jason and Medea's decisions. As I was unable to observe lessons during the earlier weeks of the academic year when the texts were first encountered and taught, I cannot say whether these dynamic and imaginative approaches were the norm throughout the process of teaching the literature.

Within my first PGCE professional placement I had taught literature to a Year 10 class, reading the Odyssey, a year 12 class, approaching the Greek tragedy unit, and a year 13 class studying the Iliad and the Aeneid. In all three cases I attempted to teach lessons that involved some active methods, including paired investigations and presentations, continuum/ ranking character exercises and debates. I was particularly pleased that a year 13 class that collectively tended to be very passive was eventually turned into a fairly lively group of students willing to express individual opinions that did not merely echo those of the teacher or of the 'brightest' amongst them.

I had therefore had some direct and indirect experience of active teaching of literature and was hopeful of trying out these approaches within my second school placement.

## Values

In this section I will explore a number of values that appear to underpin the various approaches employed in the teaching of the literature element of Classical Civilisation courses. Also I will give brief attention to the fundamental question: 'What is the value of education?' In particular I will consider two versions of education within which the learner is typified as either a passive but quantifiable receptacle or an active but ill-defined discoverer.

Firstly in response to the question "Why study literature?" it seems clear that the study of Classical literature in translation is about broadening horizons and developing perspectives that link with but go beyond the life experiences of the student. It is more than a merely academic or cerebral undertaking. As Sherwood Smith put it, Classical literature 'must be felt, not merely encountered' (1977: 52).

He went on to say:

"The concept of 'teaching literature' is a paradox'. It is self-evident that literature is not composed to be 'taught'. It is composed on the assumption that there will be readers – or listeners – who will be induced to begin reading by the expectations of intrinsic pleasure or intrinsic profit or most likely both, and will continue to read because their expectation is being satisfied."

(Sharwood Smith, 1977: 55)

Also, given that Greek tragedies are themselves individual portrayals of archetypal stories and archetypal characters, it is hugely important for students to develop individual and personal versions of these characters and stories that will help them better appreciate the choices made by the individual dramatist whose works they are examining.

In these circumstances the best that a 'teacher' can do is to guide or facilitate as otherwise the student's personal journey to discover meaning within literature is usurped by the largely redundant experience of being a passenger on someone else's journey.

An additional value of Classical literature is in my view akin to that of Shakespearean drama as described by Gibson in his book, 'Teaching Shakespeare'. Its 'appeal lies in a unique blend of the familiar and the strange, his relevance and his remoteness. All education is about 'opening doors', extending opportunities and experience. It is concerned that individuals should not be imprisoned in a single point of view, confined solely to local knowledge and beliefs. Education shows that 'there is a world elsewhere beyond the familiar and everyday' (1998: 6).

As well as exploring 'beyond the familiar' the study of Classical literature is about evaluating ideas and structures. Indeed if one considers the scale-ratings of Bloom's taxonomy, evaluation is a high level cognitive process and this in itself lends significant value to the study of the subject (Bloom, 1956).

This sophisticated process of evaluation appears to be nourished by the development of personal responses that can themselves be encouraged even at

primary school level: Lister's 'War with Troy' project successfully promoted active learning of Classical literature in the primary school classroom. 'Comments from the pupils show that they very much valued and enjoyed the experience of listening to and discovering the story together' (Lister 2007: 68). Motivation, appreciation, confidence, and general literacy all appeared to benefit from this approach to teaching Classical literature (Lister 2007: 76). Crucially the ability to argue and support points made by textual evidence is developed where pupils 'make a personal response based on their reading of the situation and can explain, and if necessary justify, their response to others' (Lister 2007: 83).

Is the above list of rich valuable outcomes of studying literature compatible with the processes and aims of examination which often dictate the very choice of what books are read and by what deadline? Indeed are these valuable outcomes not undermined by these very prescriptions? For example anyone in my class who chose to read Sophocles' *Antigone* or the whole of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* would be doing something of minimal value in terms of passing an exam that limits itself to *Oedipus* and *Agamemnon* as two of four prescribed texts. As Creek put it, 'a pupil whose aim in reading a book is to pass an examination is less likely to make a personal response that is necessary if the book is meaningful to him than one reading for pleasure (1966: 57).

Is it not therefore unacceptable to 'open doors' to the world of Greek tragedy only to close them again by a single narrow exam-centred view of what Greek tragedy is about? Examinations are, however, a powerful reality in British schools and they dominate both what is taught and how it is taught. I will now consider the extent to which the OCR examination, which prescribed the Classical literature course which I taught, encourages active or passive approaches to learning.

Barry in his book, 'Beginning Theory', quotes from the speech by Edward Freeman that was instrumental in defeating the attempt in 1887 to establish a Chair in English at Oxford University:

"We are told that the study of literature 'cultivates the taste, educates the sympathies and enlarges the mind'. These are all excellent things, only we cannot examine tastes and sympathies. Examiners must have technical and positive information to examine."

(Quoted in Barry, 1995: 14)

Within the examination specification the examination board (OCR) does offer 50% marks for 'AO2 Analysis, Evaluation and Presentation'. However, rewarding the ability to 'analyse, evaluate and respond to classical sources' and the ability to 'select, organise and present relevant information and argument in a clear, logical, accurate and appropriate form' (OCR, 2008: 61) can be an artificial affair. This is because both abilities can clearly be replicated effectively by the skilful regurgitation of teacher-prepared notes.

To be fair OCR does appear to wish an active approach to teaching the material. Mind-mapping, hot-seating and watching videos are all encouraged within the unit support material. For example, the following is a suggested classroom task when teaching the Medea:-

"Explore the relationship of each choral ode to the surrounding scenes. (It may be helpful to provide students with a summary of each ode.) This could be done as a whole class or by

assigning each ode to a different group...Some students might like to present their ideas on a poster, for example in mind-map format; using Microsoft publisher; or using the Interactive whiteboard – they could move themes etc around as they make their presentation.”

(Support material for Unit CC4 (Entry Code F384): Greek Tragedy in its context, p 6)

However, with four texts to be studied in what amounts to two terms, little time is available for the luxury of such active approaches. My own experience was that 150 lines of text ‘needed’ to be explored over every 35 minute lesson. With background material to be learnt, critical articles to be read, practice papers to be written, students would be left with only a handful of lessons for imaginative revision exercises, if they were lucky.

At a recent examination markers’ workshop which I attended, an experienced examiner talked of how students who also studied mathematics were best able to produce a perfect essay by applying the formula of relevant point supported by relevant evidence (multiplied by whatever the mark is divided by two). Indeed as there is arguably no right or wrong answer in a unit largely concerned with literature, the methodical application of this formula would yield the high marks rather than any more sophisticated or inventive approach. To break away from the formula would be the sign of a poor(ly coached) student. Ironically it might even indicate the kind of raw independent thinking that the examination board would in principle hope for but would in reality struggle to reward.

In contrast Sharwood Smith (1977: 72) described how in Danish Sixth Form Colleges texts were read more widely, as literature was assessed through coursework and oral examination. These methods of assessment appeared to free students to study the subject in depth and stray productively from the narrow path that takes them to a written examination.

In this country, however, there appears to be a clear tension between a pragmatic end-oriented education and what is sometimes called a 'well-rounded' education. Indeed, though beyond the scope of this study, there are fundamental questions raised about the very values and principles that underpin education in Britain. In particular there appears a contradiction between getting the approach right as steps towards a two hour exam on a specific day in the future and getting the approach right as part of an active and dynamic journey into broader lifelong learning. The former approach appears measurable, specific and short-term while the latter sounds somewhat general, even vague yet invaluable for the next phases of life (university and/or employment) when adaptability, responsiveness, creativity, self-confidence, initiative etc will be so much more applicable than the precise recollection of data that proved so useful on that historic examination day.

Ahmad and Aziz take the view that 'students' input on the teaching-learning process is paramount as it is their education that is at stake'(2009:17). This view would support an 'active' approach, one that is:-

"learner-centred' –'It acknowledges that every student seeks to create his or her own meaning, rather than passively soak up information...helping students to ask their own questions, to

create and justify their own meanings, rather than having to accept only the questions and interpretations of others.”

(Gibson, 1998: 9)

Both these views appear to see education as the realisation of the individual's own capacity to discover meaning for him or herself. However, one can challenge the very notion that education belongs to students (implied by the words 'their education' in the Ahmad and Aziz quote) by arguing the more traditional position that education is something that is done to or given to students. This position would typify students as passive receptacles of educational doses which can be conveniently reproduced, standardised and examined. Therefore some students can be defined as having been better educated than others simply by the 'confirmation' that examination measurement brings. Additionally employers can choose the appropriately educated candidate by reference to the appropriate examination measurement. The tension between the individualised/ developmental concept of education and the conveniently measurable version that gets individuals university places and jobs is clear.

Of course, if it can be shown that a 'learner-centred' approach produces better educated and better qualified students, then any conflict between the value positions would disappear. The literature review that comprises the next section will consider the evidence as to the link between 'learner-centred' methods and improvement in educational attainment.

## Literature review

I propose now to consider what evidence there is to support the view that 'active methods' produce positive educational outcomes. Firstly activity, rather than passivity, appears to be a significant aspect of how learners actually learn. Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' theory takes the view that learning is developed through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (1978). Constructivist theories of learning hold that new learning is built on prior knowledge or *schemata* and is directly related to motivation. Both theories portray the learner as active responders, not passive recipients.

Kim (2005) found that using constructivist teaching methods with students resulted in better engagement and better academic achievement than traditional teaching methods. However, he did not find any significant difference in student learning strategies between those taught by constructivist or traditional methods. Dođru and Kalender (2007) compared traditional teacher-centred approaches to those using student-centred, constructivist methods within science teaching. Testing student performance immediately following the lessons, they found no significant difference between traditional and constructivist methods. However, in tests taken two weeks later, students who had learned through constructivist methods showed significantly improved retention of knowledge.

The positive impact that student motivation has on learning appears significant: 'positive attitudes play an important role in prompting intrinsically motivated, mastery-orientated learning' (Hohenstein, 2007:169). The advice to the teacher is simple: 'the solid fuel to launch your lesson is motivation (Carlin, 1966: 295). However, to nourish motivation, confidence, self-esteem, interest and

enjoyment all need to be fostered. A collaborative dynamic atmosphere in the classroom where the risk of being wrong can be safely taken is essential to encouraging positive attitudes towards learning.

Pajares (2001) makes a distinction between 'performance-goal oriented' students who seek competence recognition and/or incompetence avoidance and 'task-goal oriented' students who seek mastery of material and challenge with learning as an end in itself. The latter tend to be more persistent, more optimistic, more independent and generally more efficient as learners. Motivation and self-efficacy are seen as key aspects of this efficient learning but 'significant others play a powerful role in the academic beliefs that students come to develop about themselves' (Pajares,2001: 29). The teacher can be instrumental in promoting or undermining the self-belief and positive engagement that lies behind efficient 'task-goal oriented' learning. Pajares holds the holistic view of education that schools and teachers should encourage optimistic and confident students and look well beyond academic performance as indication of successful teaching:

“The aim of education must be to transcend the development of academic competence. Schools have the added responsibility of preparing fully functioning and caring individuals capable of pursuing their hopes and aspirations. To do so, they must be armed with optimism, self-regard and regard for others, and they must be shielded from doubts about the authenticity of their accomplishments.”

(Pajares, 2001: 34)

The teaching of literature through active methods can be a powerful way of encouraging the development of the 'whole' person. By promoting skills in reasoning, prediction and analysis students experience imaginative and emotional growth' (Gibson, 1998: 5). He goes on to say, using 'the language of developmental psychology, Shakespeare can increase students' competence and confidence across the widest range of developmental possibilities. To express it less prosaically, Shakespeare develops the understanding heart.' (Gibson, 1998: 5). Replace Shakespeare with Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides and the deeply rewarding potential of teaching and studying Classical literature is revealed.

However, the reality of league tables, of departments under threat, indeed, in the case of Classics, of the subject's very struggle for survival means that such potentials can seem to belong in Cloud Cuckoo Land and not the classroom. "Accountability pushes teachers into 'teaching to the test' rather than 'teaching for understanding', which, in turn, creates a performance environment rather than a learning environment" (Harrison, 2007:215). Performance can be solidly achieved by short-term cramming, copying and rote learning. Avoiding risk by maintaining control over the schedule and, of course, over the students is attractive to the individual teacher, particularly when the school, the parent and student all want that outstanding result in August.

Foucault argued that the examination, medical and educational, was a disciplinary force that subjugates by judging and defining the student (1977: 191). In many ways, however, it is an accepted form of slavery as the examination offers standardisation, a system of rules that are clear: A\* is better than A which is better

than B etc. Otherwise how is one to decide who is destined for Oxbridge and who the factory?

However, the dominance of examination considerations in school decision-making need not dictate a traditionalist, teacher-centred, passive approach to lessons. For, if it is accepted that more 'active' methods enhance academic ability, a view supported for example by the research of Pajares (2001) and Dođru and Kalender (2007), then even those focussing on examination success should employ 'active' teaching approaches. Indeed those looking beyond examinations towards a 'whole person' or 'well rounded' concept of education should for other reasons also turn to student-centred 'active' methods.

### Methodology

“Responses to fiction is one of those topics particularly suited to small-scale 'cottage industry' research.”

(Protherough, 1983: 199).

I have taken Protherough's advice and limited myself to 'small-scale' research, a limited case study within which I will focus on the students' perceptions of which teaching and learning approaches were (and are) most effective in their view. Apart from traditional didactic methods a number of more active approaches were used within a number of lessons. Their own individual evaluation of these, in

terms of how well they encouraged the retention of information, the development of personal responses, motivation towards the material and the growth of skills beyond textual 'knowledge', is very much worthy of consideration. Indeed Rosenblatt's 'transactional' theory of how texts are read stresses that it is the individual evaluation that is central to the process of reading and understanding literature: 'the coming together of a particular text and a particular reader creates the possibility of a unique process, a unique work.' (1969: 43). This view presents, however, the possibility that this very uniqueness will lead to no possibility of transferrable data or generalisation i.e. nothing can be learned that is of use. Of course, although one would expect a range of experiences, attitudes, tastes and therefore evaluations of the teaching and learning methods just as one would expect a range of personal responses to the literature, one can assume some commonalities between individual responses that allow for some generalisation. The fact that they have all chosen to study Classical civilisation, are all girls, all share the same class are just a few of the commonalities that counter a view that any data will be too individualised to be of use.

Nevertheless, there will clearly be limitations to any 'findings'. The sample size is small, and limited to a single class of girls in a highly academic and highly selective independent school. However, since the 'aim' is to listen to students, all voices are valid. Bassey argues that 'the popular idea that where there is a problem the job of the researcher is to find a solution is usually unrealistic' (1999: 67). In this case study even the problem is unclear. Is it the examination, the teaching, the learning, the subject, the time allowance or something else that is 'problematic'? Indeed is there a problem at all, if examinations are successfully passed?

At best this case study may suggest a number of avenues for further research, by raising further questions. For example, one interesting dimension is that

of gender difference with research suggesting that ‘high-achieving girls are especially susceptible to experiencing feelings of inauthenticity’, the self-belief that academic success is ill-deserved and fragile (Pajares, 2001: 29). Again this case study can only shine a very dim light on contentions of this sort. Bassey describes findings typical of case studies such as this as ‘fuzzy propositions’ (199: 72) and I would not argue with that description. In particular I will not be going so far as to suggest any cause-and-effect relationship behind any findings, merely offering possible ‘fuzzy propositions’ for further examination. After all my primary hope as a teacher is to learn from what my students tell me so as to improve my teaching of Classical literature in the future. This is in keeping with the underlying ingredients of ‘action research’: systematic reflection, the teacher as the primary researcher, collaboration with pupils and tentative applicability of findings to other settings (Ainscow,1991:13) . Though I am presenting a ‘case study’ I agree with Bassey that ‘action research’ is appropriately defined as ‘a subset of educational case study’ (Bassey, 1999: 41) and that they have many characteristics in common.

As far as the range of methods are concerned, I have followed Bassey’s advice to be ‘eclectic and ...to use whatever methods seem most appropriate and practical (1999:69)’. I created a fairly lengthy but open questionnaire (appendix 1) as I wanted a lot of detailed observation and evaluation from the students very quickly. I was very aware that I only had a two week window in which to interview them before they would be embarking on examination study leave. The questionnaire had to fill any gaps that the lack of interview time might leave. An important source of ‘data’ would also be my own observations within the classroom plus those of their usual teacher (Teacher A), whom I also interviewed. Additionally I would be considering the written work which the students submitted.

All the above methods are problematic. Written work such as assignments can involve plagiarism, collaboration or parental help. Interviews and questionnaires as part of any qualitative analysis always runs the risk of 'demand characteristics' where those questioned give answers that are socially acceptable or aimed at pleasing the questioner (Orne, 1962). Observation is subjective and observed classroom behaviours can be influenced by many invisible variables such as mood, energy levels, outside events and relationships. All these limitations only add to the 'fuzziness' of any findings.

The primary method which I employed in this case study, beyond classroom observations and assessment of written work, involved direct access to students views and reflections via a questionnaire (appendix 1) and a follow-up semi-structured interview (appendix 2). Within the questionnaire I asked the students to comment on the following:-

- Their engagement with the subject.
- Their view on the effectiveness of various 'active' and 'passive' teaching approaches.

The interview was held just before the students left for 'study leave' and my questions, though not formally scripted, invited the students to comment on the following areas:-

- Engagement and motivation.

- The impact of examination requirements on approaches to learning and engagement.
- Their preferences regarding 'active' and 'passive' approaches to teaching and learning.

Before considering the students' evaluation I will now briefly outline the range of teaching approaches which I used.

#### Teaching approaches: the traditional method made more 'active'

“What must at all costs be avoided is a style of teaching which makes it clear that the teacher knows precisely what the poem means and how it should be characterised, so that the discussion consists in the pupils guessing what the teacher wants them to say and being commended when they are 'getting warm', ignored or rebuffed when their guesses go wide of the mark”

(Sharwood Smith, 1977: 58)

The teacher-centred approach that seems to accompany the drive towards examination success is typified as a recipe of literature reading, 'whole-class discussion', notes taken by students but securely reinforced by those provided by the teacher, accompanied by perusal of relevant background material and thought-provoking literary articles by eminent critics. Essay writing and examination question practice round off this recipe.

For most lessons I followed this recipe but with a growing emphasis on paired tasks and student presentations. I was also determined that discussions in class should be at least partially led by the students themselves. To this end the informative notes which I prepared and distributed to the students at the end of each lesson acted as a safety net, allowing students and teacher some time to linger and explore more freely as the notes would cover any 'key points' missed by such adventuring.

I was pleased that students felt able to voice divergent opinions within discussions and challenge one another sensitively. Critical assessments of the chorus' role, characterisation and morality were common sources of some lively classroom debates. This willingness to speak critically was essential to break down a barrier which Seranis identified where Classical literature 'is too often approached as a hallowed piece of literature', leaving it static and inaccessible (2003:3). It was important therefore for me to contain any urge to challenge, criticise or correct the various student views expressed except to encourage evidential linkage with the text. I tried to 'cultivate an atmosphere that was cooperative rather than competitive, perceived to be non-threatening. Students were allowed to give their views and opinions, thereby, creating a receptive classroom atmosphere to produce maximum learning input' (Ahmad and Aziz, : 17).

Seranis found students to be 'cautious about projecting their own feelings and beliefs onto the characters. They were aware of the differences between the society for whom the text was written and the modern world in which they live' (2003,2). I did not find this, as the students appeared to have passionate beliefs about the characters and the morality of their choices. Gender may have been significant in this as views about the motivation of female characters such as Medea and about relationships seemed particularly strong.

Furthermore, given the individuality of initial responses to literature, whole class debates (and paired tasks) are recognised as key steps within the 'transactional theory' of reading literature as it tests and refines the individual initial response by opening itself up to criticism and comparison with other perspectives and views (Rosenblatt, 1969: 44-45).

'Questions asked after a passage is read typically lead to better understanding and retention of what is read' (Anderson & Biddle, 1975). Apart from questions deliberately designed to spark debate such as 'What do you think about the way the chorus is behaving?' I would use questions that would encourage recognition and therefore retention (e.g. What is the imagery used here?), evaluation (e.g. How well does the imagery work?) and linkage (e.g. How in keeping is this with Pentheus' attitudes and actions so far?). I would try to tailor questions to the students, asking the more complex questions of those who seemed able and motivated to address them, but avoiding patronising and simplistic questions for those less able and apparently less interested as this would not stretch them and would only reinforce the idea that the material lacks interest. When asking questions of the least engaged student (student F) I would give her plenty of time to answer and reframe the question rather than move on to someone else or provide the

answer myself. This strategy was praised by the observing Teacher A and , although Student F's sulking surged for a time, eventually her engagement and responses did improve.

My aim was to help develop and to respond positively to students 'who have been taught to stand up for themselves in argument and not be over-impressed by the teacher's authority' (SS p59). Students A and B were already endowed with the required iconoclastic confidence and over time the rest of the class showed a similar willingness to 'stand up for themselves in argument'.

To increase discussion time and ownership of what had been read, I would occasionally set reading as an assignment with a connected investigation e.g. How is the messenger speech made vivid? Where is there irony in this dialogue? How is pathos achieved in this scene? The students would generally arrive at the next lesson with well-prepared insights to share to their colleagues.

On a number of occasions I set paired tasks within lessons and asked the pairs to present their findings to the other students. Students were often at their best when presenting their findings (e.g. a presentation on hunting imagery by students E and F was particularly detailed and coherent) as they appeared to have a personal investment in successfully carrying out the task and impressing their fellow students. I would agree with Gibson that effective students 'become the agents of their own learning as they take responsibility for their own inquiries and investigations' (Gibson, 1998, xiii).

I would argue therefore that, by asking 'active' questions and including 'active' discussions and presentations, a variation of the traditional approach can be employed which is less teacher-centred but still structured and rigorous.

However, I would accept that this approach is still largely sedentary and can become a repetitious lesson formula. Again I would agree with Gibson that ‘an unrelieved diet of any one single activity or teaching method is self-defeating’ (Gibson, 1998, 23). On the other hand variety can both encourage inventiveness and combat the predictability and routine which can destroy motivation and engagement. After all Greek Tragedy belongs as much to drama as to literature and ‘the dramatic context demands classroom practices that are the antithesis of methods in which the students sit passively, without intellectual or emotional engagement,’ (Gibson, 1998: xiii)

#### Teaching approaches: ‘active’ methods

‘But the prime resource is the students themselves: their imaginations combine with other resources to lift Shakespeare off the page and into dramatic life.’

(Gibson, 1998: 23)

With just over one week left to go in the Spring term all four texts had been read and ‘explored’. The students were then themselves asked how they wished to proceed. They prepared a ‘wants list’ (appendix 3) which consisted of a number of ideas for presentations and exercises designed to assist revision. Unfortunately due to ‘Mock Exams’ and study leave only four lessons would remain for these student-centred approaches.

One very enjoyable lesson, selected and prepared by the students, consisted of hot-seating where students took on the role of one of the characters, making a

statement and then responding to questions in role. The fact that the students were enjoying themselves (e.g. by dressing the part and 'hamming it up' a little) did not detract from the process as 'the educational value of an entertaining experience should not be underestimated' (Hohenstein, 2007: 169). In fact many of the questions and answers were poignant and powerful:-

*(To Jason) 'What do you think of women?'*

(His reply) 'That depends on how well they serve me. But that Medea – she's a little mad and a little scary.'

*(To the Chorus) 'Why didn't you do something to save the children?'*

(The reply) 'Because I'm a Chorus and we don't get too involved and anyway I didn't think she'd really do it.'

Empathy, engagement, communication skills and enjoyment all seemed to be brought out by the process and one hopes retention and revision too.

A 'mind mapping' exercise on morality within the four plays stimulated ideas and fuelled a lively debate on justice including the issue of Medea 'getting away' with murder, the gods as unjust and the nature of *hubris*.

Another exercise that I brought to the class was an 'Irony parlour game'. The students form a circle. The first student starts a sentence with 'It appears that ....' and the next student counters this with a sentence starting with 'but in reality....' e.g. 'It appears that the chorus are applauding Agave for killing a lion cub' countered with 'but in reality they are celebrating the fact that she has ripped her son's head off' and

'It seems that Oedipus is the hunter' – 'In reality he is the hunted'. Insightful examples of irony were cited in the context of an informal quick-fire party game.

Another interesting exercise, again suggested by myself and not on the student 'wish list' was a hierarchical review of murder cases within the four tragedies and a comparison of motive and heinousness. Words were invented such as 'cousinocide' to cover Dionysus's involvement in Pentheus' death and 'strangercide' to define the killing of those that encountered Oedipus at the 'place where three roads meet' (until one was discovered to be actually patricide). This gruesome debate entailed not only useful revision of details but also consideration of morality and justification.

The student 'wish list' added suggested quote lists and character profiles to the exercises outlined above and provided a rich, varied and energetic recipe for the few lessons concerned. The final formal lesson, largely teacher led, involved practice paper feedback and some tips on how to approach essays.

### The views of the students

I began the student interviews by exploring subject engagement. In response to my question, 'Why read Greek tragedy?', Student A appreciated its role as part of the foundation of drama.

'I think it makes a nice comparison if you're looking at the history of drama. It's interesting to show how it went from Greek tragedy to Shakespeare to Ibsen to modern. Also people reference Greek tragedy all the time in English.'

Student B linked the subject with developing her appreciation of literature in general:-

‘After reading older texts and putting hours of work into them and then to go home and pick up a trashy novel is quite difficult. I think you get a different mindset.’

Student C was more interested in the historical context:-

‘I find it hard to explain but I really like Greek tragedy. There’s something about keeping the past alive and seeing the individuals behind the plays that I like.’

Student E had a more ambivalent view:-

‘I find the plays useful and interesting particularly the imagery but I think they are a bit predictable and the characters a bit 2-D. But, even then, you can spot the formulas in more modern literature, though less obviously. It helps you spot things like imagery or irony’.

The interviews moved on to consider the impact of the examination. The students shared the view that the subject had value beyond the examination but that the process of being examined did entail some loss to this sense of engagement.

Student C suggested a conflict between enjoying literature and the approach that examinations appear to require:-

‘Exams mean I organise myself but I do look at the texts differently which is why I didn’t choose English for A-level as I want to enjoy reading and not over analyse.’

Student B echoed this view:-

‘I think exams narrow what you learn and force you to jump through hoops rather than actually enjoying what you’re doing or widening your horizons...with exams you work to avoid failure rather than for the joy of what you’re studying.’

Central to the questionnaires and interviews was student evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the various teaching/learning approaches, both ‘passive’ and ‘active’. The two ‘approaches’ that were judged most effective were ‘feedback on assignments’ and ‘practice papers’. A typical view was that of student C:-

‘Crucial to help me improve!’

Judged third most effective was 'group discussion'. Student B summed up the general view:-

'Topics come up that you wouldn't have considered yourself.'

Of the 14 approaches being evaluated the two deemed least effective were the use of 'drama based activities' and 'paired tasks and presentations', arguably the most 'active' approaches employed. Students agreed that such exercises were fun and memorable but time consuming and 'not a priority' (Student A).

Student C preferred 'passive' teaching approaches:-

'I don't like discussions and prefer to be lectured at. I think that's what teachers do best and it gets a bit false when they break things up, ask questions and I'm trying to give an answer that they're looking for... I know I'm in the minority in the class and some girls love taking a particular view about a character or a theme. I'm not like that. I prefer to hold back and think it through.'

But she acknowledged that active methods brought some benefits:-

'I enjoyed hot-seating. It got a bit silly by the end but it was really interesting getting different perspectives on characters which add to your own.'

In contrast Student E's learning style was clearly suited to student centred approaches :-

'I get bothered when I'm asked questions by the teacher but I'm ok when talking in a class discussion. I think it's confidence. So for me the teacher should start a discussion off and then just chip in...I like active lessons where I can be involved but the teacher needs to start things off.'

Student B saw a balanced approach as a necessity, given the reality of exams:-

'I enjoy and tend to remember things that are less predictable-like when we do drama or move about a bit...it's really difficult to get a balance between enjoying the text to its full potential, as you would in a discussion, but you really need those handouts at the end of the lesson and you really need those pointers during the lesson or else you're going to miss the crucial elements that are going to hopefully get you a good result in the exam.'

Student A appeared to suggest that enjoyment was diametrically opposed to learning:-

‘For me the most effective is when we read the texts and then talk about the important bits – that sort of thing. I think the most enjoyable lessons are when we watch videos and do some drama games and that kind of thing... but I don’t think we learn that much from them.’

She added, however, that a gentle transition from ‘passive’ to ‘active’ was what was called for:-

‘I would say the teacher should be 65% active and the student should be the remainder...It can’t be ‘oh here’s the text. You analyse it!’ Because with a girl especially that will cause panic and she won’t know what to do – I think it’s about starting people off on the right track and then helping them when they need it.’

The issue of note taking became an interesting example of how difficult it is to balance the student as dependent on and independent of the teacher:-

‘Your notes are really good but I think it’s important to make your own notes. They’re more...friendly. I know there are some girls who can’t or won’t make good notes and for them it’s a

life-saver to have notes given them. Also your notes do add to mine – all the things I've missed....'

(Student C)

'I don't like writing notes and I don't think I'm learning so much writing notes as when we're actually discussing something. So I'm really glad that we're given notes. I find that I can remember discussions better anyway as I'm enjoying them and it stands out more.'

(Student E)

The compromise position, as suggested in discussion with student A, would be to provide sketched out notes that students build their notes around or to hold back teacher notes until near the end of the course as a safety net for revision purposes.

### Reflections on the findings

Many of the student responses in the previous section seem to reflect consciousness of the importance of examination success but also of what brings effective learning to them as individuals. Active discussion was generally favoured but with the teacher as guide to avoid going 'off-topic'. More active sessions were seen as fun but largely as unnecessary frills.

My aim in this assignment was to consider the impact as perceived by a group of year 12 students of different approaches in the teaching of Greek tragedy in translation in relation to three key outcomes: examination proficiency, subject understanding and subject engagement. From listening to the students it seems clear that it is preparation for examination that has dominated their approach to learning in the same way as it has dominated approaches to teaching. The students appeared used to and accepting of examination preparation as part of the learning itinerary and methods seemed to be judged largely on how effectively they equipped for examination. Indeed active methods were generally seen as time-consuming diversions from this drive towards examination proficiency.

Interestingly subject engagement seemed to come from appreciation of the literature itself rather than from how lessons were delivered. Also the majority of students wanted more than mere examination proficiency and appreciated lessons that went beyond this, allowing them to explore the plays critically and in depth. For these students the inherent richness of the subject, coupled with the 'necessity' of doing well at the examination, seemed to override the need or desire to be more 'active' in class.

The students' Classics teacher was not surprised when I shared these findings with her: 'students are much more conservative and more assessment based than they used to be...They've got this thing that the essay has to have a right answer and they have to guess what that right answer is... Also girls are much less willing to take risks than boys'. She shared my view that by having student-led discussions and reserving some sessions for 'active' methods at the end of the course less conservative inclinations could be gently fostered.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly the fact that this assignment is based on the perceptions of highly academic girls in a high achieving selective school skews its findings significantly. Indeed academic ability and gender appear to be critical variables within the areas that I have been considering.

However, one tentative conclusion can be made which is that, even amongst this group of students, active involvement in discussion is valued and a totally teacher-led approach would appear to have little merit, even if it were to promise examination success. A balanced, varied and responsive approach will at least avoid the pitfall of a bland, robotic diet of 'this is what you need to get into your heads to get a good grade'.

In my view, a clear finding from this case study is that the process of listening to students is very useful and will be something I continue with beyond the confines of the PGCE and this assignment. It both informs the specific recipe of approaches for a specific group of students and provides important 'consumer' feedback on one's own pedagogy.

In conclusion by focusing too much on examinations, teachers and students tend to avoid risk and seek the safety of traditional ground. One can easily forget that one of the main rewards of teaching is in challenging such conservatism and trying out the new and the creative:-

The art of teaching would be much easier and much less satisfying if there were only one possible pattern. Trying other ways is part of the fun of English teaching.

(Carlin, 1966: 297)

The teaching and study of Greek tragedy should be fun too.

*(Word count : 8496)*

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- 5) Any comments or observations you have about the process of 'gaining an understanding of Greek tragedy' including how you might approach teaching the topic effectively, if you were a teacher

## Appendix 2: Example of interview transcript (Student A)

*Why in your view should anyone read Greek Tragedy?*

I think it makes a nice comparison if you're looking at the history of drama. It's interesting to show how it went from Greek tragedy to Shakespeare to Ibsen to modern. Also people reference Greek tragedy all the time in English – that's why I've found it quite useful – for example the idea that women go crazy if they haven't got men to protect them. I used some material in my coursework on Ophelia and made some interesting links.

*How do you see the relationship between exams and education?*

The Greek tragedy exam – a lot of it seems quite basic compared to what we're doing in class. I think we go into it in a lot more depth – a lot more context and stuff than we do in the exam. I find the exam a bit weird because the first question is usually about recapping the story which you wouldn't get marks for even in an English GCSE but you can get marks for in an AS tragedy paper - I find that a bit strange. Also you tend to know what you are going to be asked and I think the Greek tragedy paper could be more stretching. I think we get stretched in class but not really with the exam paper.

... The only problem for me is remembering all the quotes....but even then I think it's not absolutely necessary to get quotes in ... I just like to know a few and get a couple in if I can ...

*What motivates you to learn?*

I like learning. I like finding things out. I like the feeling you get when you understand something. That's a big motivation – but obviously I want to get good grades – I can't lie. I think though that mainly it's wanting to be clever, wanting to understand.

*(Discussion about confidence and self esteem....)*

*What do you think about the stereotypical view that girls doubt themselves when they are doing well and boys don't doubt themselves even when they're doing badly?*

I think that's massively true.... I do drama in mixed classes and the boys tend not to learn their lines and not do stuff...I think the expectation on boys is that they won't do things and the expectation on girls is that they will do things.....I think we get told off for making small mistakes when the boys get away even with not learning their lines. There is an expectation of girls that they will be better and so they have a harder time living up to those expectations.

*What kind of lesson is most effective and what kind of lesson is most enjoyable?*

For me the most effective is when we read the texts and then talk about the important bits – that sort of thing. I think the most enjoyable lessons are when we watch videos and do some drama games and that kind of thing but we don't really learn that much - so they're nice to have at the end of term but I don't think we learn that much from them.

I think when we have those more 'debatey' lessons like Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, who is more in the right? – those lessons are good and kind of fun – but I still think you can't do those lessons until you've done the 'text-make-notes' kind of lesson.

*But you could read the texts yourself. What's the value of reading them in the lessons?*

Most of us had read the texts over the holidays before but I wouldn't have been able to remember the actual scenes like Tiresias and Oedipus too well. It's the same with English though it's a bit different with novels – there too long – but plays are short enough to read them in class. I think you do need to refresh your memory if you're going to discuss a chunk.

*How active should the student be and how active the teacher in a good lesson?*

I would say the teacher should be 65% and the student should be the remainder because I think that, as much as it is important that we pick things out for ourselves and stuff, I do think that, especially at the beginning of the text, we really need the teacher as we're not sure what to look out for. Like with the Agamemnon net imagery, once it had been pointed out a few times, we started spotting it – 'oh look there's net imagery here!' – so I think that's how it has to be. It can't be 'oh here's the text. You analyse it!' Because with a girl especially that will cause panic and she won't know what to do – I think it's about starting people off on the right track and then helping them when they need it.

*You've noticed that I dish out notes but reading your questionnaire response you firmly believe the student should be responsible for notes. Some students may produce poor notes. I'm letting them off the hook but hopefully providing a safety net of notes that will help them for the exams. How do you see the balance between the students taking responsibility for creating their own personal notes and the teacher guaranteeing they have what they need to revise from?*

I definitely don't think we should be given full sets of notes because I find that the way for me to learn is to make notes. I found that during the Bacchae I started not making notes because I thought 'well, I'm going to get a handout at the end' which isn't helpful – well they are helpful but not as helpful as me making notes. With a handout I've no motivation to make my own notes which is bad...in a way you could give them out at the end of the text ...because people are as likely to lose the handouts as to not make their own notes and the thing is you should have responsibility for your own notes. Also if we've discussed stuff that isn't in the handout it may be lost if we've not made notes but we won't know till after the class that it's not in the handout. If you want to give a handout with the basics or some prompts that means that we can make notes on it – you're still making notes but there's a structure that you can make notes around. So people are being guided to make the right sort of notes

*Back to the idea of the teacher pointing in the right direction and the student doing the rest – an interesting idea.*

It might work it might not – I don't know.

*Certainly worth thinking about and I will bear what you've said in mind when I next teach Greek tragedy. I'm learning from you which is the way it should be. Any other advice for a classical civilisation teacher?*

I know it's not something which you have done but, when asked to read articles which I know are really useful and good, I only read those that have a question attached and done by a deadline as I they always end up low on my priority list otherwise.

*A good point –there has to be a follow up like processing a question to provide an incentive. Well thank you very much for your useful thoughts....*

### Appendix 3: Students' 'wants list'

- 1) Plot revision games (March 30)
  - Agamemnon (Students E and F)
  - Medea (Student B)
  - Oedipus (Student A)
  - Bacchae (Students C and D)
  
- 2) Hot-seating (March 31)
  - Medea (Student B)
  - Chorus (Student C)
  - Creon (Student E)
  - Jason (Student D)
  - Glauce (Student B)
  - Aegeus (Student F)
  
- 3) Quotation sheets (April 28)
  - Agamemnon (Students B and C)
  - Medea (Student F)
  - Oedipus (Students D and E)
  - Bacchae (Student A)
  
- 4) Essay Feedback (May 5)

*Teacher to supplement sessions (1-3) with active revision exercises*