

**Archimedes' Point: An Educational Research Body As Interface Of Engagement –
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Abstract

The field of Classics is an inherently interdisciplinary one, combining within itself the disciplines of linguistics, history, literature, archaeology, and philosophy. In addition, Classics provision in the UK secondary school system is extremely uneven; while some students will have had eight or more years of instruction in the field prior to attending university, others might have none at all.

This combination of disciplinary and educational factors has meant that teaching practice at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Classics is highly varied and flexible. Instructors must be ready to adapt their practice to a wide array of individual needs, allowing their interactions with students a wide latitude for contingency. In addition, the traditional division of teaching responsibilities between the Faculty and the various colleges serves further to vary practice.

Eight months ago, the author – a temporary but extended-term member of the Faculty of Classics – was seconded to the Teaching for Learning Network (TfLN), an educational research network. The author's research programme was originally narrowly defined. It soon became apparent, however, that the utility of his research would be derived not simply its results, but also from the altered relationship to the Faculty's teaching structure his status as a researcher conferred upon him. As an instructor in, but not entirely of, a University department, the author was in a unique position to attain a global perspective upon Faculty teaching, with the research network acting as a neutral site for educational co-configuration.

In the author's case, this process began with a series of formal and informal meetings with Classics teaching staff. These interactions were then used to inform the application of instruments previously developed by the TfLN – chiefly practice-value questionnaires – to gain an overview of teaching, and student opinion of it. Evaluation of the results of these questionnaires was further enabled by use of the Network's evolving analytic framework, which allowed a coherent interpretation of their data.

The result was a comprehensive picture of teaching at the Faculty, otherwise difficult to achieve, informed by the insights both of its teaching staff and of the TfLN. This picture clearly indicated unsuspected points of common concern shared by teachers and students throughout the Faculty. These areas of concern furthermore pointed to achievable solutions regarding elementary aspects of language learning – solutions which are now being implemented. A tightly-defined programme of research has thus created a secondary – but potentially more important – effect of raising awareness of the obstacles to effective learning and the measures needed to counter these at the Faculty.

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The Faculty of Classics and the TfLN

In February 2007, the author was seconded as a member of teaching staff at the Cambridge Faculty of Classics to the Teaching for Learning Network (TfLN) in order to investigate practice for the development of 'confident readership' of the ancient Greek and Latin languages, explicitly stated as the goal of undergraduate language instruction at the Faculty.

Both the discipline of Classics and its traditions at the Faculty are distinctive. The history of its study at Cambridge dates back to the foundation of the university c. 1209, and to a large extent the discipline still enshrines many of the values most traditional in university education – in particular, an emphasis on text and language-learning, with the hermeneutics of textual interpretation as the primary focus of study. On the other hand, classicists have long recognised that their methods and objects of study are at risk of appearing old-fashioned or becoming obsolete, and efforts at reforming or restructuring the subject as a whole have occurred sporadically throughout the last century (Schofield, 2003).

Teaching at the Faculty of Classics is likewise a mixture of received tradition and rationalising reform. Before the early 1990s, language teaching was still generally orientated towards the small-group, college-based instructional sessions known locally as 'supervisions'. Since then the Faculty has assumed an increased role in language teaching; nevertheless, teaching is still decentralised to a degree unusual even in Cambridge. Even such language instruction as does occur in the Faculty is flexible in organisation, with no syllabus or textbook being set.

As a result, practice at the Faculty is in large part determined by received understandings regarding methods and criteria of instruction. This paper accordingly describes the author's transition from being a member of teaching staff 'embedded' in the Faculty's existing teaching culture to a researcher engaged by both the Faculty and the TfLN. It furthermore outlines the process whereby this 'liminal' status allowed him to gain a systematic overview of teaching practice as a basis for the first stage of 'brokerage activities' as described by Burt (Burt, 2005: 61).

Teaching Context: Overview

Both the division of teaching between Faculty and colleges and its lack of codified learning 'benchmarks' or standards have arisen largely for historical reasons. Nevertheless, the devolution of central control and the resulting freedom of instructors to teach according to their own insight and experience have both proven to be invaluable in ancient language teaching.



While contingency of teaching to student needs is of course desirable in any learning situation, additional factors specific to the Faculty of Classics demand an unusually high degree of instructor flexibility.

First, students enter the Faculty with a wide range of experience and skills. Some students will enter Classics having already received several years of instruction in both ancient Greek and Latin; others will have Latin, but not Greek; while a small number will enter with neither. If practice is allowed to be extremely varied, this is at least in part because student needs are similarly varied, and teaching staff must be extremely sensitive to the requirements of their students if they are to succeed in bringing them through the largely-standardised assessments and exams carried out at the end of the academic year.

Second, Classics is an inherently 'interdisciplinary' study – an aspect of the discipline that is strongly emphasised at Cambridge. Students at the Faculty must be able to demonstrate an awareness and understanding of all the major genres of ancient writing, of philosophy, of history, and of the visual arts. It is furthermore expected that they will specialise in one or more of these areas over time. Language instructors, then, must be prepared to tailor the material they teach for students with a very wide array of interests and specialisms.

Despite concerns regarding the content and standardisation of college-based small group teaching at Oxford and Cambridge generally (Trigwell and Ashwin, 2003; Ashwin, 2005; Cambridge University Students' Union, 2004), small-group and loosely-structured teaching accordingly also possesses strengths indispensable in ancient language learning – a point borne out by student questionnaires (on which, see below).

The Researcher: Situation and Context

Prior to secondment to the TfLN the author was involved in both Faculty and college teaching, as is broadly typical – but not universal – of Classics instructors at Cambridge.

Faculty-based teaching, in his case, focused upon a class entitled 'Linguistic Structures', in which students are taught broad grammatical and syntactic points related to the Latin language. Although the ancient language text from which examples are to be drawn is specified, course planning beyond this is left entirely to the discretion of the instructor.

College teaching ('supervisions'), in the researcher's case, takes two forms. The first of these, known as 'unseens preparation', involves asking students to translate ancient language passage 'on sight' – i.e., having never seen them before, with the instructor providing guidance as and when necessary. The second – the literature supervision – is focused upon



literary analysis and appreciation rather than language *per se*. In actual teaching practice, however, the author finds it difficult to draw any firm distinction between the two.

The guidelines for this college teaching are even more loosely-defined than they are for the 'Linguistic Structures' course; 'unseens' teaching in particular is free-form and open-ended.

The TfLN as Interface of Engagement

The purpose of the author's secondment to the TfLN was to pursue a research proposal developed by the Faculty to investigate 'confident readership', in three stages.

1. Analysis and definition of the behavioural, cognitive and personal characteristics which constitute confident readership, and their interrelationship
2. Evaluation of the contribution of the current teaching practices to the achievement of confident readership and its component parts
3. The implementation of variations in teaching regimes to support the development of confident readership, and analysis of the impact on student progression.

Implicit in this proposal is a conceptualisation of language use as a holistic practice, demanding the simultaneous integration of several different activities and engaging the student on a more than purely intellectual level. As such – despite the status of 'confident readership' as a defined goal of language teaching at the Faculty – its underlying assumptions contrasted sharply with the researcher's actual teaching practice prior to involvement with the TfLN, which tended to be focused on the inculcation of particular identifiable language skills, rather than upon language use as a whole.

Engagement with the TfLN in terms of the research project, then, can be said to have initiated a cycle of co-configuration with both the researcher and the Faculty as a whole.

This cycle might notionally be broken down into three parts: a process of *data-gathering*; a process of *decontextualisation*; and a process of *recontextualisation*, which potentially forms the basis for brokerage activities. Each of these stages, furthermore, can be seen as dependent upon the 'liminal' status accorded the researcher as a practitioner of both teaching and educational research.



Data-gathering

In the first stage of the research programme, the author initiated a series of semi-structured interviews with students, alongside informal discussion with other instructors intended to inform the undertaking of broadly similar staff interviews and surveys.

Consultation with these two groups, however, quickly indicated serious limitations in the author's viewpoint of which he had been unaware when he began research. In particular, it was discovered that teaching practice across the Faculty and in the colleges was far more varied than he had previously thought. Even so apparently self-evident a practice as 'unseen' translation was carried out in a variety of ways – while more open-ended activities such as reading classes and the Linguistic Structures teaching hours inspired an array of divergent approaches.

These differences in practice originally struck the researcher as variations from some self-evident teaching norm. Simple reflection, however, indicated that such a perspective was unwarranted. In the absence of explicitly-defined methods of instruction, teaching staff had simply evolved a range of techniques to meet their own and student needs.

In the researcher's case, the basis of this evolution was a received understanding informed largely by the practice of his previous immediate superior at Cambridge – the Director of Studies for the college for which he supervised – and two teaching peers with whom he was well-acquainted. These practices had been modified over time to suit the researcher's experience and the circumstances of particular classes; nevertheless, continued interaction with those members of staff who had most informed his practice, and lack of exposure to practitioners outside the college for which he supervised, tended to reinforce the idea that the practices of his immediate peer and professional group formed a norm from which other techniques represented a divergence.

This realisation of the diversity of teaching methods and ideologies thus initiated a second stage of data-gathering, designed to determine the range and extent of teaching practice at the Faculty. This research was carried out chiefly by means of two extended p-v questionnaires, as the validity and usefulness of this research instrument under similar circumstances had already been demonstrated by the Plant Sciences participants of the TfLN.

These two questionnaires allowed the author to gain both a comprehensive overview of teaching at the the Faculty and in the colleges, and of student experiences of this – thereby affording fine-grained insight into teaching methods and their perceived value in both contexts.



Decontextualisation

The broad range of teaching practice represented at the Faculty, along with the author's lack of familiarity with many of the methods employed, made analysis of the results of the p-v questionnaires potentially problematic. Evaluation accordingly demanded a process of decontextualisation, whereby the varied pragmatic, pedagogical, and epistemological assumptions implicit in individual instructors' teaching – not least in the author's own – might be rendered explicit and abstracted from particular instantiations in practice.

This decontextualisation of practice was facilitated by the TfLN in two ways.

First, as described in the introductory paper (Irvine and Carmichael, 2007), the Network provided the author with an interface of engagement with the teaching assumptions and commitments of the University community as a whole. Participation in the 'neutral space' (Tuomi-Gröhn, Engeström and Young, 2003) afforded by the TfLN allowed practices previously perceived as discipline-specific to be situated in a wider context of meta-level themes and principles informing teaching. This wider context provided a domain wherein practice might be queried, analysed, and used as a focus for reflection upon practice in other departments and disciplines, via a process that might be characterised as one of 'co-configuration'.

Second, the Network's evolving analytical framework provided an interpretative infrastructure whereby the pedagogic commitments and evaluations implicit in particular teaching practices could be analysed. The six factors and principles identified in the framework – making learning explicit; contingent teaching; authentic learning; student self-regulation and independence; constructive alignment, synthesis, and throughlines; transparency and accountability – provided a means of organising and understanding a data set characterised by diffuseness and a high degree of variation. These commitments are informed in large part by the findings of the ETL Project and the Oxford Learning Context Project, and are accordingly well-tailored to the needs of assessing teaching at Cambridge across Faculty and college contexts. However, it remains sufficiently open-ended to allow its recontextualisation in a range of settings across the University.

Recontextualisation

- *Research results*

With regard to the second stage of data-gathering, when evaluated in terms of the TfLN's analytic framework, the results of the p-v questionnaires indicated particular strengths in the



area of contingent teaching. Despite the high number of teaching practices inventoried in the questionnaires, divergence between practice and perceived value was consistently low, with an overall average of 0.72 on a 5-point scale over both years. In addition this average difference reflects a substantial decrease over the two years (from 0.77 in the first year to 0.67 in the second) in a manner that indicated students felt that they made a good progression from first to the second even in those areas in which they believed they most needed support in the first year. This finding perhaps reflects the high emphasis that another item inventoried in the analytic framework generally receives in teaching – student self-regulation and independence – a quality extremely important to the traditional ethos of the Faculty.

- *Conclusions: the researcher as peripheral participant*

Two strong conclusions might be drawn from this data.

First, it is clear that the Faculty's focus upon adaptation to particular needs, and upon student independence, is one of its chief strengths.

Second, as a logical consequence of this, the role of the researcher within the Faculty must be conceived of not as an external observer reporting on and potentially manipulating a fixed and self-contained system. Rather, the teaching culture of the Faculty should be characterised as consisting of a number of loosely-linked 'micro-communities', united by shared objectives, but differentiated in terms of practice and how these aims are understood as being best achieved. The researcher, correspondingly, should be seen as a 'peripheral participant' in each of these communities (Wenger, 1998).

It should be noted that the cleavages amongst these 'micro-communities', although informal, are often viewed – as in the case of the researcher – as granting a quasi-official and institutional sanction for particular teaching practices, particularly with regard to traditions long-established at particular colleges. And it is because these 'micro-communities' are both well-established and informal that participation in a neutral site such as the TfLN becomes vital for educational research. As a member solely of Faculty/college teaching staff, the individual acts as a participant within a particular teaching 'micro-community'. Insofar as researchers are also affiliated with an external agency, however, they also attain a 'liminal' status (on the concept of 'liminality', see Turner 1977, 1982; for further applications see Garsten, 1999) that allows them both to decontextualise their practice from that of any one 'micro-community', and to cross the (informal, often powerful) boundaries between them.



This 'boundary-crossing' role is clearly fundamental to each of the three stages of co-configuration listed above. The importance of the researcher's liminality, however, is most clearly indicated with regard to the third stage: recontextualisation of the findings from the first two stages within the teaching environment. As a participant in several 'micro-communities' simultaneously, the researcher – having obtained a comprehensive understanding of Faculty teaching – was ideally placed to disseminate research findings meaningfully amongst them. He has thereby been able to initiate a process of 'translation, coordination, and alignment between [their] perspectives' similar to that described by Wenger (Wenger, 1998; 109) that has helped to define points of commonality between teaching 'micro-communities' – and thereby to identify the areas in which additional learning resources were most required.

Outcomes

Subsequent to the findings of the p-v questionnaires given above, consultation with members of the various teaching 'micro-communities' at the Faculty of Classics proved to engender rapid agreement on important issues.

In the area of general principles, it became clear that all staff have a strong commitment to the importance of teaching practices that foster linguistic independence in the students through sensitivity to particular student learning needs. Despite this general emphasis on contingency, however, consensus concerning the importance of a relatively restricted set of irreducible linguistic skills swiftly emerged – along with an agreement that under current circumstances, a mastery of vocabulary was the most crucial in relation to 'confident readership', a point that had also emerged in student interviews.

As a result, a number of experimental vocabulary resources – both print-based and electronic – are currently in development. Because these tools have emerged as the result of a process of consultation and consensus-building, they should prove adaptable enough to be incorporated into teaching throughout the Faculty, while allowing the traditional flexibility of Classics teaching at Cambridge to be maintained. Application of these resources is furthermore intended have a measurable effect upon student performance in exams.

In addition to these anticipated benefits, however, a more immediate positive outcome can be identified – for the accordance of liminal status upon a member of teaching staff has not only emphasised the nature and value of a plurality of pedagogic 'micro-communities' within the Faculty, but has also enabled these more clearly to perceive and define the core values that unite them with each other. Perhaps counter-intuitively, then, the existence of a 'peripheral participant' in relation to the teaching community has served to foster that community's sense of its own strength, tradition, and cohesion.



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