

Research Article

Forum

Report on ‘Better arguments in Scottish classrooms’

Mary O’Reilly

Classical Association of Scotland, St Andrew’s, Scotland, UK

Abstract

This report describes a new project, ‘Better Arguments’, which seeks to teach learners in Scottish secondary schools about what constitutes a good argument, how to identify a bad argument and how to build their own ‘better’ arguments. The unit of lessons uses extracts from Cicero’s *Pro Caelio* as a means of modelling both good and bad arguments, with the aim of equipping learners with a framework by which they can analyse and evaluate not only Cicero’s arguments but arguments generally. By way of background, the report explains the current provision of Classics teaching within Scotland and the challenges facing those who are working to reinstate Latin and Classical Studies, particularly at National Qualification level. In this context, the ‘Better Arguments’ project is one strategy to increase the Classics provision in state schools. The report explains the rationale behind the design and content of the unit and then goes on to highlight the benefits of teaching this unit, especially the educational, cultural and social gains to be made. It identifies some of the potential challenges to the implementation of these lessons and offers some solutions to them. Finally, it considers the ways in which this project might be viewed as a starting point, with suggestions as to how the skills developed here might be further built upon through the use of other classical texts in future units of work.

Keywords: Classics, Scottish National Qualifications, Broad General Education, literacy, rhetoric

Background

The Scottish education system saw a decline in the number of state schools offering Classical subjects in the latter half of the 20th Century. In 2004, Strathclyde University, the last remaining Scottish Higher Education institution offering a Postgraduate Teacher-Training qualification in Classics, made the decision not to replace the retiring Classics lecturer and effectively suspended the course; and in 2015, the opportunity to gain a National Qualification in Ancient Greek was discontinued. Recently, however, great strides forward have been made through various groups, agencies and individuals, to reintroduce Classical subjects into state schools, a task which has been all the more challenging in view of the fact that in Scotland, teachers must have a certified subject qualification before being able to register with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) to teach that subject. Clearly, then, those seeking to champion the establishment or re-establishment of Classics as a National Qualification in Scottish schools face these twin challenges of a lack of any Initial Teacher Education courses for Classical subjects and the certified subject qualification requirement to be eligible to teach it.

Despite these challenges, enthusiastic Classicists north and south of the border have sought to widen access to classical subjects in Scottish secondaries¹ with approaches which broadly fall into

two categories. The first approach to addressing this has been to support teachers of other subjects either to gain the necessary subject qualification or, when teachers already have the necessary qualification, to help them set up courses for the teaching of Classical Studies or Latin in their schools, particularly with a view to the provision of National Qualification courses (National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher). The second approach has been to encourage non-subject specialists to incorporate elements of Classics teaching into the Broad General Education (BGE) phase of the Scottish curriculum which covers early years, primary education and secondary education to the end of S3, through the provision of resources which are easily accessible to the non-specialist and which closely align with the educational principles of Curriculum for Excellence.

‘Better Arguments’ is a project which is designed for use at this BGE phase, geared particularly towards learners in S1–3, with the purpose of incorporating aspects of the Classical world into the general education of learners and using that Classical content and context to deliver skills which are relevant and in line with current priorities in Scottish educational policy. It has been funded through a grant from the University of Glasgow’s ‘Glasgow Knowledge Exchange Fund’ (GKEF) as part of a project titled ‘Dialogue and Mythology: Developing Impact via BGE Units in Classics’. It has been designed and created by Professor Matthew Fox (University of Glasgow), with Claire Maguire (Teacher of Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies (RMPS), Hermitage Academy) and Dr. Mary O’Reilly (Teacher of Classics, Hamilton College). Education

Author for correspondence: Mary O’Reilly; Email: mboreilly9@hotmail.com

Cite this article: O’Reilly M (2024). Report on ‘Better arguments in Scottish classrooms’. *The Journal of Classics Teaching* 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631024000709>

Scotland is supporting the project and will be hosting and promoting the teaching materials.

Outline of project

The principal aim of the 'Better Arguments' project is to equip learners with an understanding of what constitutes a good argument, the critical awareness to identify when a 'bad' argument is being used and the knowledge and skills to construct their own 'better' arguments. The course is built around extracts from Cicero's *Pro Caelio*, the legal speech in which Cicero defends Marcus Caelius Rufus against accusations ranging from plotting to poison the notorious Clodia, to involvement in the plot to assassinate the foreign ambassador, Dio of Alexandria. Through the study of these extracts, learners will be introduced to some of the different types of good and bad argument used by Cicero and through using this established framework they will progress towards evaluating those specific arguments and arguments generally, both for their quality (logic, relevance and evidence base) and for their effectiveness.

Education Scotland will host and promote these lessons and so the material has been arranged into six lessons using the 'toolkit' format commonly used by Education Scotland for standalone units. In further adherence to that model, the unit of lessons has a set of identified experiences and outcomes² and a final assessment activity. It is envisaged that it will sit within the Social Studies area of the BGE curriculum, though in terms of the experiences and outcomes of the unit, it encompasses a number of the outcomes of Languages (including English/ Literacy), Expressive Arts, Health and Wellbeing and Religious and Moral Studies, thereby spanning five of the eight curricular areas identified by Curriculum for Excellence. It is, therefore, a very good means of delivering interdisciplinary learning.

Educational benefits

This project will enable non-specialist teachers to deliver a number of cross-curricular benefits through the medium of Classics subject matter.

Primarily, learners will be introduced to the core terminology and purpose of ancient rhetoric, with particular focus on the use of argument (*logos*) and the features which constitute a robust and logical argument. Through reading and analysing extracts of Cicero's *Pro Caelio*, learners will be encouraged to evaluate where Cicero's argument is strong and where it is weak. In order to do so, they will engage not only with examples of the use of good argument (logical, relevant, evidence-based) but also with some of the more common logical fallacies adopted by Cicero (*argumentum e silentio*, argument from tradition, false dilemma). Armed with this appreciation and awareness of the foundations of argument, they will be able to approach new text and speech, alert for the ways in which argument can be manipulated, and will be equipped to assess the quality of argument being used. Learners will likewise benefit from being able to construct their own logical and well-supported arguments which will inform and add value to their approach to every area of the curriculum. The development of these skills supports and consolidates the identified outcomes for English/ Literacy (critical thinking, creation of text, written and verbal communication generally and persuasive communication particularly) and Social Studies (analysis of sources). In addition, it will begin to encourage an understanding of logic which will prove beneficial in subjects as varied as Philosophy, RMPS, Religious Education and Biology. Further benefit is to be gained in exposing learners to a text which is likely to be quite distinct from anything

they may have read before, in that it is ancient, in translation and a legal text, thus contributing to the provision of greater variety of experience.

There are cultural advantages for learners too. In the introductory lesson, where the concept of rhetoric as a tool for persuasion is set within the context of its ancient origins, and through subsequent lessons in which Roman attitudes to women, politics and inter-generational conflict are raised and explored, there is ample opportunity for learners both to gain insight into an ancient culture and to compare and contrast it with their own. In this regard, the project goes some way to encompassing some of the aims of the Scottish Qualification Authority's (SQA) 'Learning for Sustainability Action Plan', which seeks to present learning in a way which raises global awareness, this being valid even through exploration of an ancient culture.

Finally, although the unit is specifically designed for use by non-specialist teachers, the content sits nicely alongside the National 5 and Higher Latin courses, where extracts from Cicero's *In Verrem* are part of the syllabus, this being a popular choice of text at Higher level. An introduction to Cicero's style and techniques through the 'Better Arguments' unit would thus prove a good entry point to the Latin text of *In Verrem*. It would similarly provide a good introductory resource for the Classical Studies National Qualifications with their examination of the themes of women, citizenship and power, as well as the key skill of ancient-source analysis.

Timing

The creation of this project seems particularly timely. When young people are being bombarded on a daily basis with information and news from a range of social media platforms, both reliable and unreliable, genuine and fake, and where there is an increasing polarisation being generated in those online arenas, there is evidently a need and a responsibility on the part of educators to equip them with the questioning and critical faculties whereby young people can maturely and competently evaluate the information presented to them and realise when they are being 'influenced' and by what sort of arguments. The commitment of Education Scotland to promote material and lessons with precisely these skills in mind is evidence that there is a recognition of the real and current need for these skills to be taught explicitly within the Scottish curriculum alongside subjects where critical thinking is already embedded.

The promotion of the core skills of evaluating, constructing and using effective arguments relates also, in part, to another pressing priority in Scottish education which increasingly values and looks to develop the capabilities essential for life beyond the classroom. The SQA's 'Skills for Learning, Skills for Life, Skills for Work' framework, along with the Scottish Government's 'Developing the Young Workforce' strategy, place emphasis on such areas as communication (in all of its forms), critical thinking, social wellbeing and citizenship (the ability to trade in arguments providing a pathway towards active citizenship), all of which are cultivated in this unit of lessons. The potential contribution of this project to driving an improvement in literacy standards following the post-Covid decline likewise makes this a timely addition to the canon of resources available to Scottish practitioners.

Challenges

The biggest challenge facing the implementation of this project is time. The Scottish curriculum offers a great and ever-increasing

variety of subjects and many schools already struggle to accommodate the existing subjects, with some choosing to offer social subjects, sciences and expressive arts only on a rotational basis in the lower stages of secondary education (BGE phase). For this reason, the project has been limited to the six-lesson 'toolkit' model to facilitate teachers to use it without having to devote an unrealistic block of time to it.

Another challenge is the workload of teachers and the lack of sufficient non-contact time to explore, prepare and introduce new and unfamiliar topics. This could be compounded by a possible uncertainty on the part of non-specialist teachers who may feel that they are not sufficiently knowledgeable or qualified to teach it. In order to address this, the lessons have been kept simple in terms of terminology and the unit as a whole delivers a single concept. A teacher guide has also been produced alongside this as a further means of making the material more easily accessible and so that very little prior knowledge either of Cicero's speech or the Roman cultural backdrop and legal system is required. It is hoped that the inclusion of audio-visual material (in the form of a recorded performance of parts of the *Pro Caelio*), work-booklets, handouts, assessment material and marking schemes will make this a complete package and as such will be seen as an attractive unit of work. Education Scotland has committed to generating interest through a launch event and promoting it within schools, thereby hoping to expand the reach of Classics into schools with no previous history of provision.

Next steps

The development of the concept of recognising and creating arguments and the adaptation of Cicero's *Pro Caelio* for use as the central theme and means of delivering this learning demonstrates once again how ancient text and culture, despite being dismissed by some as outdated, alien and useless, can be continually adapted to remain relevant to changing educational and societal needs, through creativity, imagination, clear sight of the educational outcomes to be achieved and a pedagogical framework by which to achieve it. The choice of the *Pro Caelio*, a legal text dealing with issues of great political significance and where the background knowledge required to put it into context would seem to preclude it from use in this project, would not initially seem an obvious one.

However, the judicious choice of extracts and distillation of the core concepts have proven this to be a rich resource for the teaching of concepts crucial to modern learners. This raises the possibility of reaching for new texts in the future rather than turning to the staple texts traditionally used in the Latin and Classical Studies syllabuses.

This project is the first step in equipping learners to engage with argument. A useful next step might be to look to other ancient texts with a view to adapting them to other pressing priorities in education, perhaps looking at how ancient examples of dialogue might be used as a resource to address the issue of extreme ideas, polarisation of viewpoints and the demonisation of those who hold differing opinions. A resource which could nurture the concept of 'agreeable disagreement' through Classical texts could further empower young people to work collaboratively and effectively with others. Clearly there lies in the rich and diverse cultures of Greece and Rome the potential to find solutions to the challenges and difficulties facing Scotland's young learners today.

Author biography

Dr Mary O'Reilly is a Classics teacher in Hamilton College. She completed a PhD in Latin Literature at Glasgow University, focussing on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, with particular focus on the undercurrents which run through the poem. Following that, she gained a teaching qualification in Latin and Classical Studies and has since taught in a number of Scottish schools. She has published two children's books, *Stella's Christmas Family Tree* and *Tales from Olympus*, the latter retelling in rhyme some of the most popular myths of Ancient Greece. She is currently working with the Classical Association of Scotland on a number of projects aimed at widening access to Classics in Scottish state schools. She is also involved in creating resources for the Scottish offshoot of the 'Speaking Citizens' project.

Notes

- 1 There have also been initiatives such as The Iris Project which have endeavoured to create Latin resources suitable for use at primary level.
- 2 The Broad General Education phase of Curriculum for Excellence has a set of outcomes which should be achieved for each particular curricular area and sets learning expectations at each level along with suggestions as to the types of learning experiences which might deliver those outcomes.