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Modern classics

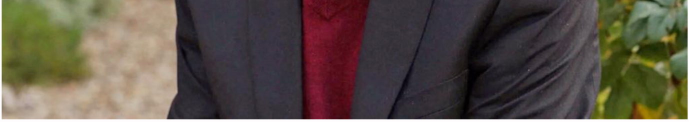
Little more than a decade old itself, a state sixth form in one of London's most underprivileged boroughs is now offering the kinds of lessons more associated with ancient Greece, medieval universities – and this country's most prestigious, and pricey, private institutions. Tom Payne meets the teachers and students of Newham Collegiate's Liberal Arts School, who are convinced that pursuing the 'trivium' learning model of antiquity, and trying to understand the past (close readings of the *Iliad* included), are the way to nourish young minds in the present and prepare them for bright futures

We're in a classroom in the basement of a grand Edwardian building. It's on the Barking Road, next to Newham Town Hall, in east London. This is the civic side of the street, with a bright, glassy library and its welcoming but watchful staff. On the other side there is a large pound shop with some of the letters missing from the name. To get here from East Ham station, I pass vape stores and phone repair shops that haven't yet nudged out the butchers selling large boxes of chicken thighs.

It's December 2024, and most schoolchildren in the country have left for home by this time of day, but here are 16 sixth-formers with two of their teachers, listening intently, but not passively, to a talk about anthropology from a PhD student, Ila Ananya.

The talk is part of the school's new liberal arts programme, which uses methods inherited from medieval and ancient teachers to introduce students to the cultures of the past, with classical antiquity at the course's heart. The model is called the "trivium". In short, although we're in a converted technical college built in 1905, and many of the students are wearing hijabs, the approach has strong echoes of hooded boys in monasteries, or even youths in togas.

Learning about anthropology contributes to the "grammar" section of the three-part trivium, which leads to logic (or dialectic) and then finally rhetoric. The basic thinking behind the rigorous course is that you learn things, test that knowledge out, and acquire the craft of expressing it. So far these students have understood that anthropologists observe communities, sometimes by living in them. While this does hold the room's attention, it helps that the speaker is a Gates scholar at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, and one student is bold enough to ask how that scholarship works.


Martyn Rush, director of the NCS's unusual new programme

The school is the Newham Collegiate Sixth Form Centre (NCS). The atmosphere of respect, hard work and traditional instruction can be traced as far back as the NCS's foundation, in 2014. When Ananya asks what anthropological research projects her audience could undertake, one girl suggests investigating why their school achieves better A level results than others in the borough: is it their founding principal? Is it the culture?

This is a fair question: the results are astounding. At A level in 2024, 96 per cent were a B or above. (For context, Eton managed 93.6 per cent.) Nobody scored less than a C in anything. Last year, 95 per cent of students received offers from Russell Group universities, including Oxford and Cambridge.

When you walk around the school, you see many inspirational hoardings of former pupils, with captions such as: "Danya. A level grades – A*/A*/A*. Studying at: Cambridge University." In 2020, 52 students landed places to study medicine, including at Oxbridge. Within three years of opening, the school was sending pupils to top American universities, starting with MIT. Places at Harvard and Princeton were to follow, with full scholarships among them.

By these metrics, the school ought to rank among the best in the world – and certainly it has almost no rivals among the UK's state sixth forms. Much of this is indeed down to its roots. When Newham's council decided that it needed a new sixth-form college to prevent the most able children from its secondary schools leaving for other boroughs, it found a remarkable principal. Mouhssin Ismail had only been a teacher for six years when he took the helm. He had previously been a City lawyer on a six-figure salary, and before that, he had played cricket for Essex.

As he told an educational conference at University College London in April last year, "that's important, because the experience allowed me to mix with a range of people from all different walks of life, but playing representative cricket in my teens, many of the other players were from fee-paying independent schools, and I began to see quite early on the difference in opportunities that presented".

In that speech, he was explaining how education can be a ticket out of poverty. Ismail himself left an underperforming state school for the London School of Economics. And in taking on a headship in Newham, he arrived in a place where people were in need of that ticket.

This is the third most deprived borough in London. At the time of my visit, 41 per cent of pupils qualify for free school meals. And the difficulties that are visible on the streets of East Ham, where you can count on being stopped and asked for spare change, are not just economic.

In the classroom, another idea for an anthropology investigation comes from a student in the front row who has often wondered about the women's refuge she sees on her way to school every day. She wants to know, what's the tipping point? When does someone decide she needs to seek safety and help?

The school's early responses to this context were at once ambitious and practical. There was a swift recognition that A levels aren't enough. After all, schools don't tend to offer A levels that have neat overlaps with the university courses leading to the best-paid jobs; and so the NCS created its own "schools" of medicine, finance, law and engineering.

The advantages were obvious: applicants rapidly became well informed beyond their classroom studies, produced eye-catching personal statements, and impressed at interview. Ismail's goal of making Oxbridge look normal became a reality within a single cohort.

Why would a sixth form with a track record of turning students into high earners decide it needs a Liberal Arts School?

All of which makes the reason for my visit stranger. I've come to see why the NCS is adopting the trivium. Why would a sixth form with such an enviable track record of turning students into high earners, using such clear and quick routes to top universities, suddenly decide that it needs what it calls a Liberal Arts School?

Why would anyone think that studying the Battle of Marathon is a leg-up for a UCAS application? Why, when universities are closing literature courses, would Newham's students stay behind after school to discuss their recent reading of the *Iliad*? What is to be gained?

In a corridor I run into Anita Lomax. She is the current principal, and Mouhssin Ismail's successor, having worked alongside him from the school's beginning. (A photograph of Ismail hangs prominently above the reception desk.) We hadn't planned this meeting, but Lomax seems to have the kind of energy that makes it possible to be in many places at once. She talks about how excited she is by the liberal arts programme, and how it answers a real need in a school that excels so markedly in the sciences.

The statistics speak for themselves: when the school was last inspected by Ofsted, in October 2021 – outstanding, obviously – 72 per cent of students were taking maths, 61 per cent chemistry, 52 per cent biology… I tell Lomax how impressed I am by the honours board. It lists many students who have already gone to Oxbridge and Ivy League universities, but only covers the pre-Covid years, and there weren't many of those. Yes, Lomax agrees; she tells me they've ordered a new one, and shows me the space where it is to hang.

When Lomax proposed the Liberal Arts School, teacher Martyn Rush, who now runs the programme, was joining the NCS. He explains that the vision is for its own sake, but also points out that teaching the trivium has been tried and tested in American schools. The principal asked him if he'd be interested in putting a proposal together for the programme, and Rush saw an opportunity for this way of teaching and learning, which had always inspired him.

The word "trivium" refers to three building blocks that teachers have used to educate their charges since ancient times, which were formalised and given this name during the Middle Ages. Once students had worked through the linked studies of grammar, logic and rhetoric, they could attempt the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy; and since the trivium covered the basics, our dismissive word "trivial" comes from its name.

Recently, educators have started to advocate for some form of the trivium in today's classrooms. Chief among them is Martin Robinson, the education consultant and author of *Trivium 21c* (2013). His quest for a better sort of schooling begins with his own experiences as a teacher, and a parent's longing that his daughter go through a system that is something more than a results factory.

And if the whole idea of the trivium, with its shamelessly Latin name, sounds like a throwback, its supporters aren't all that embarrassed about it. There are commentators such as Daisy Christodoulou (a prominent proponent of comparative judgment in education) and, for that matter, Mouhssin Ismail, who argue that progressive approaches such as "discovery learning" – lots of play and problem-solving, with minimal memorising – are far less useful than taking information in, and then retaining it.

Rush is clearly excited about making the concepts behind the trivium work on his programme, while accepting that they need some adaptation. To start with the grammar: "Obviously it's not the parsing of sentences," he explains. "It's more like the building blocks of knowledge and so forth."

In his class, the building blocks are great books: students start with Homer's *Iliad*, follow it up with Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*, and also study Ibn Khaldūn, a 14th-century writer based in north Africa whose works some consider to be the foundation of economics and even sociology.

Then there's Rush's own take on the logic or dialectic strand: "that's the second leg of the trivium, if you like – they pursue a project, having done some thinking on how to research it, how to put it together, but also how to think it through".

For the rhetoric part, they develop an idea and "present it at a kind of mini academic conference, with a panel chaired by an academic, where they get questions and feedback". If it sounds like a mix of TED talk and Oxbridge-style grilling, that's the point. This is in year 12 and, as Rush confirms, "they've done all this by the time they apply to university".

So if the question is, "What's the advantage?", there's certainly preparation for the UCAS process, and studying extracurricular things that look good on a personal statement. But when Rush asks for volunteers from the course to talk to me, they show that they've picked up much more. The programme is in its infancy, and this is the first full term of a course that's to run a whole academic year. But Rush gave it a two-term trial, and when I meet five students, one of them, Jumainah, has already delivered her TED-style talk and, at the time of our conversation, is waiting to hear about her application to read English at UCL. Jumainah's articulacy makes her a powerful ambassador for the course.

Given the competition, and perhaps given the sixth form, the course does need ambassadors, especially since the Liberal Arts School requires just as much stamina as those for medicine and law. "We've made a decision to make it as rigorous as possible," Rush tells me. "It's every week for three terms. You sign up for it and you do it. It's a commitment. So the students who've joined it are really committed and really keen. But as something that's going to grow and show its success, it's still in the early days. I would definitely like to be able to recruit from STEM students."

There's hope here: while still at the reception desk, I meet an assistant principal who teaches maths. He'd love his students to do the course, because the students he teaches understand theories, but are less confident when asked to explain them to others.

For one Liberal Arts School member, Rahma, who hopes to study history and English at university, there is this goal in mind. As she sees it, "Most humanities students want to get into law, but I actually wanted to get into something within consulting. You get tasked with big ideas, and then you need to formulate them, and you need to decipher them and make them a lot more easily understandable for the characters that you're going to be working with. So then I thought, that mimics quite a lot of what we've covered in Liberal Arts School."

Aamir, also in year 12, needed some persuading: "I was reluctant at first to actually do liberal arts, I think, because I didn't really see it as something that would particularly benefit my career," he explains. "My career choices at the time were either going into law or doing PPE. But I spoke to Mr Rush about it, and he recommended it because the skills you pick up in terms of articulating yourself, in terms of being able to write well, are something that I could utilise in any degree path or career choice."

Rush is clearly able to convince his students that there is an advantage after all. But can he convince them that there's an even greater good? It seems so. While the trivium appeals to him because it helps us to think about how students learn, he's highly invested in what they learn, too; and it's clear that the new school in Newham is devouring the old-school material, in a way that has connections with today's world. For example, the most recent speaker before Ila Ananya was a classicist who explored what ancient history can tell us about migration.

As a history student at UCL, Rush took as many of the ancient history options as he could, before completing an MPhil in Middle Eastern studies at Oxford. "I wanted to make sure that they had a critical engagement with classics and with the classical tradition. So I leaned heavily for the grammar section on the classical world, and wanted them not to be afraid of learning about the classical world for its own sake."

The proof is surely with his students. They clearly value the chance to put the ancient world into a rich context, and to explore why Greek, Latin and Arabic writers of the past saw their societies in the way they did. They talk of the "double move" – a way of standing back from a source and seeing it from other perspectives.

As Rush explains, "Why were those stories promulgated and written down at that particular time in Greek history? What kind of function might they have been playing at that time? Why did Alexander the Great prize Homer, and why did he sleep with Homer under his pillow? We're having that kind of reflective conversation about what it is about these stories that we can enjoy aesthetically, but also about what function they play at different times."

This takes another student, Iffat, quite far from the bottom line: "We live in an age of information where, unfortunately, a lot of that information isn't actually factual. I think having that double move and using it first with these texts, gives us that kind of skill to really and truly think about the information that we're surrounded by and really think, is this information factual, and why is it presented in the way it is?"

And it's precisely because the material they are studying is so old, so tested, and so challenged, that its permanence offers new generations a kind of touchstone in their own searches for truth. Before she started the course, Tayyibah thought of herself as a big reader, but now she appreciates the chance to read "books I've never really seen in mainstream education". On the one hand, as she says, "It's really interesting to learn about Homer and Plutarch"; but then, there's also the influence they had on later writers, and in turn, the influence those writers have now. "What struck me the most was

Ibn Khaldūn's book, because we learn as much about eastern civilisation and its influence on western civilisation."

> The school is pursuing success and wisdom for its students – 'the idea that this is going to help us solve some of life's big questions'

This perspective suggests another way to reconcile the apparent contradiction that this kind of education is somehow both a way ahead in life, and also valuable for its own sake. The NCS aims to pursue success and also wisdom for its students – what Rush calls "a lifelong thing – the idea that this is going to help us solve some of life's big questions". But it does so at a time when that notion is constantly challenged, including by a Government that is scrapping support for the teaching of Latin in state schools. Victorian writer Matthew Arnold defended the study of "the best which has been thought or said" as a way of spreading "sweetness and light". If anything, he passed on a vision of education that would make this kind of learning more inclusive, more widely available.

The social mobility that the NCS offers – that ticket out of poverty – leads its students to value a schooling that in the past has seemed like the preserve of the rich. With a rhetorical polish I'm coming to admire, Aamir reflects, "I think it's important to make the point that a lot of people from wealthy backgrounds, who go to some prestigious private schools, have the opportunity to study liberal arts. And I think one thing that the NCS does really well is give us the opportunity to have the same knowledge and skills and understanding that people from private schools have."

> 'A lot of people at prestigious private schools study liberal arts. This gives us the opportunity to have the same knowledge'

For Mouhssin Ismail, knowledge for its own sake is the kind of knowledge that should be available to all. As he said in his talk, "It is absolutely right that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds should have access to the best that's been thought and said; not the fact that if I come from a particular area, I resonate with a particular type of culture, therefore I can't appreciate or understand Shakespeare or Dickens or Chaucer…

"That's nonsense. It's intrinsically interesting by its very nature, and therefore young people from disadvantaged cultures should be taught those things."