

TRIVIUM

IN PRACTICE

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>i</i>
Introduction	1
1 Teaching: the Great Debate	5
2 Philosopher Kids at Highbury Grove School	11
<i>Tom Sherrington</i>	
<i>Sara Stafford, Andrew Fitch, Marie Deer, Becky Hulme,</i>	
<i>Ruth Ramsden-Karelse, Sukhi Dhillon</i>	
3 The Trivium at Turton	39
<i>Sam Gorse</i>	
4 The Trivium as a Prism	53
<i>Nick Wells</i>	
5 Enriching the Learning Experience	65
<i>David Hall, Nigel Matthias, Nick Barnsley</i>	
6 Slow Education, the Trivium and Eton College	77
<i>Mike Grenier</i>	
7 The Trivium and Human Cultural Evolution	105
<i>Nick Rose</i>	
8 Dialogue and Dialogic: The Trivium and Bakhtin	129
<i>Carl Hendrick</i>	
9 Philosophically Powerful Projects	153
<i>Dr John L. Taylor</i>	
<i>Index</i>	<i>179</i>

Introduction

‘During our first meeting we discussed the scope of this seminar, and we decided that we should limit our study of the medieval Latin tradition to the first three of the seven liberal arts—that is, to grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic.’ He paused and watched the faces—tentative, curious and masklike—focus upon him and what he said.

Williams, 2012 [1965]: 136–137

Trivium – where the three ways meet. The three ways are grammar, dialectic and rhetoric. Dialectic is sometimes referred to as *logos* or logic. These three ways formed the basis of the medieval liberal arts curriculum and were the core of a good education from ancient Athens through to our contemporary liberal arts institutions and schools. Rather than being ‘planned’, the three arts were drawn together by chance and tradition – yet, at their core, lies an uneasy truce between truth, critique and articulate opinion. This difficult relationship is the key to unlocking understanding, creativity and independent thinking and learning. It is the key to an education of ‘character’ – and, when drawn into the teaching of subjects, it is the key to great teaching and learning, not as an imposition but as part of the tradition of teaching and learning itself. The trivium isn’t a gimmick to be imposed on to a curriculum; it is a tried and tested approach to education. It is in the ‘blood’ of teaching and learning:

Knowledge, Questioning, Communicating

Or, as Sir Anthony Seldon put it in *The Times* (Tuesday 16 February 2016):

Education in medieval times was based on the ‘trivium’, with students learning facts (grammar), the ability to argue (logic), and how to communicate (rhetoric).

When one expands this into grammar being foundational knowledge and skills; dialectic being questioning, thinking and practising; and rhetoric being to express oneself beautifully, persuasively and articulately in any form, then one can begin to see how great teaching has these three things at its centre.

When one sees rhetoric as reaching out to the world and bringing things together, and dialectic as examining, thinking, looking at differing viewpoints and ways of doing things and developing one’s opinions and individuality, and grammar as being the best that has been thought, said and done, one can start to see how it might work in the classroom.

The teacher holds the baton of valued knowledge. They pass this baton on to a child, and the child and teacher hold the baton together for some time, tussling with and arguing over the valued knowledge to reach some understanding of it, while developing the child as an individual – not swamped by valued knowledge but equal to it. Finally, the teacher lets the baton go, for the child to run with it, to express *themselves* in their studies, to reach out to the community, and make their own way, developing their own character and thinking. The opportunity is there for the child to grow and add to the best that has been thought, said and done. As C. L. R. James (2013: 119) put it:

The end towards which mankind is inexorably developing by the constant overcoming of internal antagonisms is *not* the enjoyment,

ownership, or use of goods, but self-realization, creativity based upon the incorporation into the individual personality of the whole previous development of humanity. Freedom is creative universality, *not* utility.

James, *Modern Politics*

The pupil is expected to develop both as an individual and as a member of their community. As the basis of the liberal arts, this is an education for ‘freedom’. This is not an education that expects children to follow a preordained pattern, but one that ensures they have the wherewithal to join in with what Michael Oakeshott referred to as ‘the conversation of mankind ... perhaps we may recognize liberal learning as, above all else, an education in imagination, an initiation into the art of this conversation ...’ (Oakeshott, 1989: 39).

It is the conversational classroom and the adventures that might be had within this space that are at the heart of the trivium. Debate, dialogue, reading, writing, critical thinking, creativity, self-expression will all feature in this classroom. The importance of memory, of ‘knowing’, is the base of this, but it is only part of the story. From knowing, through practice and critique, to flourishing, simple ways of thinking about the curriculum can unlock complexity due to the unique tensions between the three arts of the trivium.

There is no one ‘right’ way to ‘do’ the trivium: it is a tradition that can be adapted to time, to places, to different habits and ideas. This is its joy – and also its annoyance. How much easier it would be for a school leader to ‘buy’ a way of doing it and inflict it upon her staff, students and parents.

The trivium is a glorious human accident: contradictory, yet it is the art of education and engages teachers in the art of being educators. Just as each great artist learns from a tradition and refashions it, adds to it, disrupts it, so do the teachers who have contributed to this book.

I don’t agree with everything written here; there are things I would want to do differently, but on their canvas, in their school, each contributor is creating and re-creating trivium education in their own way. I hope you will be

suitably inspired to do the same in your own home, your classroom, or in your own school.

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Chapter 1

Teaching: the Great Debate

One way to think about how the trivium might work in a classroom is to think about how it can be used to teach a topic. For this task I have chosen a simple idea that involves a debate to which there is no clear right or wrong conclusion. If we were to follow trivium principles, we would expect to do something along the following lines:

Grammar: The facts of the topic. Dialectic: The argument(s).

Rhetoric: The pupil's expression of their own opinion about the topic.

Notice here that the opinion comes at the end of the process. I often get into trouble by saying we're not interested in pupils' opinions ... until I add the *yet*. For example, I used to teach something and ask pupils' opinions about it straight away. This yielded responses that, though they may have been varied, were often instant reactions to something 'unknown'; something which often results in a negative or not altogether enthusiastic response. The trivium works in a different way: this class, and teacher, are only interested in educated opinions, and welcome a broad range of opinions, as long as they are backed up by good knowledge of the debate and encourage pupils to bring their own self to bear within that conversation.

In many subjects there are texts that open themselves up to scrutiny and dialogue. Competing theories and ideas, intractable problems (both political and cultural), competing views of history, even business ideas and how best to manage a football team offer up opportunities where there is no clear-cut answer. Sometimes a single text has a debate running through it,

or is open to a variety of interpretations. In theatre, the ‘grammar’ might be the script and also the work of the dramaturg finding out the facts about the play and its themes. The ‘dialectic’ would then come in through an investigation into the grammar – learning the script, practising, workshoping and rehearsing the script ready for the final ‘rhetoric’, or performance of the play to an audience. Even though the script is the same, no two productions of the play will be the same. The process opens up interpretations, and the same should be said for the process of learning in the classroom.

The text could be by Shakespeare, or by Virginia Woolf; it could be about the Civil Rights movement or about the Falklands War. It could be a discussion about the merits of 4-4-2 vs 4-2-3-1 in football, or a look at whether Darwin’s theories are useful in economics. Whatever your subject, there will be some opportunities to open up a text (or texts) to debate.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman by Mary Wollstonecraft might be such a text. Straight away there might be a problem here, because much of what is included in this text might not be as controversial today as it was when it was published in 1792. Therefore it might not be a good text to choose for this approach – but that is not the point. The trivium can help people understand texts by testing out the strength of an argument within them, so that at first look they might superficially agree with them, at the end of the process they might know why they agree, and, what’s more, they might be able to bring their thoughts to bear in other scenarios. Wollstonecraft’s tome might be looked at alongside the work of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It could be looked at through the lens of contemporary debates about nature vs nurture, and also through contemporary feminist critiques about patriarchy. By learning the arguments, children would get a good grounding in the depth of the debate.

The next stage would be to get children to explore the debate through a technique known as a *dissoi logoi*. Through this method a pupil would be encouraged to look at two sides of an argument – or more – and be asked to write a single piece that gives equal weight to the ‘rightness’ of both sides. This is the process through which instant opinion is ‘shelved’ and stronger, educated opinion begins to be formed.

The grammar: learn about the text and its background. Learn about opposing viewpoints. The dialectic: bring those opposing viewpoints together in a piece of writing, weighing up the different facts and opinions in a *dissoi logoi*.

This could then become the basis for a Socratic Circle. The pupils sit in a circle, with the relevant text in their hands, and they discuss the text, responding to questions from the teacher and from each other. The point is to look at and explore ambiguities in the text, to test out its logic and, maybe, to seek to challenge it. The importance of this process, again, is the warding off of 'opinion', using instead 'evidence' (as written in the text) to justify opinions that each pupil may have. The teacher can play devil's advocate and/or be a stickler for the use of 'facts' as evidenced in the text(s).

The grammar: knowledge of text(s) and other relevant information. The dialectic: a dispassionate look at the argument, drawing from knowledge (the grammar). A testing out of this argument through questioning.

This can be followed by formal classroom debates focusing on a question: 'this class believes ...' and is one way of opening up the third part of the trivium, rhetoric. One can also begin to see how each part of the trivium overlaps with other parts. Pupils can write speeches and learn them. The teacher can tell pupils which side of the debate they will be speaking for beforehand – something which truly tests the ability to understand, use evidence and persuade others. Once the debate has been conducted, the final 'rhetorical' task could be set, which would be an essay stating the true 'educated' opinion of each child. This could be read out, open to debate, or

remain in essay form to be questioned via a viva, or responded to in more conventional ways.

There are various ways to structure a piece of rhetoric and numerous methods that can be employed. What follows is a 'classic' structure which can be taught to pupils to improve both their spoken and written word work.

First, introduce the 'five parts of rhetoric'. These are:

- 1 Invention
- 2 Arrangement
- 3 Style
- 4 Memory
- 5 Delivery.

Then explain what each one is. Again, I want to keep it simple.

- 1 *Invention*: this is the content of your speech and the drawing together of your 'evidence'. It includes ethos, pathos and logos, the three musketeers of rhetoric. Ethos is your credibility. Pathos is the shared emotion between you and the audience. Logos is your use of reasoning and logic. This usefully models critical thinking.
- 2 *Arrangement* (the six parts of oratory): this can be a lesson in itself! I believe that if you teach this well, then not only will your pupils speak better, they will also be able to write essays better. Below is the 'classic' order for a speech, and it makes a great scaffold for an essay too:
 - i You begin with the *exordium* (or 'hook'): this should catch the audience's attention and it should also be central to your narrative.
 - ii Next comes the *prothesis*, where you present a short history of the subject that you are going to be talking about.
 - iii This is then followed by *partitio* (division): here you make the points which are uncontroversial and then the points which are contested.

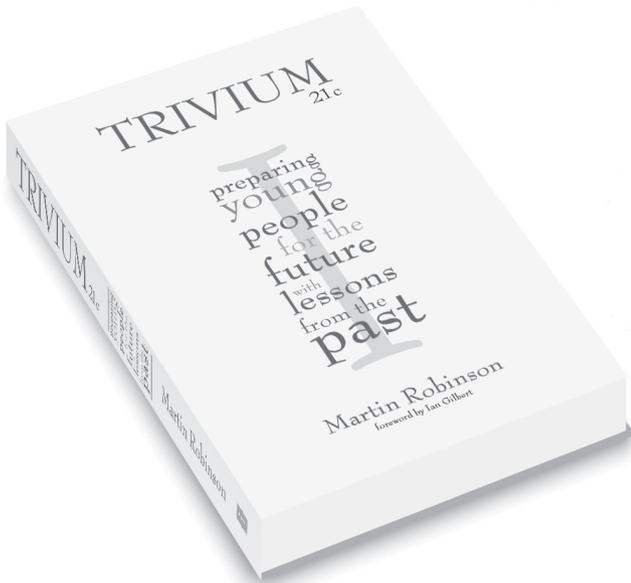
- iv Then *confirmatio* (proof): here you state the reasons behind your thinking.
 - v Next is the *confutatio* (or refutation): you go on to refute any opposing argument.
 - vi Finally, *peroration*, where you sum up the argument passionately and not by presenting a simple review.
- 3 *Style*: should the style of the talk be low, medium or grand? Low style is ‘down with the kids’; medium is probably the best for day-to-day speaking; but it would be good to introduce the ‘Grand Style’ of great oratory to see if pupils can lift the audience to a higher level through their eloquence.
- 4 *Memory*: as a drama teacher, this doesn’t worry me. I think sometimes it is good for pupils to memorize their speeches. It isn’t always necessary, but sometimes it can lift the presentation. Speaking from memory mustn’t be robotic, however; it must have *sprezzatura*: in other words, the speaker must allow their thoughts and ideas to inhabit them, so that they seem to spring fresh from their mind!
- 5 *Delivery*: you will need to work with your pupils on their delivery. This includes the use of space, positioning, posture, presence, communicating the feelings of honesty and truth, gestures, facial expressions and – crucially – the use of their voice: volume, pitch, tempo, pause and inflection are all important.

What you have just read is a classic trivium approach to studying a text or texts. However, I must emphasize that this process is not just one that fits snugly with the humanities and the arts. Every subject has its grammar; it has its logic; it has the need for practice and areas to analyse and debate; it also has its opportunities to ‘perform’ – whether on the sports field, in an exam or in the answering of questions.

The trivium is a helpful way for a teacher to think about the art of teaching, and can help in the design of a curriculum, when one is looking to achieve balance, increase student involvement and understanding, and develop creativity, independence and critical thinking (alongside the need for good academic knowledge and investigation).

Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man.

Francis Bacon



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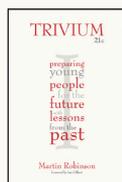
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Martin Robinson worked for 20 years in state schools in London, as a teacher, as a leader and as an AST. Now an education consultant, he works with schools on enhancing their pupils' knowledge acquisition, questioning and communication skills. He also speaks regularly on creativity, character and a wide range of other current concerns in education.



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