

## On benefits of having no prior classical education

It has not been unusual to stumble upon news articles that lament the decline of classics in secondary education, as if students grow without any sense of their roots, to be more exact, the roots of Western civilisation. More rare but occasionally, we also come across voices of some older generation oxbridge classics graduates horrified to learn that a sizeable portion of first year classics students these days learn latin and greek from scratch. I understand that some people could feel downhearted for having lost the tradition that the older generation has known. However, I would like to suggest that, counterintuitively, there could be some benefits of having no prior classical education, particularly to meet the challenges that Classics as a discipline faces today.

I would like to illustrate with my own personal experiences. I completed my secondary education in South Korea, undergraduate in the United States, and postgraduate in United Kingdom. It was when I was studying at Columbia University that I first read *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid* and chose to pursue ancient Roman history. In fact, I was also intrigued by Italian literature of Dante and Bocaccio and tinkered with it for a brief period of time. I quickly realized that, contrary to the course description of ‘all welcome with immediate level of italian’, I was the only one who is neither Italian by birth nor by heritage, therefore, without full linguistic proficiency. Left alone, I moved onto my alternative option, that is, ancient Roman history. In my classes of ancient language and history, everyone was at more or less the same starting point without any prior classical education. A more level ground to compete with other American students greatly appealed to me, as an international student. Being aware that many international students tend toward natural and social sciences, such as, engineering and economics, Classics appeared to me a rather accessible humanities subject in which I can try my luck.

My experiences certainly cannot stand for all other students’ experiences, but it led me to question classics outreach projects. I understand that they were built on a charitable mission to widen the accessibility of privileged classical education to students from less privileged backgrounds, especially given that classical education functioning as a badge of status and education in British social context. And I do not want to negate the good works done by many, including many here in this workshop. However, I think it is time to raise questions and reflect on implicit premises and relevant issues. Classics outreach would be only one example to illustrate my point about classical education in general. Does it not help to perpetuate and somewhat exploit the idea of classical education being a badge of certain status? Is it not hindering students without prior classical education from choosing Classics in university? Might a more neutral ground attract more students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds?

Concerns about the decline of Classics as a discipline is nothing new, and urgent calls to renew the discipline have been reverberating for awhile. I propose that students from diverse background without prior classical education could bring fresh air and new perspectives. Recently, *Eidolon*, an online journal, published a series of articles on ‘First Generation Classicists’ which tells the stories of Classics scholars and students from backgrounds seldom observed in the discipline, including students from Philippine and a Native American tribe,

an American first generation college student, an 18<sup>th</sup> century African scholar from modern-day Ghana. Attracted to ancient Greco-Roman world for various reasons, they told stories of their own perspectives that they developed through their individual and communal experiences to read and understand the ancient world. These perspectives are certainly not conventional. Personally, I also recall that my undergraduate classics department were an eclectic mix of students who were largely characterised as oddballs amongst students. Certainly, diversity in postgraduate and professional level is another matter, and academia of Classical studies strives to be more inclusive at the moment. I do not intend to argue for abolishing classical education in secondary school all together. Yet, from my experiences, I would like to suggest that having no prior classical education might be another way we could consider in order to open up the discipline to a diverse group of students. And, to borrow the words of Dwight Lewis, an American classics professor, this shall 'create epistemology, which will give us more innovation.'