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Research Article

Using the CSCP *Classic Tales* resources to improve literacy in Year 9

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the literacy rate of the pupils I teach has been declining. This has led to some problems with GCSE Classical Civilisation, where pupils are not strong enough readers to fully access the prescribed sources. To counter this, one of my former colleagues suggested that we use the *Classic Tales* resources as the basis for our Year 9 course (students aged 13). The aim is to teach the pupils as much mythology as possible, which is an excellent foundation for the myth and religion unit, and to get them to read as much as we can, using the interactive reader, pdf transcripts, and recordings of the stories to engage all pupils in the class. The aim of this paper is to discuss the successes and failures of this strategy.

Keywords: literacy, classical civilisation, oracy

Context

I will start with a little context. We are a small private/independent school in Kent, surrounded by selective state-maintained grammar schools and other independent schools. When I started teaching here 15 years ago, most of our pupils had a grammar school profile. Our intake has changed to include a higher-than-average Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND) rate (about 30% of the current school have a diagnosis).

We currently start Latin in Year 8 (age 12). In Year 9 (age 13) pupils can choose two options for further study from Latin, Classics, French, German, and Spanish. They then have the option of taking Latin and Classics on timetable in Years 10–11 at GCSE (ages 14–16) and in Years 12–13 at A Level (ages 17–18).[1] For the Year 9 Classics class, we have the luxury of an on-timetable set, and no set curriculum that we have to follow. This is, in fact, the course that changes most frequently, as what gets taught depends on who is teaching it. Over the years we have covered Athenian democracy, bad emperors, Greek architecture, and what makes a myth, amongst other topics.

After we received the timetable for the academic year of 2020–21, my teaching colleague and I were discussing what to teach to the Year 9 Classics classes. She had both Year 9 Classics classes and wanted to focus on their reading. We have also always felt that we should resource the Year 9 course ourselves. There was no neat textbook that covered everything we wanted, so the endless creation of PowerPoints from each change in the course added to our workload. This time, we sat down and discussed where our pupils were and where we needed them to be. For GCSE Classical Civilisation, we teach Myth and Religion and Roman City Life, and at A Level we teach the *Odyssey*, Greek Theatre, and Greek Religion.

My colleague, wanting to reduce workload, looked at what resources were available and we discussed what our aims were. We decided that we needed the pupils to read more widely. They were struggling to access translated sources at GCSE as they did not read often. They found the complex vocabulary and classical names hard to access, and therefore found it difficult to recall the details of the texts. We decided that the best option was to find a course that would get them used to lots of mythology and get them reading. The Cambridge Schools Classics Project (CSCP, 2024) *Classic Tales* resources looked ideal for what we wanted (see https://classictales.co.uk/).

Classic Tales in the classroom

The *Classic Tales* resources, originally designed to support pupils listening and oracy skills, are a selection of stories, recorded by professional storytellers. They are available for free online and come with a range of classroom activities. The stories available are versions of Aesop's *Fables*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. As there was a selection of texts to choose from, we could tailor the course to our pupils' interests. Although our pupils were at the older end of the intended age range, the material allowed for a good grounding in mythology and accessible resources to help those with weaker literacy skills.

For the first year, my colleague opted to do the 'War with Troy' story. We teach the *Odyssey* at A Level, and it felt right to give the pupils the opportunity to learn about the war where Odysseus made his name. My colleague planned a course of the 'War with Troy' to take half a term with 2 hours and 20 minutes of lesson time and set about planning her delivery. As I was not teaching the course that year, I cannot say for definite how it went in the classroom. What I can say is that when that Year 9 class started GCSE, they were still talking about it, and any time any of the associated myths came up in class, the pupils would eagerly discuss

the characters. One pupil even took it upon herself to read the *Iliad*, as she had enjoyed the 'War with Troy' adaptation so much.

For the next academic year, 2021–22, after the success of the initial trial, we decided to continue using the *Classic Tales* resources. That year my colleague had one class and I was teaching the other. We decided to do 'War with Troy' for the first half term and then move onto Tales of Change, the *Classic Tales* version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. My initial experience of teaching the course was positive. We provided pupils with printed copies of the workbook to read along with as the recorded version of the story played. This allowed pupils with weaker reading skills to follow along. The website also has an interactive reader, which highlighted the text as it is being read aloud. Pupils were given the choice of reading this on the board or their own booklets, as the story was played to the class in a lesson. About half the pupils opted to follow the text on the board, the other half preferring to follow along in their own booklets. We did not use the initial read of the story for note taking or highlighting; instead, pupils simply read along with the storytellers.

After reading each episode, pupils had to answer some initial comprehension questions, just to show they had followed the story. There are some provided by the *Classic Tales* website under the 'follow up tab'. Most pupils were able to answer these questions well. Those who needed more support could use their own copy of the text to find the answers. We provided a glossary for a few words, 10–15 per episode, to help any pupils who struggled with the meaning of the more complex vocabulary. We also included the character table provided by CSCP in the pupil booklets, so that they could keep track of who's who. This is conveniently supplied both by episode and in alphabetical order.

In the early weeks the pupils were engaged with the story and wanted to discuss the details in greater depth. They quickly had favourites and wanted to discuss the motivation of the different characters and how they differed from modern ideals of heroes. The timeframe we had set out meant that we were covering two episodes a week. This proved to be quite a short timeframe, and with the joy of us not having to stick to any particular plan, we extended the 'War with Troy' unit of work to cover the whole term. This allowed for more activities to happen around the different episodes. For some of these, we used the suggested materials provided by the *Classic Tales* website, such as discussing pictures of the story and whether we agreed with the interpretation of the characters. We also did activities such as hot seating and newspaper articles.

Assessment

This paper is not really about assessment, but for anyone interested, we decided that the formal assessment for each term would take the form of a GCSE-style 8-mark question. This is an evidence-based question where pupils compare two different sources and come to conclusions about the topic. This allowed for comparison of different sections of the text, worked on the pupils' extended writing skills, and allowed us to start developing their knowledge of the GCSE course. We allowed time in lessons for the writing to happen, so that appropriate scaffolds could be used. This happened after Episode 8, rather than at the end of the course, so that it was not the last thing done.

Pupil engagement

As pupils progressed through the story they became increasingly invested in the characters. The death of Patroclus was not taken well by the class, and coloured their opinion of Achilles' and Polyxena's interactions. Overall, we had a similar result to the first year in that the higher prior-attaining pupils were requesting further reading on the topic. The lower prior-attainers could recount much of the story and had picked favourite characters and strong opinions, showing a clear comprehension of the text. Pupils were excited to hear that 'story time lessons' as they had been nicknamed, would be continuing after the Christmas break.

In some ways, it would make more sense to do 'The Tales of Change' stories first. Unlike the episodic 'War with Troy', where pupils need to remember what happened earlier in the story, these are stand-alone episodes. The resource has broken up Ovid's *Metamorphoses* into its most famous myths and dealt with them individually.

Our decision was made in consideration of two factors: first, that we wanted a way to work the *Iliad* onto the curriculum, and that was why it had been talked of before; and, second, that the pupils had a similar level of starting knowledge of the Troy myth. Most had heard of Helen, but did not know much more. With the 'Tales of Change', however, there was a much more varied range of knowledge. Some had details from the Percy Jackson stories,[2] some had read children's versions of the myths, and some knew nothing. By teaching Troy first, the pupils were all at least aware of the Olympian gods.

Lesson structure

The *Classic Tales* website has a suggested order to follow the stories, and several other ideas if you do not like their first suggestion. To keep our lives simple, we decided to follow what was on the main page of the website. As my colleague had done most of the planning for the 'War with Troy' unit, I took control with the 'Tales of Change' unit. We followed a similar lesson structure; retrieval practice, vocabulary, story introduction, read the story, do a comprehension exercise, then a main activity and a plenary. As the 'Tales of Change' stories are shorter than the 'War with Troy' episodes, we found that in some lessons, we could actually cover two stories comfortably. This would depend on how well the stores fit together. Our aim, timewise, was to complete all the stories by Easter. The 'Tales of Change' also come with five myths from around the world, which can be directly compared to five of the tales. This allowed for classes to discuss mythology from around the world and compare it to the Greek and Roman stories. The inclusion of Balder, a Norse story with Loki as a central character, went down particularly well. For these stories, we got pupils to create their own character tables, as one was not provided. As pupils covered more stories, they became confident in comparing the different stories. They suggested reasons why the gods should be feared or not, and whether mortals were to blame for any of the events. We also discussed the role of women in society at length. The myths from around the world sparked interesting comparisons and pupils drew out similarities which made them explore the nature of different cultures. All in all, it felt successful. Pupils made their way through the different stories with enthusiasm. They had strong feelings on the different characters – Orpheus and Eurydice broke their hearts, Baucis and Philemon had a 'happy' ending.

These pupils, now my Year 11 GCSE class, still discuss the stories with passion. They have read more widely around mythology, using books by Madeline Miller, Natalie Haynes, and Jennifer Saint as a springboard to explore the stories with a more modern eye. A familiarity with the stories from the 'Journeying to the Underworld' unit for the Myth and Religion paper, has allowed pupils to more

easily access the Homeric Hymn to Demeter and the more literal translation of Ovid's Orpheus and Eurydice. They have compared details with the version studied two years ago and discussed why they might have changed.

Modifications in the second year

In the academic year of 2022–23, we repeated the 'War with Troy' unit as had been done previously. One change was the newspaper report, which the pupils asked to be a video war report. This proved a creative endeavour and allowed pupils to prove their comprehension of the stories and their understanding of the different issues the story highlights. For the 'Tales of Change' unit, we decided to only do a selection of the stories and limit the unit to half a term rather than a full term. This was for two reasons: first, I was teaching one class and the other was being taught by a member of the school's senior leadership team, who wanted a more civilisation-based course (we spent more time on Roman entertainment), and second, a few pupils were beginning to lose enthusiasm for the stories in the last couple of weeks of the Easter term. In particular, the Labyrinth story was a longer version of the Theseus and the Minotaur story, so pupils felt it was a little repetitive. The stories chosen were: Creation Part 1, Orpheus and Eurydice, Erysichthon, Baucis & Philemon and Arachne. These worked well to keep pupils engaged. However, we lost some of the comparative myths. However, my trainee teacher for last year did some research and found something that worked.

Classic Tales and oracy

I often have trainee teachers in my department, and they usually take on my Year 9 class. This means that they have also been part of this trial and have had their input into the scheme of work. Two trainees have read the stories aloud or got the pupils to read aloud rather than use the recordings. This has the benefit of improving pupils' reading skills. However, my assessment of these attempts is that the lower prior-attainers struggled without the interactive reader to follow. It also added anxiety to the class as several pupils lacked the confidence to read aloud with conviction. Neither they, nor the trainee teachers, were able to give as polished a performance as the professional storytellers, which meant some pupils lost meaning as the emphasis was not quite right. Here I may be influenced by my own loathing of public recitation. It always put me off as a pupil, and I still hate doing it as an adult. However, my experience from the classroom tells me that pupils were less sure of the stories that had not used the interactive resource as the weaker readers had not been as well supported.

I also adapted my teaching last year by giving more vocabulary to pupils. A fellow classics teacher highlighted the website *Rewordify.com* to me. This is a place where you can copy and paste an entire text and it will produce a list of complex vocabulary and provide a glossary for them. I started producing these for the pupils in my class with English as an additional language, but it is a scaffold that helps all readers. The weaker readers in the class could access the stories more readily and therefore comprehend them more easily.

Encouragement to read

My current Year 10 Classical Civilisation GCSE class have not got to the 'Journeying to the Underworld' unit yet, but have coped with the myths of Hercules reasonably well. They may have benefitted from doing more reading in the Year 9 course, to practise these skills further. According to the baseline data, they are overall a weaker class and therefore will struggle more. The stories did encourage more further reading for this group, with one particularly strong pupil reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in full over the summer holidays. For the academic year of 2023–24, we have reverted to teaching the full 'Tales of Change' selection, but we will omit the Labyrinth story so as not to be repetitive. I feel that this will help pupils get the most practice of their reading skills before they start the GCSE course.

Overall, I have found this course to be useful in terms of improving reading skills. Pupils have to engage with large chunks of text and remember a continuous story. The interactive reader really helps pupils with additional needs. A pupil with a visual impairment has commented on how it has helped her to engage in the class more easily. Pupils will weaker reading skills also find it helpful to be able to go back and listen to the stories again, to help the revise. Parents have also commented on pupils' engagement with the stories, noting that some children, who are usually reluctant to read, have become enthusiastic about finding more things to read on this topic.

As we, as a department, continue to refine this course, I would like to make more of the glossed vocabulary I give to pupils. I do this to an extent now, but feel it could be improved. I also feel that I would like to build in an opportunity for pupils to re-read the story in class after the initial read through. This is helping pupils to process more of the details. It would need to be planned carefully due to the large ability range in the classes. Extension tasks are something else I would like to improve. I am trying to come up with a long-running task that pupils can complete whenever they finish a task. The difference in reading and processing skills means that some pupils finish the comprehension questions before other have answered the first two.

Notes

1 GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) is a set of examinations for different subjects taken by students aged 15–16 after 2 or 3 years' study. A Levels (Advanced) are examinations in subjects taken by students aged 17–18 after a further 2 years' study, as preparation for entry to Higher Education.
2 Percy Jackson (Riordan, 2006) is a series of books which uses Greek mythological characters to tell stories set in the modern day.

References

CSCP (2024) Classic Tales. Available at https://classictales.co.uk/ (accessed 23 April 2024).
Riordan R (2006) *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. London: Hyperion.