My first encounter with studying ‘Classics’ was in my first year at secondary school, during which I followed a one-year ‘Classics’ course which focused on the culture and mythology of ancient Greece. I was fortunate enough to be able to study Latin from Year 8 and Greek from Year 9, but it was that ‘Classics’ course I followed in Year 7 which first ignited my passion for the ancient world, and which set me on a path that eventually led me to become a Classics teacher.

It was, therefore, what we would recognise as a ‘Classical civilization’ course which changed my life and made me a Classicist, and as I began my teaching career one of the aspects of the job to which I was most looking forward was teaching the GCSE subject Classical Civilization. Now, however, at the end of my third year as a qualified teacher, I have come to see that Classical Civilization, as a GCSE and A Level subject, presents challenges as much as it offers a chance to those of us who would wish to teach it, and for those children who wish to study it.

This article, which is based upon a paper delivered at the Classical Association Annual Conference 2013, hosted by Reading University, is an exploration of some of those challenges. I do not claim to offer any real answer here, not least as I write from a position of considerable inexperience, but I do feel, as many have thought before me, that questions of this nature need to be asked, and solutions found, if Classical Civilization is to provide (or even ‘be’) the opportunity we all want it to.

Classical Civilization – by which I mean courses that study the classical world by reading Greek and Latin literature in translation and by investigating the culture of Greece and Rome – have since at least the 1960s been seen as a means of increasing the number of young people studying the ancient world at school. The non-linguistic nature of Classical Civilization certainly ensures that the subject is accessible to students who might not find the study of Latin or Greek easy, whilst it also allows it to be taught by those without knowledge of ancient languages. It has been my experience that there is relatively little overlap between those taking GCSE Classical Civilization and GCSE Latin, as Figure 1 demonstrates.
In other words, there were this year (2013) 24 teenagers who learned about the ancient world up to GCSE who would not have been doing so had a non-linguistic course not been on offer, a pattern repeated over the previous three years in the two schools in which I have worked. I cannot claim that this pattern is repeated nationwide, but these figures do suggest that Classics as a discipline ‘gains’ students because of Classical Civilization being on offer. Nationally, the numbers of students taking Classical Civilization are very healthy compared with those taking Latin, Greek and Ancient History, as Figure 2 showing numbers of examination entries at GCSE and A2 Level makes clear.

It seems highly likely that many of the students who take Classical Civilization will not be studying another Classical subject, and we can therefore be pleased that Classical Civilization does appear to be delivering on its promise of increasing the number of young people who study the ancient world at school.

We perhaps cannot, however, be pleased with the number of students taking a Classical subject when those figures are compared with the number of students taking other subjects:

As Classicists, we cannot be satisfied with a situation where for every one student taking GCSE Classical Civilization there are 50 students taking History – a situation where GCSE Classical Civilization is attracting a number of students of the order of magnitude achieved by GCSE Religious and Tourism rather than GCSE Religious Studies. It is not the aim of this article to review in depth the reasons why the Classical subjects now occupy such a marginal place in secondary education in the UK; it will perhaps be sufficient here to note that the main reason why so many fewer pupils study Classical Civilization than other apparently comparable subjects is that the subject simply is not available to as many students due to issues which include lack of space in a school’s curriculum and a shortage of suitably qualified teachers. What I do want to pursue here, however, is whether there are aspects of Classical Civilization as a subject that prevent it, even where it is taught, from being as successful as we might wish.

One such aspect must surely be the ‘reputation’ that Classical Civilization enjoys. All subjects have a reputation, as was brought home to me last year when a group of students started producing internet memes on a range of issues to do with school. Amongst these were two I confess to having found funny – one declaring ‘Dropped colouring pencils on sheet of paper – Got an A* in Geography’, the other a picture of toddlers drawing pictures with crayons, captioned ‘Meanwhile...in Geography’. These memes were playing upon the reputation of Geography, which seems to have been reduced by them to ‘Geography equals colouring in’ – in reality a most unjust opinion. I found it less easy to laugh, however, when the meme-producers turned their attention to Classical Civilization, producing a ‘Meanwhile...in Class Civ’ meme which showed Maximus fighting off tigers in Gladiator. In the eyes of at least these students, therefore, the reputation of Classical Civilization – or ‘Class Civ’, an abbreviation which itself seems to demean the subject – is ‘Classical Civilization equals watching films’.

Although such an opinion might cause us to shudder, the students were not, of course, entirely wrong. I imagine that most Classics teachers have been grateful (at least on some level) for the way that Gladiator, Troy, Alexander, 300, Disney’s Hercules and Clash of the Titans (among countless others) have simultaneously raised popular awareness of our subject and have also provided clips or whole films to watch and discuss in class. We surely need, however, to be aware that use of such resources risks Classical Civilization appearing to those who know no better as ‘ancient media studies’, with all that description (again, as Media Studies is generally perceived) may imply about the subject being a ‘soft option’.

Classical Civilization’s reputation as a ‘soft option’ comes not just from its (actual or assumed) use of motion pictures. Ironically, the very absence of a linguistic element from the subject that makes it so accessible makes it seem also easy by comparison with the ‘real’ Classical subjects of Latin and Greek – a perception that can have unfortunate consequences. At my second PGCE teaching placement, a mixed comprehensive upper school, GCSE Classical Civilization was in the process of being phased out; the senior management felt that it was worth continuing to offer Latin at GCSE because Latin was an intellectually-demanding subject which few state schools in the immediate area offered, but that the same arguments could not also be made for Classical Civilization. I now teach at a selective, academic, mixed independent school, and there too the reputation of Classical Civilization causes problems. I regularly witness, and try to correct, the belief held by some students who study Latin and Greek that Classical Civilization is a ‘doss subject’ and that those who study it are somehow ‘second-class Classicists.’ One occasionally hears the view from parents that they find it odd that an academic school should teach a subject like Classical Civilization, alongside the sense held by some that universities will take little interest in a qualification in Classical Civilization. However false the opinion may be,
if ambitious students, or indeed their parents, decide that Classical Civilization will seem like a blot on their Curriculum Vitae, they are going to be less likely to want to study the subject.

Four years of teaching Classical Civilization has been more than enough, however, to convince me that the subject’s reputation is wholly undeserved; my dismay at hearing the subject disparaged stems from a firmly held belief that it is actually a very difficult subject at GCSE and AS/A Level. Last year I taught a Year 11 Classical Civilization class who found their ‘Pompeii and Herculaneum’ module particularly daunting due to the sheer quantity of information they were supposed to know. The AQA specification for this module notes that ‘candidates will study the destruction and rediscovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum; their layout and buildings. Candidates will be expected to show an understanding of the topography of the two towns and how they were destroyed, using both literary and archaeological sources, and to evaluate the importance of the towns as evidence of Roman life.’ To do so, the exam board specified that students should read two letters of Pliny the Younger and become familiar with ‘public buildings’ (streets, shops/bakeries/bars, workshops, forum, baths, temples, theatres, amphitheatres) and ‘private buildings’ (houses of the Vettii, Faun, Menander, Tragic Poet, Cæcilius, Neptune and Amphitrite, Wooden Partition, villas of the Mysteries and Diomedes, apartment blocks, décor and furnishings). Such a quantity of material is not inconsiderable, and of course that module comprised only 25% of their Classical Civilization GCSE. My students’ other examined modules required them to read five books of the Odyssey, and to read Euripides’ Medea and understand the evidence relating to the City Dionysia; they also, for the final 25% of the GCSE, had to produce a controlled assessment essay of roughly 2,000 words on the topic of Nero, for which they needed to read significant excerpts from Tacitus’ Annals and Suetonius’ Life of Nero. Were this paragraph describing what students might be expected to do during a university course it might be reasonable, but I suggest that, when it is remembered that what I have just described is what pupils aged 14-16 are required to study for less than two years as just one of perhaps 10 subjects they are studying, the current specifications require students to cover a very considerable, perhaps unreasonable amount for a GCSE. Given that I think we must acknowledge that some of the students who take Classical Civilization are at the weaker end of the academic spectrum, perhaps drawn in by the subject’s reputation, the difficulties those students and their teachers will face in a mixed-ability classroom should not be underestimated.

The situation is not very different in the Sixth Form. Last year I taught a Year 12 class the ‘Greek historians’ module (for the OCR specification), and a colleague taught them the ‘Greek Tragedy in its Context’ unit. What this meant in practice was that between September 2012 and April 2013 – just six months in school – my students, who were also studying two or three other AS subjects, needed to read four Greek tragedies, five whole or part books of Herodotus and two of Thucydides, and two Lives of Plutarch. The exam board indicates that there should be 180 ‘guided learning hours’ to cover all of the work for AS Classical Civilization. On the ‘Greek historians’ side of the course, I only just managed to read the most important sections of the set texts in class time before the students headed off to revise over Easter. Although I would not want to suggest that other GCSE and A Level subjects do not require students to know a lot of information, the question of whether what we expect students to cover and know thoroughly for Classical Civilization is realistic still seems valid.

That question perhaps becomes even more relevant by looking again at what my pupils studied for their GCSE. Their controlled assessment essay was an ancient history task in which they needed to assess the usefulness of Suetonius and Tacitus as sources for finding out about the life of Nero. In their examined modules they needed to be able to conduct literary analysis of the Odyssey and the Medea, to evaluate the cultural phenomenon of the City Dionysia, and to discuss the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum chiefly on the evidence of archaeology. By combining study of ancient history, literature, culture and archaeology, GCSE Classical Civilization differs little in essentials from the degree course I took at the University of Cambridge. Even without Latin and Greek, Classical Civilization is the very essence of Classics with its multitude of disciplines and its focus on Greece and Rome alike. That means, however, that Classical Civilization is also a subject which requires its students to become capable in a range of different skills, and that it is a subject different from others offered at GCSE and AS / A Level in the variety of types of evidence with which a student needs to work. Given the time restraints, I worry that Classical Civilization risks requiring its students to become jacks of all trades, with the inherent danger that they become masters of none.

If the quantity and variety of material needing to be covered in Classical Civilization, even at GCSE level, are very considerable, the same cannot be said of the resources available to support teaching and learning of the subject. Given the relatively small numbers studying the subject, one can perhaps forgive publishers’ reluctance to produce materials for it, but that does make it hard work for students and teachers alike. The specified content for the GCSE ‘Pompeii and Herculaneum’ module discussed earlier prompted my then Head of Department to produce a 138-page booklet to cover student needs as no single published resource was suitable; for the AS Greek Historians module I prepared over 200 pages of notes to guide my students in their reading of the texts. Neither resource would exist without considerable investment of teacher time, and although it is part of the job of being a Classical Civilization teacher, it is not so much a part of the job of a Latin teacher, let alone a Maths teacher, owing to the existence of excellent and widely-available resources. It is perhaps
also disconcerting for students, when they ask what they can read for revision, to be directed either to major academic publications or to be told that nothing is commercially available. The lack of published resources perhaps also arises from the fact that Classical Civilization as a subject is currently defined by exam specifications rather than by an agreed, coherent framework. Producing a textbook that covers all available examination options would leave each covered inadequately; producing a standalone textbook unconnected with an exam specification would not be a great step forward from where we are. Perhaps what is needed is a clearer blueprint for what ‘Classical Civilization’ is, or should be?

Another challenge faced by Classical Civilization at GCSE is that it does not count towards the current English Baccalaureate performance indicator, and there are suggestions that some schools have, consequently, opted to switch from Classical Civilization to Ancient History, which does count. Although the burgeoning strength of Ancient History as a GCSE ought to be a good thing for Classicists, there is perhaps the risk of Classical Civilization losing out in its ‘rivalry’ with Ancient History on quite mercenary, results-driven grounds, which surely ought to be regretted as Classical Civilization fosters a broader skill set and is, as I have suggested, closer to the essence of ‘Classics’.

The final challenges to Classical Civilization I want to mention relate again to the teaching of it. I suspect many of us who teach the subject did not ourselves study it at school; despite my experience of ‘Classics’ in Year 7, I took Classical Civilization at neither GCSE nor A Level. It is not necessarily straightforward for those whose classical training has been through the Greek and Latin languages to become teachers of an overtly non-linguistic course. Classical Civilization also, arguably, demands of a teacher a much wider subject knowledge than either Latin or Greek given the range of topics that could be covered, and it may be that even those teachers whose experience has mainly been in the civilization rather than the languages of antiquity will find challenges in store if required to teach a topic with which they are unfamiliar. Such a problem might be exacerbated further where Classical Civilization is taught – as must seem realistic in many situations – by non-specialist teachers such as historians.

This article has painted an increasingly gloomy picture of Classical Civilization at GCSE and AS/A Level – a subject studied by few, with a reputation for being a ‘soft option’, that turns out to be incredibly difficult to study given the quantity and diversity of the material to be covered, and incredibly difficult to teach due to the lack of resources available and on account of the background of many of its teachers. Classical Civilization, I suggest, does indeed face a number of challenges, but I also suggest that we must not lose sight of the chance that Classical Civilization offers to widen access to Classics and to inspire a broad interest in antiquity for those who, for whatever reason, cannot access the world of the Greeks and the Romans through Latin, Greek or Ancient History. If we are to overcome the challenges and make the most of that chance, however, I suspect that we need to ask ourselves whether Classical Civilization as it stands is what we want it to be. Perhaps, I conclude, what is really needed to face the challenges of Classical Civilization, and to make the most of the chance it offers, is change.

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Reference

1 This is not the place for a full history of Classical Civilization: those interested in this area are directed to Hunt (2013).