Trivial Pursuit

If we want a great education for our children that is genuinely suitable for the age in which they are living, then we might have to reach back to the distant past for inspiration, argues **Martin Robinson...**

In 2006 my wife and I became parents. As a father, I did not want my daughter to become a 'customer of education'. I did not want to be regularly updated on what level she had reached, how globally aware she had become, or how good at teamwork she was. I wanted her to be able to talk about the things that matter; not to ignore the latest ideas, but to allow those ideas to emerge from an engagement with great works of culture, art, science, and the historical and literary achievements of, for example, Maurice Sendak, Lewis Carroll, A. A. Milne, and Greek mythology.

I began to consider a 'classical education' – having her engage with the works of the great and the good. But at the back of my mind was this nagging doubt: how do I give her a language of learning, a way of taking control of the process? Is this akin to me, as a parental Prospero figure, imposing a language on my Caliban of a child? Yet it is Miranda, not Prospero, who teaches Caliban to speak. This makes a difference because she has innocence, an ethereal quality, and a far more gentle approach to life. Caliban complains that she has, '*... taught me language, and my profit on't is, I know how to curse.*' Will this always be the relationship between teacher and pupil?

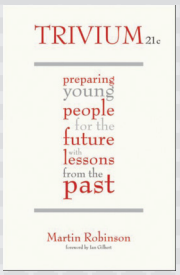
Finding the key

The utilitarian education establishment wants my daughter to develop the language of skills for the workplace. But surely there must be something greater than the language of the committee and the aspiration of middle management? If I look at language as representing culture itself, and if I consider all the great works from the past – those great creative, artistic, and scientific achievements – then there must be a way into this which offers a key that I can give to my daughter so that she can unlock the door and continue to discover life's richness and complexity, long after I have fallen off my perch and shuffled off this mortal coil.

There was a clue to be found in something I had discovered in drama improvisation and in teaching theory. This was an approach to learning that could help my daughter process knowledge, relate to truth, and have the freedom to express herself. I began to search for constraints – a mantra that would assist her in her learning and allow her to develop her own voice. It was an attitude to learning that is at once based in knowledge, argument, engagement, belonging, and the capacity to make a difference. I needed to go back to the beginnings of learning inherent in my own conventional schooling. This was a tradition that had failed me because it was taken for granted that I had the key. I didn't.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AFTER 20 YEARS WORKING IN LONDON IN STATE SCHOOLS – AS TEACHER, HEAD OF DEPARTMENT, AST, SENIOR LEADER AND QCA ASSOCIATE WITH A FOCUS ON CREATIVITY – **MARTIN ROBINSON** IS NOW A PARENT, WRITER AND CONSULTANT WITH AN INTEREST IN HOW THE ARTS SHOULD INFLUENCE EDUCATION. THIS FEATURE WAS EXTRACTED FROM HIS NEW BOOK, **TRIVIUM 21C** (INDEPENDENT THINKING PRESS, £18.99), WHICH EXPLORES WHETHER A CONTEMPORARY TRIVIUM CAN UNITE PROGRESSIVE AND TRADITIONALIST INSTITUTIONS, TEACHERS, POLITICIANS AND PARENTS IN THE COMMON PURSUIT OF PROVIDING A GREAT EDUCATION FOR OUR CHILDREN IN THE 21ST CENTURY (SEE P.74 FOR A REVIEW).



Three ways

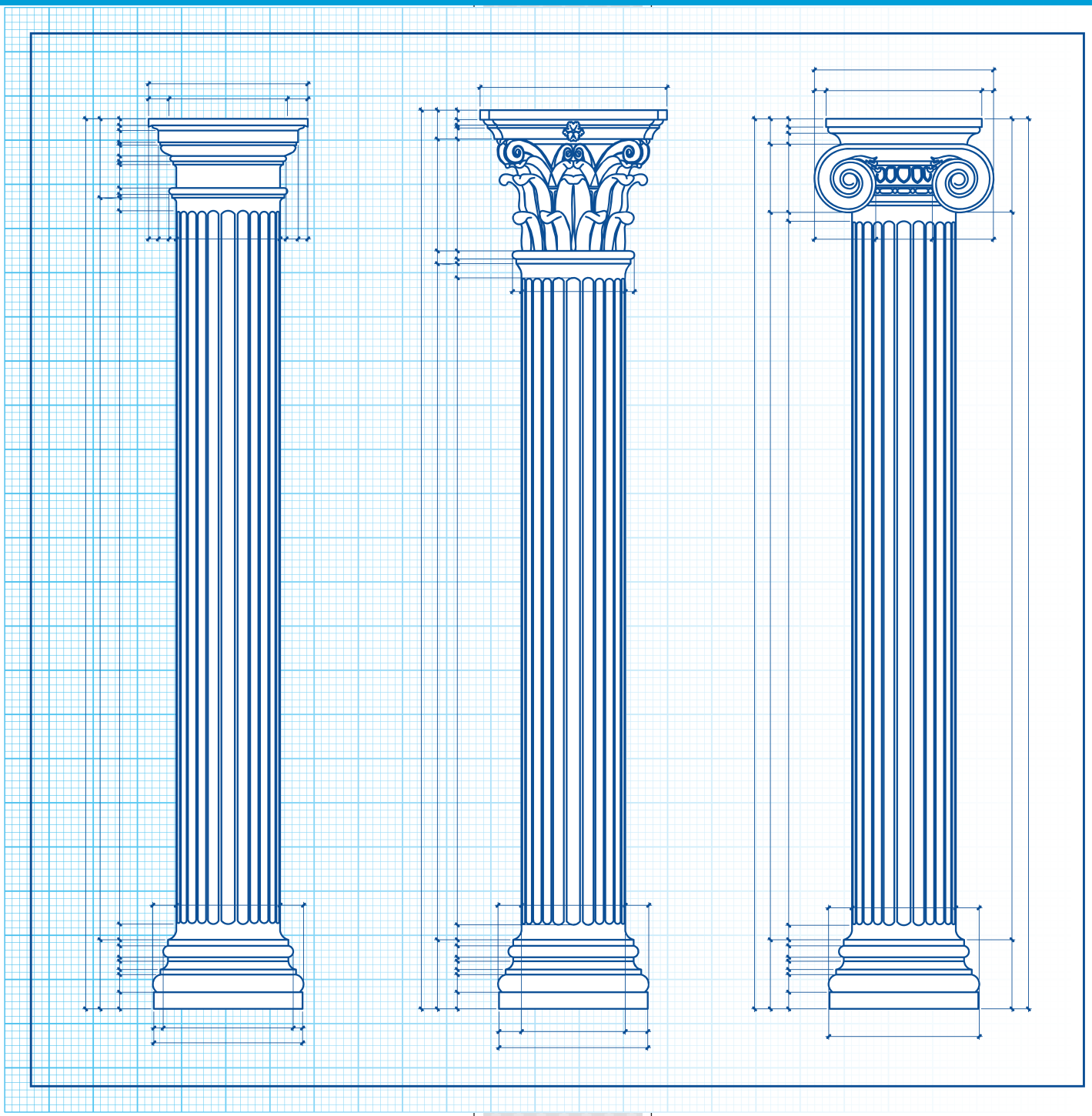
"*O, had I but followed the arts!*" says Sir Andrew Aguecheek in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, bemoaning the quality of his education. The 'arts' he refers to would not have been the subjects that we would think of today as the arts, but the seven 'liberal arts' that were the mainstay of a grammar school education in Shakespeare's time. These were divided into the quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy, which were more about number and content; and the trivium: grammar, dialectic (or logic or *logos*), and rhetoric, which were more about language and *ways of doing things*. The three arts of the trivium would be developed simultaneously, and once mastered it was expected that a student would have acquired the knowledge, the reasoning skills and the ability to communicate well that would stand them in good stead for the further study of the quadrivium.

Some of the finest minds had learned through the trivium; it had been tried and tested. But – and this is a big but – it had also, obviously, been abandoned. This set me wondering: how and why did the trivium come to prominence in the first place? Why did it stop being the basis of our curriculum? Is there anything from the trivium that survives in our schools today? Should I consider it as the basis of education for my daughter?

If I am to be a good parent, I need to encourage the idea in my daughter that curiosity is not best served by prejudice. If I want her to be an independent and free-thinking individual, I must not model the closed mind of someone who thinks there is only one way to wisdom. The three arts of the trivium challenge because they are, fundamentally, different ways of seeing the world. It would be far easier to be a grammarian, a dialectician, or a rhetorician rather than being an advocate for the trivium, because such an advocacy requires embracing contradictions and living with uncertainty, even paradox.

The good life

We have the authoritarian grammarians with their 'valued' knowledge and rules. We have the communitarian rhetoricians with their great oratory, who bestow citizenship and are interested in the development of virtuous character. The former tell you what to do; the latter encourage you to get involved. Added to these we have the awkward dialecticians, those who want to enter into debate, dialogue, or even just have a chat. We have the scientifically thinking logicians, all reason and slightly removed. We also have the Platonic dialecticians (*logos*), the believers in higher truths – perhaps they are quasi-religious types or



have artistic 'vision'. I might even suspect that they are prone to megalomania. Whatever they do or believe, they operate on a different plane. In the interest of education for wisdom and a good life, all of these come together under the umbrella of the trivium.

Autodidacticism, the art of teaching yourself, is something we all need to be able to achieve. I do not expect my daughter to leave school knowing everything there is to know, but I would like her to acquire the habit of learning on her own, of having knowledge, processes, and criteria by which to judge what she is yet to learn. The trivium – knowing, questioning, and communicating – is a *way* of learning rather than just the *what* of learning, and this is what I want for my daughter. I want her to know about things and how to do things. I want her to be able to question, both to find out more and also to realise that some things aren't known, can't be known, or aren't fully understood. I want her to communicate about things she has discovered, surmised, or created in the way of an open hand to the world. Finally, I want all this to have a purpose, which can be summed up by the phrase 'a good life' (because I certainly don't want her to have a bad one). When I look at the three arts of the trivium and the pursuit of a good life, I wonder why it was beyond the wit of my school to give me this grounding, and why it shouldn't be the grounding for a great education now. Surely, there is nothing that could stop the trivium from being the foundation of schooling for my daughter in the 21st century?

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