

# Learning at school

The Direct Grant school I attended with a free place by exam did offer us extra maths and English education beyond GCSE (then O level).

We did Maths and English O levels a year early, and then offered Additional Maths and Further English Studies at the end of the fifth form with public exams. This meant we did tackle calculus, trigonometry and more complex algebra and geometry. The average age of the class to take English and maths O level was a bit over 15. I took them around the date of my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday as I had jumped a year at primary school.

We took the French O level at the end of the first term in the fifth form and had a two term course encouraging us to read French literature with no public exam at the end.

I took 5 more O levels as well as Add Maths and Further English Studies at the end of the fifth form.

In the sixth form we had to take a Use Of English exam which we were told some universities required, and I sat 3 A levels in Economics, History and English.

My experience of the fourth and fifth forms was of hard work with a lot of rote learning, but some good grounding in basics that were needed later on. We were taught from a text book or from a lesson plan designed by the teacher. I found latin particularly testing, exacerbated by not enjoying what you could read when you managed to understand a bit more of it. I was not interested in Caesar's Gallic wars or Vergil's Trojan wanderings. I disliked the Roman invasion of Britain and their slave based system.

My experience of the sixth form was transformational. My History teacher taught us a crucial lesson at the start of the A level course. He told us we needed to read widely and find out about the subject. He could not do the work for us. He was not going to tell us how to answer questions. I realised it was up to me to spend time reading. I needed to set myself high standards and form my own judgements about the questions and issues raised. I did not have to stay for the sixth form and teachers were not going to accept responsibility for my choice to stay and study their subject. I needed to be really interested in it myself.

The first two terms were very difficult. I was very self critical, aware of how little I knew and struggling to find a style of writing which did justice to my thoughts and knowledge as it grew. The English course provided part of the answer. The teacher told us to ignore the set texts of the A level syllabus for the first year and spend the time reading widely to get a sense of the span and range of English literary output. Best of all we were asked to write an essay about a different Shakespeare play each week. This enabled me to study the best writing and phrase making. If you want to write well, read well was a phrase I subsequently came across.

My A level experience was further changed by winning an open scholarship to Oxford by examination in the fourth term of the sixth form. Suddenly all I needed was two grade E passes at A level to qualify for a student grant.

Oxford did not require A levels as they had examined me in four 3 hour exams already. I chose to continue with my 3 subjects but was even freer to study them as I saw fit. The School kindly arranged a readers ticket for me at the local University library to give me access to more material.

It meant when I arrived at Oxford I was well advanced in my studies . The College kindly procured a pass for me to attend seminars for research postgraduates to be closer to the cutting edge of the subject. I will draw some conclusions about what we can learn and how we can learn with help from a school from my experiences in a later blog.

I sketch this as it serves to remind us that schools can show flexibility if they wish, and more maths can be included before entry to the sixth form.