

Balliol College: Balliol College Classics: Dr Adrian Kelly - video transcript

The tutor, Doctor Adrian Kelly, is seated, facing the camera. The tutors' name and course subject are shown the first time they appear. The tutor answers the questions that are displayed on screen.

>> DR ADRIAN KELLY (ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, CLARENDON UNIVERSITY LECTURER, FELLOW AND TUTOR IN ANCIENT GREEK LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE): Hi there! I'm Adrian Kelly. I'm the Tutor in Ancient Greek Literature at Balliol College, Oxford, and I'm also an Associate Professor in Classics at the University of Oxford. My main areas of research are early Greek epic from the 8th to 6th centuries BC and Athenian tragedy and comedy and culture more generally in the 5th and 4th centuries BC.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What work do you give to students to prepare for tutorials?

>> DR ADRIAN KELLY: Well, the work that we like to give to the students is a mixture of reading and writing, so the way in which I do it and other tutors will do it in a different way. That's really one of the strengths of the Oxford tutorial system - that you can get people doing things in radically different ways. But the way that I like to do it is to give them a topic sheet with a series of relatively clear questions at the top and then a list of journal articles and book chapters that they need to read in order to get ready to answer the question. I tell them: go and read all that stuff, write down notes, think about it during the course of your lectures, talk about it with the other students, because that's really also one of the great things that we get them to do: we like them to get involved in collaborative learning. And then from your notes, start to think about how you'd structure an essay. And in that essay, we ask them to address the several questions that we've written at the top of the topic sheet and we ask them to hand that essay in the night before the tutorial. Other tutors will do it in slightly different ways, so that they'll get them to bring the essay to the tutorial and they then read it out, but I don't like doing that. I think actually the students' thinking has already taken place, and what I want to do is to take in the essay first, see what the students have done and then think about the sorts of things that I've got to do in order to get them to take the next couple of steps. And so that's how I like to run the tutorial work.

[Question displayed on screen:]

How are tutorials structured?

>> DR ADRIAN KELLY: The tutorial structure will vary according to what the tutor does, so if you're one of the tutors who likes to have students read out their essays then you'll get them to come into the room, sit them down, have a couple of words with them just to say "Hi" and you know, let them feel that they're in a slightly relaxed space, and then just get one of them to start reading out their essay and invite the other student to stop the first student whenever they have a question. But I'm not one of those tutors. I like to, sort of, read the essays the night before, so when we're actually in the tutorial, I've got a series of themes that I want to get us to cover, and so, I'll say: "Well, why don't you give us a precis of your essay, and the things that you argued - what you thought was the really crucial thing?" So you'll let the student give a very small presentation for a couple of minutes and then that's it, and then you'll stop them, you'll ask the other student what they thought of that, how their own treatment differed, if at all - some of the time it doesn't: they write the same essays - but then, what I do is I then say "Right well, out of that precis, what I can see there are three major themes that we've got to focus on." We then spend the time talking about those themes and I'll try to get them talking first, and I'll ask them questions. The best tutorials are those where the tutor is not saying very much at all, but often because of the fact that lectures are not really a large part of the way in which students learn here - they learn much more in their own time and during the course of the tutorials - one of the things that I'll find is that one of my duties as a tutor is to give them the basic kind of information that they need in order to answer the questions that I'm asking. So, I try to facilitate what happens. In the very best tutorials you get to students talking to one another and you're not saying a word, and that does happen, and when it does happen it's amazing - that's just brilliant!

[Question displayed on screen:]

How do you explore ideas with students?

>> DR ADRIAN KELLY: There are a number of ways in which we can explore ideas with the students. Obviously, you start out with the student essay and you want to see how far they've gone into a certain question. You're always trying to build on what it is that they've done, so that they feel that there's a collaborative learning environment, and it's not just one where I'm telling them things and they're writing it down, because that's boring. It's boring for me, it's boring for them. Some of the time it's by giving them new ways of looking at the stuff they have already written down. Some of the time it's by questioning them and seeing where their arguments have fallen down and then trying to challenge them to make those arguments stronger - you know, "What are the kinds of questions that you need to ask, in order to hold the thesis given some of the questions that I have asked?" It's always about question and answer. It's always about trying to get the students to think on their own feet but to work from what it is that they've got, because students here, we ask them to work very hard and they do work really hard. The quality of work that they bring into the tutorials is a really good basis the students to do the work before the tutorials and then making sure that we push them past it for further learning. So, it's always about getting the students to do the work before the tutorials and then making sure that we push them past it.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What do you enjoy about conversations with students?

>> DR ADRIAN KELLY: The thing I enjoy the most about conversations with the students are the unscripted moments, you know, because I've been doing this job now for almost 20 years. You can always tell with any given topic that there are three or four things that almost any student is going to say, because these are the basic things that you've got to say in order to get grips with a topic. What I love it is when students go off that script and they just start to make connections that I haven't seen. And so, what I really like is when students say something that is completely out of left field and that I've never thought before and it's "Oh I'm going to have to pause and think about that." I really like that moment. I really like that moment of intellectual stimulation and we're really lucky in Oxford, particularly in Balliol, because of the quality of students that we get that you will get those sorts of questions and they challenge you to think about not only your own knowledge but the way in which you've been approaching the whole question. So that's really what I like most.

[Question displayed on screen:]

How do students inform your own understanding of your subject?

>> DR ADRIAN KELLY: The students helped me with my own research and thinking about the parameters of my subject in a number of different ways. One of those ways is that I'm lucky enough to research some of the core areas that I teach. So Homeric Epic, Athenian Drama: these are the things that are very popular in our courses and we get lots of students wanting to take those papers, and so it means that when I'm coming up with something which I feel is an answer to a problem in the scholarship, I can try it out on my students. And that makes them kind of guinea pigs in a weird sort of way, but it's actually really useful for me, because they are very supple thinkers, they haven't yet been sort of forced into a certain way of dealing with a type of question, and they're much more open to different possibilities. I find that it's been tremendously useful. There was a time, about five or six years ago, every single thing that I'd published I had first tried on students in Balliol. And it was great. I get so much out of seeing them engaging with my own weird and wacky thoughts that when I'm able to draw on that for my further research, that really helps, and that's one of the reasons why the tutorial is just the very best sort of teaching environment, because the teacher gets out of it as much as the students do.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What qualities do you look for and seek to develop in students?

>> DR ADRIAN KELLY: I want to see enthusiasm first, and what I mean by that is not just someone who'll come into the room and say "I really love Homer" or "I really love drama." It's someone who's shown that they really love Homer and they really love drama by going beyond what they've been able to do at school. Some of our students will have

studied Homer and drama at school, some of them won't, but I'm looking for the same thing regardless of the schooling background, which is: "Have you pushed yourself beyond what you had to do? Is your enthusiasm of the sort that it's really driven you actually to learn something and to engage with this topic?" If it has, then that's really crucial. It's our job then to take that enthusiasm to make sure that students got the ability in order to do the degree here, and then push them on and shape them as students. But it's that enthusiasm at the start which has a real basis rather than just saying "Oh, I really like Homer." That's kind of what we're looking for.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What is the best thing about teaching at Balliol?

>> DR ADRIAN KELLY: There are quite a few really good things about teaching at Balliol. First of all, from a classics point of view, we've got a really large classics school here. Most other colleges just have one or two classicists; we have four. That means that we get lots and lots of students and so, on the one hand, that means a big teaching burden, but on the other hand it means lots and lots of really clever students that you get to deal with, so the size really helps. It's also the quality of students at Balliol. We get really good, clever, engaged, different students. We don't take all of our students from one schooling background. We really like to see people coming at these texts from a variety of different angles, and so it's the diversity and the quality of the people here that I really like.

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