



Balliol College History: Dr Helen Gittos- video transcript

The tutor, Dr Helen Gittos, is seated, facing the camera. The tutor's name and course subject are shown the first time she appears. The tutor answers the questions that are displayed on screen.

>> DR HELEN GITTOS (ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, COLYER-FERGUSON FELLOW AND TUTOR IN EARLY MEDIEVAL HISTORY): I'm Dr Helen Gittos, I'm a Fellow and Tutor in History, and I specialise in the Middle Ages.

[Question displayed on screen:]

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

>> DR HELEN GITTOS: The whole week's work is organised around an essay which the student writes. We would sit down at the beginning of term and talk about the kinds of things they're interested in, and design the work of the term around that. I would then give them a reading list for one of those topics each week and that would include things which were introductory ways into a new topic but also brand-new pieces of evidence that have just been discovered or debates that are exciting and current. The student would then spend, probably, about two-thirds of the week reading for that, listening to lectures, going to lectures that are related to that topic, and perhaps a third of the week writing their essay. And they would then hand the essay in maybe the day before or the morning before the tutorial and I would then read that essay, and that would then be the basis of the discussion within the tutorial.

[Question displayed on screen:]

How are tutorials structured?

>> DR HELEN GITTOS: Each tutorial is different. I usually try and start off with whatever is in the student's mind. They have spent a week thinking about this material and we will begin by talking about things they've read, things that they're puzzled by, questions they have or things that have really excited them -you know, what was really interesting and intriguing. Often that provides a beginning and then much of the tutorial will be exploring the ideas that they've written about in the essay, or maybe ones that they didn't quite manage to put in the essay but wish they had. It's very much a conversation which is starting from wherever the student is and it might end up in all sorts of ways. We might end up talking about something very different that fills in bits of their knowledge, or ideas that they hadn't covered, or we might end up dismantling the argument they put together and putting it back together in a different way and seeing if that is more powerful. Sometimes, we'll look at pieces of evidence, so we might look at, you know, images of maps or archaeological evidence, or some source, or something brand new, and think about what does this add to or change whatever the student has been arguing.

[Question displayed on screen:]

How do you explore ideas with students?

>> DR HELEN GITTOS: Sometimes, it's led by things that have come up from their work, something that they don't understand or they were confused by. Sometimes, it's about debating some current argument that's going on within the field, and we might explore what that debate's all about and why people have different sorts of views about something. Sometimes, it's very evidence-based, so maybe we talk about why historians have different views because they prioritise different sorts of evidence. Sometimes, it's about contextualising things differently, so if we look at these, something from a point of view of Britain, how does it look if we place it within a wider European or global context? How does that change things? Every conversation is particular and different and that's what makes them interesting.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What do you enjoy about conversations with students?

>> DR HELEN GITTOS: You never know what's going to happen. You don't know where it's going to end up, and the student has been reading and thinking about a topic for a whole week. They've sometimes read things that you haven't read for a long time or maybe that you haven't yet read, and so they're bringing all sorts of ideas and perspectives into the room. It's just a genuine pleasure to explore them with them and - and they're really unpredictable, and for that reason, they're very exciting.

[Question displayed on screen:]

How do students inform your own understanding of your subject?

>> DR HELEN GITTOS: It's genuinely a partnership. At its best, I am talking about things that I'm currently thinking about at the same time as the student, and we work together to think through real problems. It isn't so much a kind of going through the motions of having a debate, it's actually talking about what's really interesting and really puzzling and really current. At the moment I'm supposed to be writing about the 13th century and finishing a book chapter but, because I've been teaching early Anglo-Saxon England, I've ended up writing an article about the 6th century. That's absolutely informed by, related to, coming out of, things that I've been talking with students, both undergraduates and graduate students, and I similarly am bringing into tutorials things that I'm currently thinking about and working on, and the students talk with me about what they find persuasive or what they don't. At its best, it's very much really doing history, not just pretending to be historians.

[Question displayed on screen:]

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

>> DR HELEN GITTOS: We're looking for students who want to work hard, who are genuinely committed and interested in doing history. We're looking for students who are willing to take risks, to be adventurous, to not say the obvious, and we're looking for students who are interested in developing their own voice and treating it as something which is creative. Often, the very best students and the students that are great to teach are the ones who are perhaps a bit unconventional in some way, or simply are just really, really willing to think deeply and explore and be open-minded about the subjects that they're interested in and where their thought will take them.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What is the best thing about teaching at Balliol?

>> DR HELEN GITTOS: Oh, the best thing about teaching history at Balliol is the students. The students are extraordinary. They are such interesting, diverse, surprising, splendid people and being able to share some of that time with them is very special. But it's also an amazing place to do history because history is such a big subject in Balliol. We have four permanent tutors in history. We have a huge community of graduate students as well as undergraduates. It very much feels like a place where we collaborate, we work together, where there are long traditions of great historians who've worked here before, but we're currently exploring new ideas in a community.

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