

ORACY

Pinnacle of ACHIEVEMENT

Oxford Spires Academy, winner of the ESU Oracy Culture Award 2022, impressed judges with its numerous and far-reaching oracy activities.

We paid a visit to find out what sets the school apart

‘That was really good, now we’re just going to tweak it so that we win,’ says a voice at the front of the class at Oxford Spires Academy, a state comprehensive of c.1,300 students in the east of the city. The class, a mixed group of Year 7 to 9s has been rehearsing its performance for the Magistrates’ Court Mock Trial Competition in which a student, in this case a particularly innocent-looking Year 7 named Luna, stands trial charged with

possession of an offensive weapon in a public place. The case having been concluded, it is now time for feedback. ‘Make eye contact, don’t just read your notes.’ ‘Speak clearly – we know you all can.’ ‘Ask follow-up questions.’ ‘Have confidence. If you say something wrong, just go with it.’ ‘Remember to congratulate the other team.’

These comments – their delivery as assured as their content is constructive – come not from a teacher however, but from a group

of three Year 10 coaches, overseen by a Year 12 mentor, all of whom have gone through the competition themselves. This emphasis on student-to-student coaching was one of the things that caught the judges’ attention in Oxford Spires’ entry for our Oracy Culture Award 2022, and it is all the more impressive when one learns that the three Year 10 coaches today have all suffered with anxiety and mental health problems, and two of them have spent long periods as selective mutes.

‘Have confidence. If you say something wrong, just go with it’



Oxford Spires Academy has seen a five-fold increase in students taking part in oracy activities in recent years



‘All three of them have really struggled over the past couple of years and to see them suddenly able to advocate for themselves and others, and clearly enjoying what they’re doing, is just so wonderful,’ says maths teacher Kate Morris, who, with English teacher James Hart leads the Enrichment Team in charge of oracy activities.

FULL HOUSE

In fact, the process has been far from sudden and is due in no small part to the plethora of oracy activities that Kate and James lay on, most of them in their own time out of school hours. These include, among others, a Year 7 and 8 speech competition in which sixth formers judge entries to decide the shortlist; inter-house and inter-academy public speaking competitions; various debate clubs and competitions; the Mock Magistrate and Mock Bar competitions (now almost entirely student-led); all three national ESU competitions; Shakespeare performances for the Oxford Preservation Trust; a ‘Spires Speaks Shakespeare’ event (based on the ESU’s Performing Shakespeare

Competition) that sees students mentor Year 5s in local primary schools; and an annual much-loved panto, which often acts as a stepping-stone into many of the other projects. ‘Once Miss Morris knows about you, there’s no getting away,’ jokes Eva, a Year 12 student who attributes her decision to stay on for sixth form to the oracy activities and leadership opportunities on offer.

Each activity, and the roles within them, is carefully chosen to appeal to different abilities and to build different skills. So the chair in the ESU’s Public Speaking Competition has to summarise events and engage with the audience and visiting speakers, while the magistrates in the Mock Trial practice their note taking but need only speak in front of a small group – perfect for shyer children.

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A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

In the three groups we’re lucky enough to spend time with on our visit, it’s obvious what a supportive and friendly community it is. ‘It’s important that we all support each other, not just within our house but across the houses,’ says Eva. ‘We want to ensure that there’s a good standard across the board so that everyone can compete the best they can and enjoy it so that they want to come back and do more.’

That they clearly do. ‘I was really nervous when I joined Spires because it was a whole new secondary,’ says Luna, our hammer-wielding accused. ‘But when I joined the panto, and then mock magistrates and ESU Shakespeare, I found a community that I’d never had before. Also, I’m not from England, so these clubs have helped me find my words and to speak more clearly and confidently.’

For Henry, a Year 10 student whom the isolation of lockdown caused to become a selective mute, it was the friendships and confidence gained from Mock Trial in Year 7 that made them feel brave enough to come back in Year 9. ▶



Teacher Kate Morris, below, believes oracy skills are important in building confidence

‘Everyone is so kind and welcoming, and you know everyone else is also nervous. It’s not just you.’

Despite the hefty workload, both Kate and James feel these extra-curricular activities are vital to their students, pointing out that although many imagine Oxford to be a town of genteel academia, the school’s catchment area includes postcodes that fall into the 10 per cent most income-deprived in the whole of the UK. Over 40 per cent of students have English as an Additional Language and 24 per cent are pupil premium. ‘Oracy is so crucial to their development, for their passion and ambition,’ says James. ‘It helps them speak with confidence and charisma, to make informed decisions and to build relationships.’

‘For me, it’s about making sure that our students have all those opportunities that private school students get,’ says Kate, who herself went to private school. ‘I want them to have the confidence to compete – not just in competitions but to know that when they go to university, they have a right to be there and feel they’re everybody’s equal.’

Kate is not alone in recognising the benefits in this. ‘A lot of people who you meet through competitions might be future politicians or CEOs so it’s

‘It’s inspiring having older students help us. I realise that if I want to be like them, I have to start building my way up now’

really important that we as a state school have the chance to get involved and make those connections for ourselves,’ says Em, a Year 12 student. Ayesha, also in Year 12, agrees, adding that beating such a school is a real confidence boost, especially for the younger year groups. ‘I remember a competition against a girls’ private school when I was in Year 7,’ she says. ‘They all had crisp blazers and impossibly shiny hair and I thought “how can I ever compete?” But we won. It was really heartening.’

RECOGNISING SUCCESS

These wins – and indeed the participation itself – are recognised with colours which students wear proudly on their school jumpers; are publicly celebrated alongside sports and arts achievements in the school’s newsletters and prospectus and, crucially, feed into the house cup. ‘So many schools award their house cup only for sports,’ says Em, ‘whereas here, drama, music,



science and public speaking all feed in. It’s acknowledging that we don’t just value the people who do sports, we also value those who really enjoy chemistry, or who can explain a topic clearly.’

As you would expect, as students witness and hear about each other’s successes, more want to become involved, and around 20 per cent of the school now participate in some way – a five-fold increase over the last three years. A strong house system, which encourages cross-year collaboration, has helped this growth, as has the increasing emphasis on student leadership. ‘It’s inspiring having the older students help us,’ says Natalie, in Year 9. ‘I realise that they’re only one or two years ahead of me and I really want to be like them, so I have to start building my way up now.’

This trickle-down effect can also be seen in the wider community where outreach activities, such as the Spires Speaks Shakespeare project, have encouraged an increasing number

WORDS: NATASHA GOODFELLOW IMAGES: ROGER HARRIS

of students to choose the school (it is significantly over subscribed). Toby, now in Year 10, was first introduced to the academy as a primary school student when he came here to perform a speech from *The Merchant of Venice*. ‘That’s one of the reasons why I wanted to come to Spires because they had such an amazing theatre to do all these speaking and drama things,’ he says.

Allowing students to take the lead on various projects not only enables them to develop different skills, allowing those who may not be the strongest public speakers to shine, it also brings other benefits. ‘It frees up time for the enrichment team to work with students who don’t naturally put themselves forward,’ says Kate, adding that it is often these students who stand to gain the most.

The ESU’s Oracy Culture Award celebrates those schools placing oracy at the heart of their curriculum. There are two award categories: one for primary and one for secondary schools. Applications are now open via esu.org/awards and close on the 14 July. Winners will be announced in September.

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MAKING AN IMPACT

In what is surely proof of an effective oracy culture, this is something the students themselves recognise. ‘Speaking activities are such a great opportunity,’ says Merca, in Year 10. ‘They help build confidence, they help you in your schoolwork, your research and writing skills, and you meet different people and do different things than you usually do in school.’ Delilah, in Year 9, agrees. ‘When you write an essay, you just hand it in and the grade is the end of it,’ she says. ‘But when you make a speech, people come and talk to you about it. You feel like you’re making an impact.’

Principal Rich Corry has nothing but admiration for his team who go to such lengths to enable these opportunities for the students, especially in the current climate. ‘It would be so easy to drop them because of the focus on the curriculum, because there’s no money, because there’s no time, but actually, it’s all these enrichment activities that make Spires so special. We can’t expect teachers to do all this, but the fact that they do is amazing.’

The children themselves acknowledge this too, volunteering, entirely unprompted, how grateful they are to their teachers for giving up their evenings and weekends for them. ‘Miss Morris and Mr Hart are so inspiring,’ says Milton, a Year 7 student. ‘Because they do so many different things, it makes me realise that I don’t just have to pick one job. My A levels won’t decide everything for me – I can do whatever I want to do.’

THE STUDENTS SPEAK

‘Public speaking has helped me find a part of myself I never knew existed. I always wanted to speak and express myself, I just didn’t know how to. Making friends with people through these clubs was probably the best thing I’ve ever done.’

Sadiya, Year 10

‘Oracy has helped me present myself and my ideas better. Also, if I don’t like other people’s ideas, it’s taught me how to say so in a constructive way.’

Toby, Year 10

‘Public speaking and debating teach you a lot about politics and how the country is run. I think it gives you more than just confidence, it gives you a sureness in yourself, a belief in what you’re doing.’

Ayesha, Year 12

‘Oracy helps you to think on your feet and improvise in unexpected situations, and to apply the knowledge that you do have when faced with a problem that you perhaps don’t fully understand.’

Em, Year 12