

# Arabella Anderson-Braidwood

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## Reflections on the Oxbridge Tutorial

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Arabella Anderson-Braidwood\*

## REFLECTIONS ON THE OXBRIDGE TUTORIAL

### Abstract

This paper examines the composition of both Oxford and Cambridge Universities, with particular emphasis upon the college-based tutorial as the blueprint for a more relational form of education. The article covers a brief history of the college system, the life cycle of an Oxford student, and the educational outcomes of the tutorial. This is shown to promote creativity of thought, and therefore proves to be a successful method of teaching. In conclusion, it is suggested that the tutorial is gaining popularity within secondary education as an alternative to group teaching, chiefly because of its focus on the development of the individual student.

### Keywords

Oxford, Cambridge, Oxbridge, oxbridge interview, tutorial, Oxford College, Cambridge College, education.

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Oxford and Cambridge are recognised around the world as institutions of academic excellence. Both are consistently ranked amongst the world's top ten universities, and vie for first place on the independently assessed British league tables (World University Rankings, 2009).<sup>1</sup> Those students fortunate enough to have satisfied the rigorous entrance requirements gain a unique life experience, centred upon college communities in which they receive unparalleled teaching from world-class academics through the form of tutorials. These involve weekly meetings with an assigned tutor to discuss the student's re-

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\* **Arabella Anderson-Braidwood** was born in London, grew up in Scotland, and now lives and works in Poland as an English teacher. She holds an M.A. (Hons.) in Art History and English literature from St. Andrews University, and an M.Phil in History of Art from Clare College, Cambridge. She enjoys reading, visiting museums and galleries, laughing, entertaining and "doing life" with her husband Marcin.

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge currently holds 4th place on the international ranking list, and Oxford 10th, whereas *The Times* analysis of British universities places Oxford first for 2009, and Cambridge second.

search and ideas, expressed in the form of essays. This ancient method of teaching is the cornerstone of an Oxbridge education, and it would seem that there is, currently, a push for its renaissance in popular education. What follows is a brief review of the mechanics of the Oxbridge system – the formation of the colleges, the life-cycle of a student, comments on Oxbridge “blues” and a consideration of the tutorial itself. I would like to suggest that although highly demanding, student life at Oxbridge is a positive experience that trains students, primarily through the tutorial, to think independently and creatively.

### History of Colleges

It is important to understand Oxford and Cambridge not as static institutions with one system of hierarchical governance, but as dynamic federations, much like the United States. Both are made up of a mixture of colleges and permanent private halls (PPHs are only found at Oxford). At the present moment Oxford comprises 38 colleges and 6 PPHs with a total of 11,917 undergraduates and 7,350 postgraduates (Facts and Figures. University of Oxford, 2009). Cambridge has 31 colleges with 11,824 undergraduates and 6,001 postgraduates (Facts and Figures. University of Cambridge, 2008).<sup>2</sup> The guidelines for relations between each college and any kind of central administration can be vague, as each college has a large amount of autonomy in how it operates within the University.

The foundation of Oxford and Cambridge, and their subsequent organisational structures, differ slightly. Oxford is the oldest university in the English-speaking world, and although there is no clear date of foundation, teaching existed at Oxford in some form in 1096. It grew rapidly from 1167, when Henry II banned English students from attending the University of Paris. By 1201, the University was headed by a *magister scholarum Oxonie*, on whom the title of Chancellor was conferred in 1214, and in 1231 the masters were recognized as a *universitas* or corporation. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century rioting between townspeople and students hastened the establishment of primitive halls of residence. Most of these original halls were monastic in nature, but sadly none of those dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries survived the Reformation in their original format. The modern Dominican permanent private hall of Blackfriars is a descendant of the original (founded in

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, the exact number of students fluctuates from year to year; on average it is around 18,000.

1221), and is therefore sometimes described as heir to the oldest tradition of teaching in Oxford.

Rioting between ‘town and gown’<sup>3</sup> in 13<sup>th</sup> century Oxford caused a group of scholars to flee to Cambridge in 1209. At first they lived in lodgings in the town, attracting students to them, but in time houses were hired as hostels with a Master in charge of the students, in a system mirroring that at contemporary Oxford. By 1226 the scholars were numerous enough to have set up a *universitas*, represented by an official called a Chancellor, and seem to have arranged regular courses of study, taught by their own members. As at Oxford, from the start there was friction between the students, who often caused disturbances, and the citizens of the town, who were known to overcharge for rooms and food. King Henry III took the scholars under his protection as early as 1231 and arranged for them to be sheltered from exploitation by their landlords. At the same time he tried to ensure that they had a monopoly of teaching, by an order that only those enrolled under the tuition of a recognised master were to be allowed to remain in the town (University and Colleges..., 2009).

Colleges as they are known today began to emerge at Oxford in the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century, where University, Balliol and Merton colleges were all established between 1249 and 1264 (though precisely which is the oldest is unknown); at Cambridge Hugh Balsham, Bishop of Ely, founded Peterhouse in 1284 (A Brief History..., 2009). Generously endowed and with permanent teaching staff, the colleges were originally the preserve of graduate students studying divinity. However, once colleges began accepting fee-paying undergraduates in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the hall system went into decline. Some of the original halls merged, becoming colleges, such as Michaelhouse (1324) and King’s Hall (1317), which joined to become Trinity College, Cambridge in 1546. Contemporary colleges St. Edmund’s Hall (Oxford) and Trinity Hall (Cambridge) retain the title of hall for historical reasons connected to their foundation, though they are in fact proper colleges.

A college building will normally consist of a sprawl of several “quads” (Oxford), or “courts” (Cambridge), each added at a different stage in history due to the growing number of students. The inevitable architectural melange provides an atmospheric backdrop to student life; St. John’s College Cambridge has a total of eleven courts, sampling architectural styles from the later Middle Ages through early

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<sup>3</sup> This is a traditional expression that describes the relations between the university members and the townsfolk, still used today at both Oxford and Cambridge, as well as many other British universities.

Neo-Gothic to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. College expansion continues to this very day; currently St. John's, Oxford and Clare College, Cambridge are each building a new quad and court. College buildings are also popular film locations; Christ Church College, Oxford is featured in the earlier Harry Potter films, and several parts of the recent *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* were shot in and around St. John's and Trinity, Cambridge.

Colleges contribute towards the vitality of university life through a strong sense of identity and friendly rivalry that can, at times, resemble tribalism. Each college has its own set of buildings that are often entirely self-contained so that all the sleeping, eating, teaching, administrative and library facilities are on one site. In addition, colleges typically own a considerable amount of land within their respective cities, enabling an overflow of students to still live "in" college accommodation, although not within the college building itself. Colleges bear their own coats of arms, have nicknames or diminutives, such as "The House" (Christchurch, Oxford), or "Emma" (Emmanuel, Cambridge), and a vast array of personalised clothing for a number of activities, all in college colours. The college affiliation of undergraduates can be identified from 100m simply by the colours of their scarves.

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### **The Life-cycle of an Oxbridge Student**

In the last two years of school, British students take between three and four Advanced Level exams (A-Levels) in a wide variety of subjects of their choice. The grades they receive, on a scale of A\* to E, (with A\* being the highest), supply the academic credentials used by British universities to choose their undergraduates. Students applying to Oxford or Cambridge must have a minimum of three A grades in their A-Levels. Hopeful students apply to "read" a certain subject, specifying in their application a college to which they hope to become member. Academics are also attached to colleges, and because of this, some colleges are known for different academic strengths – Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, is well known for engineering, for example.

A month or so after the initial application (in which you must include samples of written work), worthy candidates are selected for interview at their prospective colleges. This stage is made up of (at least) two separate interviews; in each, the student is interviewed by two professors and asked a series of questions relating to their subject. Typically at the end of the first interview, the professors will give the candidate a topic to research in the college library, and the student

will discuss their findings in the next interview, normally a mere 24 hours after the first interview. The entire process is academically demanding, as Oxford's admissions website declares: "The University of Oxford is world-famous for academic excellence. The best and brightest students are selected, irrespective of their background, on their academic merit, and passion and commitment for their chosen degree course" (Studying at Oxford, 2009). Entertainingly, the Oxbridge interview has passed into the realms of mythology within British culture. There are stories, passed on from one generation of students to the next, which describe tutors lying on the floor and demanding, "Surprise me!"; of shoes being removed, chairs not being present in the interview room, and even of newspapers being set on fire.

In many ways, the interviews are a reformatting of the tutorial, and supply a taste of Oxbridge's demanding study regime, based around weekly tutorials and essay writing. Following a successful interview, and acceptance, new students "come up" to their university for matriculation at the start of the Michaelmas term on 1st October, which marks the beginning of the academic session.<sup>4</sup> During term time, students are expected to remain at the university working hard; Cambridge has an old law that all students must live within two miles of Great St. Mary's church during term time to ensure their ongoing membership in the University.

The short eight week terms are very fast paced. At the start, students are given their lecture programme – a series of lectures based in their departments, which they are expected to attend. In addition, science students are given scheduled lab sessions. All students are assigned a tutor; at Oxford this is normally someone based within the student's own college, but at Cambridge the tutor is more often from a different college. This tutor will meet with the student once a week for an hour to an hour and a half; typically there will be between two and four students in a tutorial, but sometimes the teaching is on a one-to-one basis. In the tutorials students discuss their latest research and findings with their tutor; the tutor will try to stretch their students intellectually and will set them another essay topic for the following week (essays are approximately 2,000 words long).

It is important to note that 90 per cent of the work done by Oxbridge students is independent research. Both Oxford and Cambridge Universities boast an impressive network of libraries, the most famous being the Bodleian at Oxford, and the University Library at

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<sup>4</sup> The university year is divided into three terms of eight weeks: Michaelmas runs from October to December; Hilary from January to March, and Trinity from April to June.

Cambridge, which have between them some 15 million volumes, besides periodicals, maps, etc. Both libraries continue to grow rapidly. In addition, every college has its own library, most of which are open 24 hours a day, and contain the books necessary for the majority of undergraduate research. Even in the small hours of 2 or 3 a.m., students can be found reading in earnest for their tutorials.

The essays presented for discussion at tutorials are graded by tutors, but these grades do not contribute toward the students' overall degree classification. At the end of the first year at Oxford, students sit the prelim exam, which they must pass to proceed to the second year of study. At the end of the final year, students sit another set of exams, their "Finals", at which they are tested on a wide variety of material which undergraduates covered over the previous three years (a large portion of which is supposed to have come from independent research). In addition to the extreme stress induced by Finals, Oxford students have to sit all their exams wearing sub fusc: a form of dinner suit that is incredibly taxing to wear in exam conditions. A short time after Finals, students discover their degree classifications; at Cambridge these are posted on boards outside the Senate House, known to all as the Wailing Wall. There are five kinds of degree classification – the rare double firsts, achieved only by the brightest students; first (still unusual), upper second, lower second, and finally third, which is mysteriously known as a Desmond, after Archbishop Tutu, in student slang.

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### **Oxbridge Blues**

The relationship between an Oxbridge tutor and his/her students can be a recipe either for success or total disaster. Many students upon arriving at Oxford or Cambridge suffer a mild form of depression. This can be caused by several factors: always, there are the dramatic changes brought on by leaving home and the transition from school to university. Often, students suffer a blow to their self-confidence as they determine their place in the academic pecking order amongst scores of bright fellow students. Most common is the stress of coming to terms with the rigorous Oxbridge schedule and the high expectations of professors and family. Around 800 students at Oxford use the university counselling service each year: approximately 5-6% of the student population (O'Brien 2004). The demanding work-hard, play-hard environment begins to show half way through term, when both universities' students complain of something called "Fifth Week



Blues”, a kind of malaise that sets in due to the incremented stress of the work cycle. But there are worse species of mental discomfort.

Intensive academic work, especially at the culmination of a degree course, often causes stress, isolation and depression. The strain of Final exams is a primary cause of self-harm or suicide amongst Oxbridge students, and has been widely publicised. Older studies show that up to two-thirds of students who commit suicide at Oxford are worried about academic achievement, or their courses (Hawton, Simkin, Fagg, Hawkins 1995). Statistics at Cambridge are slightly lower, with an average of two suicides in the University every year (this is also slightly lower than the general age-matched population) (Collins, Paykel 2000). In spite of this, Cambridge University Counselling Services estimate that about 40-50 of the students who seek their help every year talk seriously of “suicidal ideation” (Reducing the risk..., 2009). However, of the number of cases of deliberate self-harm admitted to the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford in 2007, only 24 were Oxford University students (18 females and 6 males), 1.5% of the total number of patients received during that year (Hawton et. al. 2007: 13).<sup>5</sup> Within this group, employment or studies as a cause of self-harm only featured at a 31.1% rate in males, and 22.8% in females, with relationships emerging as the most common problem that precedes self-harm.

Of course, there is a whole framework of services in place for preventing student depression and suicide. These include careful induction upon arrival at university, provision of generous extra-curricular resources, such as sports facilities, to help alleviate academic stress, and readily available student counselling and psychiatric services. College life is invaluable in fending off depression. Most colleges have a “parenting” system, whereby freshmen are assigned to older students who help them to acclimatise upon coming up. Students living in college work, eat, sleep and socialise in the same quarters, all of which develops a strong sense of purposeful community and college identity. The network of societies across innumerable different sporting, intellectual, musical or other subjects also help to provide a support framework that bridges colleges. All in all, Oxbridge students rate their university experience extremely positively; college life and close contact with academics offered by tutorials are cited as the main ingredients for happiness. This is shown in a 2008 poll, which placed Cambridge at number two and Oxford at seven for student satisfaction within the U.K. (McCall, Grimston 2008).

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<sup>5</sup> *N.B.* for the authors, ‘deliberate self-harm’ is defined as something that “encompasses both ‘suicide attempts’ and acts with other motives or intentions” (Hawton et. al. 2007: 1).



## The Tutorial System

In the earliest moments of Oxbridge it would appear that tutors acted frequently *in loco parentis*. The first statutes of Trinity College, Cambridge, which date from 1552, inaugurated a tutorial system in which the fellows took responsibility for students' academic *and* moral progress, teaching them Greek, amongst other things, and ensuring they settle their bills (Advancing by Degrees, 2009). Vestiges of this still survive: a colleague at Cambridge was regularly driven to the airport by her tutor; one Oxford alumni recalls a philosophy tutor who would pass around the brandy during tutorial to stave off boredom. Drink receptions, dinner parties and Christmas mulled wine in a tutor's set, or rooms, are common if not universal happenings.

Today tutors work primarily to develop the intellectual *savoir faire* of their charges. The Oxbridge tutorial enshrines discussion rather than the didactic relay of information. In the words of the Oxford undergraduate admissions website: "The tutorial system's success relies on the active exchange of ideas between you, your tutor and other students present. You must be prepared to give and defend your own opinions, whilst conceding to others and accepting constructive criticism and advice. Through this method of teaching you will develop your ability to think independently" (Studying at Oxford, 2009).

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This independence of thought is the entire end-goal of the tutorial. Students are taught to be hunter-gatherers of information, rather than relying on the spoon-feeding by older and wiser academics. However, this can be something of a double-edged sword. Whilst the tutorial develops students' intellectual flexibility, teaching them how to elegantly present compact summaries of research with their own opinions, students can become insular, arrogant and academically snobbish. With time, older students jettison first year inferiority for over-confidence. "Oxbridge arrogance" is a slur often cast upon the attitude of graduates (albeit frequently by those who failed to win a place at either university). Other critics point to the mental incongruities of Oxbridge alumni, who can discourse at length about theoretical physics or Romantic poetry, but who fail to spell correctly or lack the skills to tie their own shoelaces.

However, the so-called "arrogance" has undergone a subtle change in recent years. In previous centuries, an Oxbridge education was sometimes required "not so much to receive occupational training as to acquire the social polish considered intrinsic to a commanding personality" (Kuklick 1979: 26 after Stoler 2002: 230). It was possible therefore, in the "old days", to slip into the university on the strength

of social connections, rather than academic excellence. One exceptional case of this occurred the 20th century, when Prince Charles attended Trinity College Cambridge from 1967 to 1970, though he did not shine academically either before or during his undergraduate years. Evelyn Waugh's aristocratic character Sebastian Flyte, the arcadian dandy serene in his laissez-faire approach to work, is depicted in the novel *Brideshead Revisited* as a member of Christchurch, Oxford in the 1920s, which he seems to attend on account of his fortune rather than any academic merit.

Today, this kind of favouritism has been thoroughly stamped out in a bid to maintain academic excellence, though temptation can still lurk. In 2002 an undercover reporter working for *The Times* newspaper posed as a rich banker, offering bribes to tutors on behalf of his son to ensure a place at Oxford's prestigious Pembroke College. Two fellows of the college succumbed, accepting large cash donations. They were later exposed and immediately dismissed by the college Master, Giles Henderson, who commented: "the speed and decisiveness with which the college...acted on this serves to underline Pembroke's commitment to the selection of students being made solely on the basis of academic merit and potential" (Two Oxford Fellows..., 2002).

One alternative to financial preferment that offers a surer route in is the Oxbridge Applications company. It was started in the early nineties by a group of recent Oxbridge graduates with the express purpose of preparing candidates for the entrance interviews, and, interestingly, it is run largely upon a tutorial system. Clients are trained in the correct rubric for the interview, tutored in their chosen subject, and taught how to give winning responses to difficult questions (the company currently employs a network of 400 Oxbridge alumni tutors, who teach candidates through the interview process). The current success rate of groomed candidates is 47% compared to 26% of 'external' applicants (Oxbridge Applications, 2009). Of course, the training provided by Oxbridge Applications comes with a weighty price tag, potentially offering richer students an unfair advantage at the admissions stage.

Another quality encouraged and developed by the tutorial in Oxbridge is creative thinking: the ability to adapt knowledge to the solution of awkward problems. This is frequently tested in the Finals exams: Maths students at both Oxford and Cambridge have sat papers featuring Lewis Carroll's absurd question, "Divide a loaf by a knife",<sup>6</sup> taken from his 19th century children's book *Alice Through the Looking*

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<sup>6</sup> For those interested, a detailed answer to this question can be found in Siklos 2008.

*Glass*. Last year English finalists at Cambridge were bemused to find lyrics by pop-singer Amy Winehouse alongside those of Walter Scott, John Milton and Shakespeare on their practical criticism exam (Woolcock 2008). But perhaps the most tangible examples of Oxbridge creative thinking have happened outside of the tutorial. In 1958 a group of engineers from Cambridge's Gonville and Caius College managed to put an Austin Seven van, weighing approximately 400 kilos onto the roof of the University's Senate House, a building separated from Caius by a narrow passage. This feat is proudly commemorated on the Caius website, where one of the perpetrators of the exercise recalls that "accounts and pictures, attractively biased by national temperament, appeared later in magazines as far away as Germany and Switzerland" (Gonville and Caius College, 2009) Urban legends recalling this story, still in healthy circulation in Cambridge, tell that the Master of Caius sent a case of champagne to the rooms of those students responsible as a congratulatory present.

### Into the Future

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It is this kind of creative ingenuity, bred in part by the particular attentions of a tutor, which has maintained the tutorial system over previous centuries. In light of the competitive nature of contemporary academia, and the increasing pressure upon academics to produce original research, it would seem that the trend would move towards the gradual extinction of the tutorial system. In larger and more rapidly developing universities (often found in large cities), where the ratio of student to academic is much higher, the tutorial is often scrapped in favour of larger and more impersonal seminars. Interestingly, universities taking this approach were ranked low in terms of student satisfaction last year, with otherwise high-scoring institutions like Edinburgh and Imperial College, London, languishing at the bottom of the league table. It would appear that tutoring is an essential constituent of a good education, making for a thriving, relational university. As such it is undergoing a renaissance in general education, with more and more school pupils seeking private tuition, not just for the grades, but also for the personal attention.

This is especially true for younger children. With growing pressure upon eleven year olds to secure coveted places in the top public schools in England, tutors are in demand not just for their knowledge but for a style of teaching that provides encouragement. Often the unique attention provided by the tutor ameliorates poor academic

performance at school (often due to large class size and unfavourable time constraints). Students who struggle with maths or chemistry find that they can grasp the subject more readily under the guided direction of a tutor – a massive confidence booster for a young child. Tutoring can also be an appealing career choice for recent graduates who don't know what to do post-university. It is a lucrative business, (some tutors earn between £30 to £40 per hour), sometimes carrying hidden perks like travel (Jacobs, Green 2009). Moreover, tutors have the benefit of seeing their students flourish rapidly, frequently developing a hunger for more advanced material – rewards enough for anyone with the inclination to teach.

This kind of individual attention, already offered by the Oxbridge tutorial for hundreds of years and now spilling out into the broader educational system, could potentially cause a glorious reformation in the state sector. Could an introduction of the tutorial system into state education provide the answer to many problems, such as disruption in the classroom or poor ongoing academic performance, whilst also providing a framework that would allow teachers to appraise difficult or harmful external factors more easily? Could a relational-educational approach be the panacea for all ills?

It would seem that the course is coming full circle for the tutorial system. Begun in Britain as the pedagogic training of young men at Oxbridge within a homely, hostel system with overtones of avuncular supervision, the tutorial has evolved into a highly dynamic forum for learning. Students benefit chiefly but not exclusively from the close contact given by their assigned tutor, which develops creative thinking as well as mental sagacity. The fruits of this style of education are now finding appeal outside of Oxbridge, and are being used as a more engaging alternative to the time-honoured class-room structure. It remains to be seen what effect the tutorial will have in schools, and whether this will lead to a greater osmosis between Oxbridge and the world beyond its dreaming spires.

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**Arabella Anderson-Braidwood** urodziła się w Londynie, dorastała w Szkocji, a obecnie mieszka i pracuje w Polsce jako nauczyciel języka angielskiego. Zdołała tytuły M.A. (Master of Arts) z wyróżnieniem na kierunku historia literatury angielskiej na Uniwersytecie w St. Andrews oraz M.Phil (Master of Philosophy) na kierunku historia sztuki na Uniwersytecie w Cambridge (Kolegium Clare). Lubi czytać, zwiedzać muzea i galerie, śmiać się, przyjmować gości oraz żyć codziennością ze swoim mężem Marcinem.

## Streszczenie

### *Uwagi o systemie tutorialnym na uniwersytetach w Oksfordzie i Cambridge*

W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono strukturę uniwersytetów w Oksfordzie i Cambridge; skupiono się szczególnie na opartym na strukturze kolegiatnej systemie tutoringu jako modelowym rozwiązaniu edukacji opartej na relacjach. Przedstawiono historię systemu kolegiatnego, kolejne etapy doświadczeń studenta oraz skutki stosowania systemu tutorialnego. W tekście argumentuje się za tym, że jest to skuteczna metoda uczenia, która wspiera twórcze myślenie. W podsumowaniu wskazuje się, że tutoring staje się coraz bardziej popularny w szkolnictwie średnim jako alternatywa dla uczenia grupowego. Jest to umotywowane przede wszystkim naciskiem, jaki tutoring kładzie na indywidualny rozwój każdego ucznia.

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## Słowa kluczowe

Oksford, Cambridge, Oxbridge, rozmowa kwalifikacyjna w Oxbridge, tutorial, Kolegium Oksfordzkie, Kolegium w Cambridge, edukacja.