

# Enquiry-Based Learning Use of Papyri in the Teaching of Classical Studies

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## Abstract

At Level 1, courses in Classical Studies aim to provide students with a broad foundation of knowledge and basic key skills for the analysis of literary texts. At Level 2, we aim to introduce students to new approaches to texts, such as literary theory, and also to encourage them to become independent researchers in preparation for dissertation work at Level 3. This project formed part of a new core course entitled 'Theories and Mythology' and involved the production of new digital images of papyri and manuscripts from the John Rylands University Library (JRULM).

After introducing the students to key principles of literary theory and the analysis of ancient mythology early in the course, the assessment and seminars used the principles of narrative theory to help the students to reflect on their own educational narratives. In the second semester we moved on to more explicitly EBL approaches, as students worked in groups on texts from the John Rylands collection, such as papyri and illustrated seventeenth-century manuscripts from classical literary texts on a mythological theme. Each group was asked to prepare a presentation to answer the following question: if the library was burning down, why should your text be saved?<sup>1</sup> The students made group and individual visits to the library to assess the value of their own text, guided by initial bibliography and questions about the history, interpretation and modern evaluation of the piece.

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<sup>1</sup> Significant collections of texts have been lost or damaged in just such a manner, as fires consumed libraries at Constantinople (1204), the Royal Castle of Stockholm (1697), or the Cotton Collection at Ashburnham (1731). See Harris, M. *History of Libraries in the Western World* (London: Scarecrow, 1995).

# Background

Compulsory course for Level 2 students on the Classical Studies programme, optional for others. Four students took this as an option as part of the Combined Studies degree. A total of 41 students registered for the course, with one withdrawal at Christmas. All of the students had taken at least one Level 1 course in Classical literature.

# Rationale

The EBL element of the course was linked to a wider emphasis on the use of narrative theory in education in the overall course structure:

## Aims

- To make students more effective and motivated learners, through exploration of their own learning strategies.
- To improve student engagement with the content of the CLAH programmes using modern educational theories.
- To make greater use of the JRULM's resources.

Objectives: The project involved two related areas:

1. To make the JRULM's collection of papyri and early manuscripts more accessible to UG students. A range of resources (including online digitised texts) were developed to provide jumping-off points for student exploration of texts in translation and the 'original' Greek.
2. To develop a framework for students to explore their own learning experiences through discussion of Greek myth. This involved setting up EBL study groups for 'Theories and Mythology', plus a student-directed WebCT project. This work, drawing upon narrative theory<sup>2</sup>, linked to (a) through consideration of the processes of translation, transmission and reception.

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<sup>2</sup> See Abma, T., 2000. Fostering Learning-In- Organizing Through Narration: Questioning Myths And Stimulating Multiplicity In Two Performing Art Schools. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, (9) 2, 211-231; Barone, T. E., 1992. Beyond theory and method: A case of critical storytelling.

# Approach

Students filled in a skills questionnaire at the start of the first semester. On the basis of this questionnaire the class was divided into groups of four or five, ensuring that each group had a good mix of talents, and at least one student who had previous experience with one or both ancient languages. Towards the end of the first semester the groups were announced and seminars discussed the principles of group work and the assessed presentations. We made an initial visit to the CEEBL centre and discussed issues of kinaesthetic learning and the reasons for using a new learning space.

At the start of the second semester, I took group visits to the JRULM at Deansgate where the librarians introduced the students to the library resources and allowed all the students to see their texts plus those of the other groups. Students were encouraged to register as readers and return to study their own texts, which most of them did.

For the next four weeks students met in their small groups to work on their projects. The entire class met together for group work sessions once a week, under the supervision of a GTA, Magdalena Oehrmann, who provided practical and social support. It was important that students had a point of contact who was not going to be involved in marking their presentations. These sessions were compulsory and monitored by attendance registers. Students were also expected to meet at least once a week in addition to these sessions and most groups met several times a week. While a number of venues were provided for them, such as seminar rooms and library space, most of the groups met over coffee or at the Deansgate library. Students were also given details of extra office hours specifically for this course, and were encouraged to send any questions they might have by email. This was the usual channel of communication used.

From the start of the process, students had been aware of the possible problems caused by group work, and had been encouraged to work through difficulties in their group. They were, however, aware that there was a safety net, that they could contact myself or Magdalena if there was a serious problem developing, such as the absence of one member of the group. There was only one case where this happened, when a student

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*Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 142-146; Bruner, J., 1985. Narrative and paradigmatic modes of thought. In E. Eisner (Ed.) *Learning and teaching ways of knowing*. Chicago, IL: National Society for the Study of Education, 97-115; Witherell, C. and Noddings, N., Eds., 1991. *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

made no contact for over two months, then expected to join in just before the presentation (there were no special circumstances). In that case, I informed the student that he was not now able to participate, and would forfeit his chance to gain this 20% of the overall course mark. While a number of students expressed some unhappiness after their presentation, because they felt that other members of the group had not contributed as fully as they might have, these were all problems which only came to light on the day of the presentation itself. In these cases, I discussed the problems with the concerned students and looked at further strategies they could use to avoid similar problems in future. In each of these cases, the concerned students offered the comment that they had not wished to question the progress of their fellow presenters until it was too late, because of a wish to avoid conflict. Although we had previously discussed strategies for conflict management, there were more fundamental problems of students' self-image and the social pressures they perceived. We were able to discuss this in the context of educational narratives which had formed the basis of work in the first semester.

On the day of each presentation, I arrived fifteen minutes before the session was due to start in order to resolve any last-minute problems. The class was well motivated and most students arrived at least twenty minutes early. The presenters had heeded warnings about computer equipment and all did a quick run through before the session started. Although the presentations were lecturer-assessed, students in the audience were given blank feedback sheets to help them reflect on their own responses. After each presentation, five minutes was assigned for questions. It was an indication of the success of the presentations that they inspired lively discussion.

The presentations were generally well thought through and well executed. They made good use of visual aids and showed a strong awareness of ways to persuade an audience. The strongest performances focussed directly on the question 'Why should we save this text?' and showed considerable rhetorical skill. One of the groups working on a battered 19<sup>th</sup>-century translation of *Agamemnon* began their presentation by saying they had initially wished they had a papyrus, and that the Deansgate librarian had described their text as 'a horrible little thing'. From this starting point they had been inspired to think laterally and to consider the value of the text as a historical object, a visual image and a cultural artefact. These students produced a First-class presentation, which was a cause for great celebration as the students individually had usually received marks for written work in the high 2:2 category. This demonstrated well how a change

of approach can draw out the best in students. The weakest presentations still achieved a good mid 2:2 standard, but demonstrated three key problems. One problem was the lack of structure – individual presenters often had their own section of work, and the group had failed to provide any editorial oversight, although they had normally assigned one person (as suggested in the course notes) to collate the material and prepare the PowerPoint material. A second problem was the lack of focus on the question set. In several cases, the argument for preserving the piece was only implicit in the overall presentation and had to be articulated further in response to questions. The final problem which bedevilled one group in particular was a lack of proofreading. Problems of spelling and grammar which were noticeable on a handout became glaring when projected in magenta-highlighted PowerPoint images.

Overall, the experience was a very positive one, both socially and educationally.

## Assessment

Short presentations of ten minutes plus questions were used to assess the main group work. This counted for 15% of the total course unit mark, with a single group mark being assigned. This was complemented by an individual short essay reflecting on the EBL process which counted for 5%.

Many students expressed anxiety about presenting at the start of the course, but this is a key transferable skill needed for when they seek employment. We discussed early on how best to deal with presentation nerves and the feedback from several students expressed how pleased they were to have had the opportunity to develop this skill.

The choice of assessment style was also determined by a wish to draw out students' hidden strengths. Presentations are particularly helpful for students who are predominantly Activists or Pragmatists in their learning styles, so the module as a whole changes the conditions from a model of lecture/tutorial which favours Reflectors and Theorists. (Using the Honey and Mumford (1984) system of learning style classification, with reference to the Kolb (1984) learning cycle. P. Honey and A. Mumford, *Using Your Learning Styles* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Maidenhead 1995. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1984); D.A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning. Experience as the source of learning and development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ. Prentice Hall, 1984)). It is also worth noting that the composition of the module as a

whole is designed to work on the three main levels of learning identified in Bloom's Taxonomy: while the initial lecture/tutorial sessions worked predominantly with Cognitive skills, which were then developed further through explicit evaluation in Semester 2, the use of presentations requires the development of Psychomotor Skills. In both semesters, the need to discuss in groups topics of some sensitivity, such as sexuality and gender, require students to develop emotional sophistication, which reflects objectives within the Affective category. See the updated version of Bloom's 1950s work in L.W. Anderson & D. R. Krathwohl (eds.), *A Taxonomy for learning, teaching and assessing*.

In the initial stages of setting up the groups, tutorial sessions discussed the marking criteria for presentations (which were based on the general university criteria for assessed work). Although the central principles, such as structure and content, were similar to those used for written work, the students were given specific guidance on how to interpret the criteria for the oral aspect of the work. We discussed how presentations allow for a greater range of techniques to influence an audience, and talked through some of the potential problems. In previous courses using presentations I have used peer assessment, but I have encountered a number of problems, and found that anxiety about peer assessment actually inhibited creativity<sup>3</sup>. For this reason, the presentations were marked by myself, while being recorded for 2<sup>nd</sup> marking/QAA purposes.

In each session, two groups presented their work using the PowerPoint facilities in the seminar room of the CEEBL centre. Each group was given initial oral feedback immediately after their presentation session, identifying key strengths and weaknesses, and were also told the mark. This immediate feedback allowed for a brief dialogue between tutor and students as the presenters reflected on their performance. This was followed by written feedback which gave more detailed comments and suggestions for improvement.

In their written reflection on the process, students were encouraged to reflect on the group dynamic and how their own role had contributed to the success of the project. While most students focussed on the practical skills they had developed, such as use of

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<sup>3</sup> See discussions in D. Boud, R. Cohen, & J. Sampson, *Peer Learning in Higher Education: learning from and with each other* (London 2001); N. Falchikov, 'Unpacking' Peer Assessment, in P. Schwartz & G. Webb (edd.), *Assessment. Case Studies, Experience and Practice from Higher Education* (London 2002), 70 – 79.

library resources and tips on giving good presentations, several also commented on how they had reacted to presentation feedback and noted that this was the first time in their career they had actually looked closely at the marking criteria for a piece of work.

## Evaluation

### 1. **Specific questionnaires:**

At the start of the course students filled in named questionnaires about their expectation and experiences as students. They commented on their predominant learning styles, their strengths and weaknesses, and how they felt about certain key skills, such as research or presentations. At the end of the course, they were asked to fill in a similar questionnaire and were then given back the initial questionnaires to assess how they had developed. The results of this process were discussed in tutorial groups, and indicated that all the students had become far more conscious of their own approaches to their studies. A significant proportion reported that they had developed key skills, and had surprised themselves with their ability to perform new tasks.

### 2. **Tutor feedback:**

As the overall course convenor, I kept my distance during the group work section of the course, and thus held a number of discussion sessions with my GTA, Magdalena Oehrmann. She reported that the group work sessions had been very productive and that many students had told her privately how much they had gained from the process. Magdalena was pleasantly surprised at how well the EBL process worked, and hopes to use it herself in her new job as a lecturer at the University of Lampeter.

### 3. **University questionnaire:**

It was difficult to assess the impact of the EBL element in the overall university questionnaires, as most comments were about other aspects of the course, such as the availability of library books. As 2007-8 was a difficult year financially, it was inevitable that such considerations would have an impact on the overall student experience. Previous versions of this course have been unpopular, with each successive change in format only improving ratings slightly. Comments have remained consistent over several years, as many students do not wish to take a compulsory unit and do not wish to study literary theory or develop new skills.

Unfortunately these are key skills for the Classical studies degree, and many students only realise the value of this course when they begin work at Level 3. While the same type of comments were given this year, the overall satisfaction with the course had improved, from a score of 1.3 to 1.5 (score range from -2 to 2).

## Further Development

The EBL element of the course was very successful so will remain counting for 20% of the mark in 2008-9. The structure of the course over two semesters was designed to allow students the maximum time to reflect on their progress, but several students commented that they would have liked more direct contact and did not like being left to mull over ideas during the Christmas vacation. For 2008-9 the course will run as a first-semester only unit, which may create a greater sense of cohesion and urgency.

In 2007-8, I used some images as part of one of our Open Days. The materials developed for this course will be modified so they can be used in our recruitment and widening participation strategy.

It was my intention that the framework created for the use of papyri in EBL groups would be available to course convenors on other UG course units in 2008-9, but this has been postponed until 2009 -10, because of the changeover from WebCT to Blackboard, which has necessitated a considerable rewrite of the resources.

## Overall Comment

Although the students were initially cautious, after they understood what was involved 99% of the group engaged enthusiastically with the material, and demonstrated that the EBL process had developed their skills as learners and presenters. It was particularly noticeable that students of all abilities were able to contribute positively. The best students were able to produce sophisticated reflections on their own thought-processes, and even those students who struggled to grasp some of the principles were still able to benefit considerably from the 'learning through doing' methodology. Several students surprised themselves with how well they did in this course, and commented that the experience had changed their self-perception and encouraged them to take on new challenges.