

Classical Studies for the New Millennium: Traditional Material Through New Methods and Perspectives*

Introduction

The last decade has seen a re-evaluation of the humanities and sciences in the university environment. Changes in the economic and political landscapes have incurred social ‘problématiques’ that reflect and are in turn reflected in academic curricula. Several recent publications have taken it upon themselves to defend liberal arts education, while university administration under the pressure of market value has questioned the role of the humanities. During this time, digital humanities has claimed a role in research and teaching, and for this reason on occasion has been interpreted as an attempt at a humanities revival, and perhaps even an admission of technology’s seminal ubiquity. In this paper, I reconsider digital humanities and argue that it should be appreciated as a novel methodology that effectuates a more holistic pedagogical approach both for the humanities and, even more specifically, for classics and the sciences. It is not a matter of one versus the other but of one effectuating and actualising the other.¹

This paper explores the role of classical education in a media-oriented era and identifies pedagogical practices that better elucidate the content of Graeco-Roman studies by relating them to contemporary issues and embracing diverse digital technologies. The paper presents results of a variety of techniques employed over the past five years in four classics and digital humanities courses as well as in a co-taught interdisciplinary offering with a classics component. This study argues that classical languages and cultures, as well as digital technologies, should be appreciated anew – one against the backdrop of the other. It is only then that what seems pure theory – as is the case with classics – or merely *ars gratia artis* – as can be the case with technology – acquires a more substantive and inferential existence that enhances students’ perception of the self and the world.

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1 Zakaria 2015 makes a very convincing case for the exigency of liberal arts education and the quintessential skills that can educate students to be productive, well-rounded, and adaptable adults. For another in-depth discussion of the humanities and their contribution to democratic societies, see Nussbaum 2010.

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Contemporising a classics course

One of the major issues of our time is the individual's sense of identity and belonging. The majority of people in the academic world and beyond would claim that classics is outdated and unable to be part of this conversation, let alone contribute to it. Additionally, we should acknowledge the ways in which classics has been misinterpreted and misused by disingenuous and misguided agendas with regard to such issues.² As an instructor, I believe that the most efficacious way to openly address such discussions and contribute to bettering the world is to educate future generations – our students. It is our duty to teach them how to read ancient sources and learn from the past.

To this end, I designed a course that prompts students to explore the world around them and their sense of belonging by effectuating traditional classics concepts through modern perspectives and digital methodologies. The title of the course is *Identity of the Self from Classical Antiquity to the Digital Era*. Throughout the class, students work on classical and modern texts on ethnicity, race, and citizenship and engage with digital storytelling to create stories actualising these issues. Another parameter of our perception of the self relates to our conception of the world's glocal (both global and local) dynamics. So I use virtual-reality applications and 3D scanning and 3D printing of copies of Graeco-Roman artefacts in class to enhance the students' understanding of the relevance of classical antiquity in the modern world and the connections between time and space. Ultimately, they experientially comprehend ideas of one world history and world cultural heritage.

More specifically, students learn to identify, describe, and explain the fundamentals of identity in the classical world, while being able to correlate it with today's concepts and the personal need to define ourselves as individuals and global citizens. They are trained to analyse and evaluate ancient practices and learn how to study history and why that matters – ultimately becoming able to appreciate the significance of the famous quote attributed to Mark Twain: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes". Beginning with ancient Athens, we consider fundamental concepts, such as democracy, but also question the exclusion of non-native born individuals. Students are assigned readings from Edith Hall's *Inventing the Barbarian*³ to modern publications in social studies and biology, such as Stephen Gould's article *The Geometer of Race*⁴ and Jared Diamond's *Race Without Color*.⁵ More importantly, the students have to create a video in class, using any free software, to vocalise and share their understanding of Athenian citizenship, inclusion or lack thereof, and relate it to personal thoughts and

2 For discussions, see Allen 2015, Dee 2003, and Zuckerberg 2018 for an extensive relevant bibliography.

3 Hall 1989.

4 Gould 1994.

5 Diamond 1994.

experiences. This is a group activity that enhances different skillsets and interests, while engaging all the students in diverse capacities – some students write the script, others take part in the skit, and others are in charge of the video production. Moving to the Roman Empire, we study and explore the viability of naturalisation within the borders of the Empire and explore the effect that language and culture acquisition had on the citizens of the Empire. During class, students reflect on Claudius' Lyon tablet, that bears the proposal to admit Gauls to the Roman Senate.⁶ The students have to contemplate, question, and ultimately argue cases of migration, naturalisation, glocalisation,⁷ and belonging, while also consulting secondary bibliography on these issues.⁸

To this end, the course brings everything to a more current context, as I ask the students to take a test, designed by Harvard University, that studies implicit bias based on gender, ethnicity, and other distinguishable characteristics.⁹ The point is to learn about historical perspectives and subsequently to be in a position to enhance their perception of 'us' and 'them' in our world.

Other topics to which students are sensitised are war victims, veterans, trauma, and giving marginalised groups a voice. Once more, the current sociopolitical landscape has normalised behaviors of exclusion and stigmatisation that need to be discussed. Ancient civilisations, the Homeric culture of heroes, and Aeschylus' *Persians* are only a small number of texts that can be wrongly interpreted by the untrained eye as simply glorifying war, which is only half the story. Therefore, this module and the class discussions are structured around Euripides' *Helen* and *Trojan Women* and are aimed to help students who share similar experiences vocalise their stance, to prompt others to empathise, and hopefully to urge everyone to consider more carefully and critically the world around them.¹⁰

During the last weeks of the semester, students engage with the concept of world heritage, embracing the mission of digital humanities to internationalise history and culture. The students are trained in exploring digital technologies, such as online museum exhibits and digital preservation of historical sites, to consider how such advances can help them understand themselves as agents in world history. To this end, at the end of the semester the students also practice 3D scanning and 3D printing and discuss how a 'foreign' artefact when 're-physicalised' in our classroom can become part of

6 For an extensive discussion of the tablet, its meaning and ramifications, and further bibliography, see Griffin 1982.

7 The term 'glocalisation' has a long history that begins in discussions of territory. There have been long scholarly debates as to its origins and its meaning. Most scholars agree that the term first appeared in the work of Roland Robertson, a sociologist, and Erik Swyngedouw, a geographer. The term became more prominent, widely used, and debated during the 1980s and mostly in the 1990s. For a very comprehensive and enlightening history of the term, see Robertson 2018.

8 Geschiere 2011 discusses autochthony in Africa and Europe. Iredale 1999 and Mahroum 2001 point to the skills and competencies of immigrants as instrumental in their integration. Sense of belonging (Baumeister, Leary 1995) and well-being (Phinney et al. 2001) are also key factors in fostering positive emotional processes and contribute to well-adjusted social interactions. Weingrod / Levi 2006 actually talk about "multiple citizenships," and Lerner et al. 2007 argue that immigrants use their identity of origin as an interpretive tool to construct another one.

9 <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html> (last accessed August 17, 2020).

10 For modern associations and perspectives, see Pillinger 2019 and particularly pages 74–107: 'Rewriting Her-story: Euripides' *Trojan Women*.' See also Son 2016.

our experience.¹¹ They engage with 3D-scanning tools and technologies to digitise and ultimately digitally preserve an artefact of interest from the Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida. The students then have to reconsider technology, authenticity,¹² and digital preservation in the face of environmental and war catastrophes¹³ as well as the very act of re-experiencing historical artefacts on our own terms.¹⁴

Language matters: moulding conscious speakers

Two other courses I developed pertain to the promotion of the study of language, including but not limited to the teaching of Greek and Latin. Greek, Latin, and any foreign language for that matter, are admittedly considered by students difficult to master, and more often than not inconsequential or useless to their future career path (an issue with which many of us have to contend). However, the foundational *gravitas* of language comprehension and cultural communication cannot be disputed. In this course, students are assigned a variety of readings, including Edward Said's *Return to Philology*,¹⁵ in which they consider statements such as the following:

“Humanism, I think, is the means, perhaps the consciousness we have for providing that kind of finally antinomian or oppositional analysis between the space of words and their various origins and deployments in physical and social place, from text to actualized site of either appropriation or resistance, to transmission, to readings and interpretation, from private to public, from silence to explication and utterance, and back again [...] all of it occurring in the world, on the ground of daily life and history and hopes, and the search for knowledge and justice, and then perhaps also for liberation.”¹⁶

They are also challenged to consider the power, significance, and monumental impact of language and to reconsider their notions of classics and the humanities. For instance, based on Amazon's artificial-intelligence machine that was meant to facilitate that company's hiring process, we discuss the power of language in issues of inclusion, marginalisation, and diversity, and how ultimately it leads to the shaping of our society.¹⁷

11 Carrozzino 2010

12 For discussions on authenticity, see Di Giuseppantonio Di Franco, Galeazzi, Vassallo 2018.

13 See Meskell 2018 for the history and perennial pertinence of UNESCO and the art of conservation.

14 Danto 2008, Jacks 2008, Nieves 2008.

15 Said 2004.

16 Said 2004, 83

17 Dastin 2018.

In language-focused classes, the use of treebanking analysis through the *Perseids* framework has, of course, proven beneficial.¹⁸ Moving beyond the morphosyntactic surface, though, I have combined this linguistic granulation with comparative analysis of other ancient and/or modern languages to explore styles of writing that can be more or less influential. Such an approach to language can also contribute to more profound apprehension of language as the most pervasive social tool. To this end, students have used software such as *Stylo*,¹⁹ *Voyant*,²⁰ *InfraNodus*,²¹ and *Wordclouds*²² to study political speeches, compare translations of Greek and Latin texts to determine discrepancies between the original and its translation, and have also compared ancient texts, such as Euripides' *Italicize*, and their modern adaptations to redefine classical reception. One student noticed that in the historically earlier American presidential debates the personal pronoun 'we' was used more frequently than 'I.' Another student examined parameters that influenced the translators of Virgil's *Aeneid* – whether historical circumstances, backgrounds, country of origin, or the agendas of the translators. Another worked on consensual and forced relationships in the ancient world to find similarities with modern-day '#MeToo' stories. And another student tried to explore morphosyntactic similarities between Roman historical and biographical works.

Thus, the seminal backbone of these courses is to teach students about the politics of language and to alert them to the dangers of doubting their pervasive involvement in and huge impact on our lives.

Digitising humanities, humanising the digital, or both?

I have also developed a transdisciplinary course titled *Digital Tools for the Arts and Humanities* that was designed not only to bring together students from different disciplines, but also to open a discussion about technology's role in the arts and the humanities as well as the role of the humanities and the arts in technology, and to promote re-appreciation of the need for disciplinary confluences. The course effects collaboration among digital scientists, scientists, social scientists, artists, and humanists. The core idea could be encapsulated in the project titled *The Next Rembrandt* in which computer engineers and artists collaborated to study the painting techniques and intricacies of Rembrandt and then proceeded to produce new artwork that would most resemble the painter's mastery.²³ Of course, we do not fail to discuss the pitfalls of such collaborations,

18 perseids.org (last accessed April 12, 2021); Crane 2012.

19 https://computationalstylistics.github.io/stylo_nutshell/ (last accessed April 12, 2021).

20 <https://voyant-tools.org/> (last accessed April 12, 2021).

21 <https://infranodus.com/> (last accessed April 12, 2021).

22 <https://www.wordclouds.com/> (last accessed April 12, 2021).

23 <https://www.nextrembrandt.com/> (last accessed April 12, 2021).

particularly when not conducted appropriately – observing the boundaries of each discipline while also engaging with their convergences.

During the course of the semester we discuss humanities, digital humanities, and human-centric computing. We explore text-, image-, and audio-based tools and projects. Furthermore, we work with visualisation tools, treebank annotation through the *Perseids* framework, 3D digitisation, *Stylo*, xml, html, and open-software-development APIs such as *Google Maps*.

The main idea is for the students to learn how to use a variety of tools that they will then re-conceptualise and re-contextualise in their own areas of research. To this end, the students' projects are meant to showcase that language can be studied from a linguistics perspective by a humanist, as an advertising component for online shopping, or an efficient promotional tool for social networking.

Also, the course is taught within the parameters of the *Sunoikisis* digital classics consortium.²⁴ Each week we have a two-hour session on a particular tool and its potential uses and then a one-hour session on the same or related tool or project as presented by a colleague through the *Sunoikisis* program. The multifaceted expertise in this consortium provides the students of this course with the possibility to attend lectures by experts in several different fields, and consequently to broaden not only their research perspectives but also their way of considering other disciplines. Another unique approach of the *Sunoikisis* program is the fact that several of the projects are presented by their creators.

More specifically, for the *Treebank Annotation* sessions, albeit focused on classical Greek and Latin texts, I have had students who annotated not only in one of the classical languages but also in Indian and Hebrew. The session on *Named Entity Recognition: SNAP and Recogito* inspired a project on the Silk Road in the past and present, in which the group designed their own interactive map. In the students' own words:

“The Silk Road constituted a route of goods, ideas, and cultures throughout the centuries. Connecting the furthest ends of the known world from East to West, it has been an invisible yet concrete network, which fostered intercultural encounters and economical exchanges in what could be considered the first stages of modern globalization. Nowadays, the Silk Road does not exist anymore as a trade route as it was before. Nonetheless, its existence perpetuates in the form of a framework to interpret the world. Recent events have highlighted once more how important the Silk Road is in the awareness of the people who live in the areas touched by it. Migrants who are crowding the European shores follow the same path that goods from the furthest Eastern regions would do in their last leg into the Old Continent. The One Belt One Road plan proposed by the Chinese

24 <https://www.dh.uni-leipzig.de/wo/sunoikisisdc/> (last accessed April 12, 2021)

government traces the original Silk Road to form a continuous trade and investment network to promote a transcontinental economic development zone among numerous emerging markets stretching from East, Central, and South Asia to the Middle East and Africa. The project will try to offer a multilayer representation of the Silk Road for what it meant in the past, and for what it offers to the understanding of current events.”

Finally, another project examined the authorship of a group of letters written under a pen name and attributed to Benjamin Franklin. Again, in the students’ own words:

“Ben Franklin used many different pseudonyms with full personas. However, the story of why Franklin invented Silence Dogood is interesting. As a teenager, he was working at his older brother’s newspaper shop in Boston called ‘The New England Courant’. He wanted to write for the newspaper, but his brother, somewhat of a bully, wouldn’t let him. So, 16 years old, he posed as an older widow named Silence Dogood, writing 14 letters and sending them to be printed at the shop of his brother every two weeks. The letters were consistently published in The Courant until his identity was discovered by his brother, prompting him to flee to Philadelphia. To clarify our method of proving our concept that Silence Dogood was one of Ben Franklin’s pen names was one in authenticity of authorship. We will first talk about our review of the pre-name cluster graph generated in Stylo that provides the Delta distance between the Silence Dogood Letters, the Busy Body Letters, and Franklin’s letters. The variance of the Delta distance that exists in this data set ranged from 0.9 to 0.6. This 0.3 variance supports our concept that there exists a high probability that the Silence Dogood letters and Busy Body’s letters were both written by the same author. After determining this, we compared the Delta distance of the three future writings that are known to be authored by Ben Franklin. The resulting cluster analysis shows that the text in Letter 7 and Letter 10 written by Silence Dogood aligns almost perfectly with the text in two of the letters that are known be written by Ben Franklin. One of these letters was to Sir Hans Sloan (1725) and the other was to Miss Jane Franklin (1746). The text from all three of Franklin’s letters falls at ~ 0.85 on the Cluster analysis.”

Techne: the technological and cultural making of our world

In 2018 I was awarded an Andrew Mellon ‘Research into Teaching’ grant. One of the deliverables was to design and offer a multidisciplinary, team-taught course that explores the separation between nature and culture as humans develop and use technology to

imagine and modify the environments they occupy and ultimately create the technosphere.²⁵ Examining a range of technologies and technological advances from different time periods and contexts, students gain a better understanding of how technology has shaped our lives and the world. The class includes an experiential learning component. In the beginning of the semester, each student is given a box with the *UF Quest* game that we designed.²⁶ Using an old aerial photograph of the University of Florida campus as a map and a GPS app as a guide, students visit and ‘interact’ with artefacts and sites of interest throughout campus while they reflect on how they experience them in their everyday life. Upon completion of the assignment, they are given a 3D-printed, scaled-down replica of the respective site or artefact.

In my classical-studies module, students explore concepts of cultural productions in the Graeco-Roman world and their effect on our understanding of world history. More specifically, we study both technological and cultural inventions of the ancient world (legal, social, athletic, and artistic) to determine how a cultural technosphere was constructed and subsequently re-authenticated, globalised, and eternalised.²⁷ Then the students have to actualise their understanding of the past by engaging in an experiential activity. They have to visit the Hippodrome Theatre in Gainesville, Florida, which is designed as an ancient Greek temple, and take a video while they reflect on the traces of the Graeco-Roman world in their everyday lives and embark upon a unique adventure through space and time, thus hopefully appreciating the historical continuum and its repercussions for our society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper demonstrated renewed methodologies for classical studies that embrace the globality of the discipline against the backdrop of the individual’s sense of self, re-envisioning classical studies and by extension the humanities as seminal disciplines for the renewed understanding and betterment of the world around us. And in this spirit, I would like to close with the words of Norman Augustine, the former Lockheed Martin CEO, who stressed the importance of both scientific skills and humanistic thought:

“So what does business need from our education system? One answer is that it needs more employees who excel in science and engineering [...] But that is only the beginning; one cannot live by equations alone. The need is increasing

25 <https://research.dwi.ufl.edu/projects/technosphere/> (last accessed April 12, 2021).

26 <https://research.dwi.ufl.edu/projects/technosphere/index.php/course/> (last accessed April 12, 2021).

27 The readings assigned range from ancient Graeco-Roman contributions to the modern world, both with respect to tangible and intangible heritage, to Harari’s book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2015) to bridge civilisations and consider the world as a whole.

for workers with greater foreign-language skills and an expanded knowledge of economics, history, and geography [...] Certainly when it comes to life's major decisions, would it not be well for leaders and employees of our government and our nation's firms to have knowledge of the world's great philosophers and the provocative dilemmas found in the works of great authors and playwrights? I believe the answer is a resounding 'yes.'"²⁸

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²⁸ Zakaria 2010, 89–90

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