

Teaching Classical Mythology with a Dynamic Syllabus: A New Approach to an Old Course

When teaching Classical Mythology, many instructors seek to introduce their students to as many original documents as possible, whether they be texts, artwork, or archaeological remains. Such a source-oriented approach allows for in-depth discussions of the evolving meaning of myths through time and space, and also allows the students to understand the specific meaning a given myth may have had in a community at a particular time and place. Yet, as most Classical Mythology courses are targeted to college freshmen or high school students, it can be challenging for the students to access original source documents, even in translation, considering the rather arcane way that they are presented in traditional print media (complex numbering schemes, idiosyncratic encyclopedias and artifact catalogues, etc).

A solution for this problem has been found in the form of a dynamic syllabus, a feature of the Perseids platform. The dynamic syllabus allows to place all readings and materials assigned for a lecture or a class on one page by pulling texts and artwork from the managed resources available in the Perseus Digital Library (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>) and other online open-source repositories such as Arachne (<http://arachne.uni-koeln.de/drupal/>) (see fig. 1 A). Students can then access the assigned materials by clicking on the links. Further tools are then available to them in the Perseus Digital Library, such as commentaries and cross-links.

By providing direct access to source documents, the dynamic syllabus offers an experience that is similar to using a sourcebook. Yet, the dynamic syllabus offers much more flexibility than a sourcebook, since the instructor is free to assign the materials of her choice and can also easily assign or suggest supplementary materials. The dynamic syllabus also makes it easy to update course materials from one iteration of the class to the next and to react quickly to

student feedback concerning particular readings. Finally, the dynamic syllabus makes class materials fully portable, as they are available online from any location, and thus allows reaching a population of students who increasingly prefer online learning.

In addition to all these advantages, the dynamic syllabus is designed to foster analytical thinking by offering an annotation module in which students can produce commentaries and essays. In my Classical Mythology class, students are assigned mandatory readings each week through the dynamic syllabus as well as a set of three optional readings, graded in order of difficulty (see Fig. 1 B). These readings concern the same myth or mythical complex studied during the week. The students' task is to choose one of the additional readings and analyze it with respect to other sources on the same myth. They are encouraged to address questions such as: "How does this text/artifact compare to other testimonies on the same myth? Why is it different/similar? Did the author/artist have a particular purpose in producing such a rendering (political, social, artistic, etc.)?" The students then produce an essay (maximum 500 words) and type it in the Perseids annotation system (see Fig. 1 C). They are encouraged to include links to further materials such as parallel texts/artwork or bibliography. If the essay is fully satisfactory, the student receives full credit and their essay is published on the Perseus website as a reading aid for future students. If the essay requires corrections, the student receives feedback and is able to resubmit it for half credit if the changes are satisfactory. During the course of the semester, students are required to submit at least 3 essays (1 easy, 1 medium, 1 difficult). They can submit as many essays as they wish, and the only the three best are counted towards class credit.

The interactive nature of these assignments has proven a motivating factor for students, as well as the prospect of seeing their work published online. Thus, the dynamic syllabus allows teachers to explore ancient documentary sources directly with their students and then offer

students an opportunity to contribute to the production and dissemination of knowledge regarding these documents.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with several tabs open. The active tab is 'PerseusCatalog'. The address bar shows a file path: 'file:///home/balmas/workspace/course-demo/src/syllabus.html#period-0'. The page content is titled 'Greek and Roman Mythology' and includes course details: 'Meets: Tu-Thurs 10h30-11h45, Crane room', 'Instructor: Dr. Marie-Claire Beaulieu', 'Office: Eaton 327', and 'Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday 3h00-5h30 and by appointment'. The current section is 'Week 4'. Under 'Lectures', 'Lecture 1' is listed with the topic 'Apollo and Artemis'. Below this, 'Required Readings' are listed: 'Homeric Hymns, *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*' with a link 'Read in Perseus'. This section is circled in blue and labeled 'A'. Under 'Optional Readings and Analyses', three options are listed: '1. Easy', '2. Medium', and '3. Difficult'. This section is also circled in blue and labeled 'B'. At the bottom of the page, there is a section for 'Diluvium. Deucalion et Pyrrha.' with a Latin text snippet. A button labeled 'Create/Edit Essay' is circled in blue and labeled 'C'.

Fig. 1. Dynamic syllabus. A: Mandatory readings. B: Optional readings. C: Button to launch annotation module