

Building Skills in the Classical Archaeology Classroom: Low-Stakes and Scaffolded Assignments

It has long been clear that frequent, “low-stakes” or exploratory assessments allow students to develop the language and tools of particular disciplines, which can then be applied more productively both in class and in higher stakes writing assignments and projects. As exploratory writing, meant to encourage engagement without the pressure of generating a polished essay, these assignments also make the material more accessible to all students, thus promoting inclusivity in the classroom. This paper reflects on the benefits and drawbacks of low-stakes assessments in the Classical archaeology classroom as a means to build the skills of interpretation needed to productively engage with the material, and to foster student engagement. Such assignments also have advantages for instructors: they allow for nearly immediate intervention if students are struggling with specific skills, and they can be assessed and returned quickly.

In this paper, I describe two variations on low-stakes assignments I have used in my courses: the first variation, which I employ in my Greek and Roman archaeology survey courses, builds individual skills such as reading and interpretation of architectural plans, visual interpretation and description of images, and application of various interpretative lenses, such as identity. These short reflections are tied to concepts recently discussed in class, offering students the opportunity to first see the skills in action, then apply them to new case studies. When they receive feedback and are asked to apply these skills again in class, their responses are more nuanced and confident. These reflections also allow students to engage with sites and objects, especially those of non-elites, we might not otherwise be able to cover in a survey course; they might thus examine Christian lamps through the lens of identity studies, or gender in Greek houses by analyzing the accessibility and visibility of specific spaces by reading an architectural plan.

The second type, which I employ in two thematic courses (Pompeii and daily life; Greek vases and vase painting), involves scaffolded low-stakes assignments which build towards a culminating project. In the Pompeii course, this scaffolded project involves the analysis of a

student's dorm room from several archaeological perspectives, culminating in an archaeological report on their space, as if written from 2000 years in the future. This project allows students to explore how archaeologists analyze archaeological material to better understand daily life and ancient identities, and, at the same time, also makes them more cognizant of the limitations and difficulties of interpreting material culture.

In the course on Greek vases, students choose a vase from a museum to analyze throughout the semester. They then apply specific analytical tools and knowledge to this vase throughout the semester, reflecting on various qualities of the vase, including painters and potters, techniques, imagery, and uses. These assignments allow students to practice these skills in a low-stakes setting. Feedback from these essays can then be incorporated into their culminating project: an ArcGis StoryMaps presentation in which students generate a public-facing digital story combining text, art, maps, and other graphics to provide an object biography of a single vase, grounded in a broader understanding of Greek vases as cultural artifacts.

As well as discussing the specific tactics for implementing low-stakes writing assignments like these in a course, this paper will also discuss student feedback and offer examples of assignments, rubrics, and student projects. These examples will highlight both the benefits and potential difficulties of implementing this type of assignment in an archaeological classroom.