

## Ancient and Modern Fiber Arts: Praxis and Pedagogy

Over the past five years, many of us, as veteran college educators, have found ourselves adapting, reenvisioning, and changing our approaches to our classes and curriculum each year. No sooner had we switched to online learning during the pandemic, than we were stuck dealing with our students' rampant use of AI and general disengagement from sustained inquiry of course materials (McMurtrie 2025, Stripling 2024). How do we care for our students' learning, our own sanity, and the future of our discipline when we're faced with so many amorphous challenges from all directions?

In my case, I've been attempting to face these challenges by developing a radically different sort of class from a normal classics course. As a long-time knitter, I've long had an affinity toward fiber arts. A couple years ago, while working with a student who was writing her senior capstone on ancient women and weaving, I decided to take a weaving class with a local fiber arts workshop, followed by another a class on spinning wool, using both spindles and wheels. While taking these classes and discussing women's textile skills in ancient literature with my student, I realized that I could translate all this into a creative arts course open to all students on our campus.

This presentation will describe the promises and pitfalls of the class that I created. I'll begin by noting that this is not based on historical reenactment—we aren't attempting to discover how women in antiquity spun, wove, or manipulated textiles. Instead, it is designed to give students an overview of how humans have made fiber and what we've done with it over the past few thousand years. The class mixes practical, hands-on skills with discussions of readings that range from ancient women's connection with textiles (Penelope and Helen, Arachne and

Philomela), to the archaeology of ancient fabrics, and from the lack of sustainability of fast fashion, to lessons on mending. In our classroom, students learn to spin wool with a spindle and to create small tapestries with their yarn. In a required field trip, students explore the local arts community and dye their yarn (and other fabrics) during a trip to our local fiber studio. My goal here is to introduce students to fiber arts skills and resources that they can continue to use and draw from even once the course is done. In another field trip, we visit our local museum to examine their oldest textiles (from Egypt and South America), medieval tapestries, and contemporary fiber art so that students comprehend the geographic, temporal, and aesthetic variety of the medium.

Practically speaking, this class requires more work than students usually expect from a creative arts class, and it's not just the readings that cause them strife. As they grapple with the awkward physical manipulation of their spindles and tufts of wool, some perfectionistic students are forced to work through their frustration as they create things that they think are ugly and some class periods become quasi-therapy sessions. Later, as students work up against the final deadline for finishing their weaving projects, they again have to manage their initial expectations. And, of course, although the hands-on portion of the class is wildly popular, I am still struggling with engaging students with the readings. Nevertheless, through the work of this class, students gain appreciation for just how much work textile production required historically, and I help them draw the connection to how clothing manufacturing is no less labor intensive today, only that the labor is just much less visible to us.

## Bibliography

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