

Looms in the Classroom: Ancient Textiles through Studio Art

Hands-on learning has gained increased popularity in the classroom, while experimental archaeology yields new methodologies and discoveries. Courses that include experimental coursework can attract new students of differing backgrounds to the study of the ancient world. In addition, hands-on activities provide the opportunity to explore the benefits and drawbacks of an experimental approach in academic inquiry. Ancient textiles is a field which has benefitted greatly from experimental methods, both academically and pedagogically. While vocabulary and imagery related to textile production is incredibly common throughout our evidence of the ancient world, grasping the meaning of such terminology is quite difficult, even for a modern textile artist, without visual or physical aids.

In this paper, I describe the structure and outcomes of an undergraduate course “Ancient Mediterranean Textiles,” cross-listed in the department of Classics in Arts & Sciences and in the fashion department in the university’s School of Design & Visual Art. This course met twice a week, alternating meetings between reading/lecture sessions, and studio sessions. Students read about an aspect of ancient textile production and were then immediately able to put their reading into practice in the studio. Along the way, they completed a series of writing assignments in which they had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in the studio, and build scholarly skills such as close reading, critical source assessment, research and citation, and argument. The course culminated in a final project consisting of a physical creative component and a short paper (imagined as an expanded museum description) describing the research behind their physical work.

Over the course of the semester, students studied textile production from the beginning (raw materials) to the ends (finished textiles and their uses). Our first studio session on fiber and fiber preparation involved hackling flax and combing and picking fleece. We had three studio sessions on spinning in which we assembled drop spindles, learned how to spin and ply, and toured the university's tech center to learn about 3D printing opportunities through 3D printed spindles and distaffs. Next we moved onto weaving, weaving small pieces on DIY cardboard looms and setting up and weaving on an ancient Greek warp-weighted loom. We closed with felting and fulling, a take-home dye workshop, and sewing and construction.

As instructor, I brought in previous textile production experience which empowered me to propose and design this course. However, many of the specific studios involved techniques in which I had no personal experience prior to planning the course. Additionally, the cost of some of these studios may seem like a large barrier initially, but ultimately most were able to be designed with minimal expenditure. In describing my course design, I hope to inspire other instructors, even with minimal artistic experience, to incorporate hands-on elements in their own courses or propose similar new courses to their administrations. This paper will provide details on budget, the process of cross-listing a course, modular studio design, and student feedback, while offering examples of assignments and student work.