

Dionysus *Synergates*: Critical Thought and Interdisciplinary Learning

It is a truth universally acknowledged that small Classics departments in small universities need both friends and visibility. It is a truth further acknowledged that “assessment” does not generally cheer the academic heart. Our campus is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which requires a Quality Enhancement Plan of all their institutions. Ours is centred around critical thinking, and many of us have attended faculty development workshops based around the work of Elder and Elder (2008), Nosich (2011) and Brookfield (2011), with a view to teaching critical thinking more intentionally and explicitly.

Enter the Festival of Dionysus in the Mountain South, an interdisciplinary event centred around a performance of *Philoctetes* translated by our Classics majors. Festival-goers explored connections between ancient Greek and traditional Southern Appalachian practices of music, science, and the role of medicinal plants in health promotion in both cultures. Additionally, students learned about the foodways of both traditions via a communal feast. Before, during and after the event, participants were assessed for their perceptions of the experience.

One of the greatest challenges in regular translation classes is that time pressures often cause us to advance through a text without creating a final version that reads really well in English. *Philoctetes* poses particular problems because of its multiple expressions of lamentation, which are relatively lacking in English, and soon the translation becomes thick with “alas!”, “wretched”, “woe is me” and similar “translatorese”. These problems are lessened by presenting students with the explicit goal of creating something performable and accessible. Even more helpful proved framing the course around the elements of critical thinking proposed by the Elders and the nine intellectual standards of high level thought which underlie them. Many of these have an obvious bearing on translation – clarity, precision and relevance, for

example, but need critical analysis: what is an accurate translation? Is the goal of precision always helpful? Are there elements that a good translation *must* contain? Are they merely multiple or competing? If the latter, is there a hierarchy in them, and on what assumptions does the hierarchy depend?

Keeping this conceptual framework central, the ancient drama students eventually produced two translations. From the first, which kept closely to the Greek, students moved to another, as performance text. They banished “alas” from the final version and were intrigued to see how some words of lamentation could be replaced by actions on stage. Sometimes, after deliberation and some student anguish, we deliberately chose a non-literal rendition of the text. Post-performance feedback indicated that the audience appreciated the production, though the translation students saw many previously unnoticed flaws in their work – a learning experience in itself. In oral and written reflections, the students state that they are beginning to think about translation in a more nuanced way. This talk will include short examples of our scripts and of critical thinking exercises on translation.

The goal of the ancient feast was to create foods for a communal banquet based only on ingredients and recipes either from the ancient Mediterranean or Appalachia. Students in a “Foodways of Blue Zones” course taught in the health and wellness department studied the dietary patterns of especially long-lived populations in 5 locations around the world, including Ikaria, Greece. Students prepared for the festival by reading about foodways in ancient Greece (Dalby and Grainger, 1996; Beer, 2010) and foodways of Appalachia (Engelhardt, 2011) and benefitted from guest lectures and discussions with Elizabeth Engelhardt and Keith Green, a local scholar raised in the Appalachian mountains. They created two menus using ingredients and foodways of ancient Greece or traditional Appalachia (emphasizing locally sourced

ingredients) adapted to fit foodway patterns known to promote longevity. They then prepared these two menus in quantity and served them to festival-goers after *Philoctetes*. Student reflections provide evidence that hands-on experiences with food and culture and sharing it in community creates deep and memorable learning.

The benefits of our multidisciplinary approach seem clear: learning across disciplinary boundaries was stimulating for faculty and the 60 plus students who contributed to the festival. The hands-on element was especially important to many who expressed great pride in their contributions. Up to 400 individuals attended some part of the festival, which we hope will live in student memories, make new friends for Classical drama and placate the assessment gods for some time to come.

Bibliography

Michael Beer, *Taste or Taboo: Dietary Choices in Antiquity* (Totnes, 2010)

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Paul and Linda Elder, *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking* (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2008)

Elizabeth Engelhardt, *A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food* (University of Georgia Press, 2011)

Gerald Nosich, *Learning To Think Things Through* (Prentice Hall, 2011)