A Skills-Based Learning Scaffold in an Undergraduate Classics Curriculum

When faculties design curricula, the focus generally centers on content and coverage. A typical undergraduate curriculum in classical civilization, for example, is likely to contain courses on Greek and Roman history, archaeology, literature in translation, and philosophy, in addition to course in the original languages. A student who follows such a curriculum will be broadly exposed to the ancient world, and then can take electives based on interests developed in classes with broad-based content. Elective courses are often at a higher course level, and incorporate the expertise of the departmental faculty. In a more practical sense, most classics curricula also take into account university general education requirements and provided courses that fulfill requirements within it. The fiscal realities of contemporary universities require most departments to generate revenue by offering courses that will fill with students from other majors.

My department was careful to regularly update our curriculum to ensure that our students had broad exposure to fields within classical studies and adequate language preparation. Still, when our advanced students wrote their capstone research paper, we were nearly always disappointed with the results. The students, even after taking many classics courses, did not know how to use or cite primary sources correctly, and did not know how to locate, understand, and incorporate secondary scholarship into their research. Our frustration eventually led to a revision of our curriculum that builds a research/writing component into each class. The curriculum prepares majors to have all the skills they need before they attempt their capstone writing, while also introducing general education students to the way that research is conducted in our field.

To begin this process, the full-time faculty brainstormed a list of skills that students needed to do research and writing in Classics. The list included, *inter alia*, reading, understanding, and summarizing primary sources, and then citing them appropriately. We also noted that many students did not understand the difference between a textbook and a primary source, or that the primary sources they were reading were translations of the original. A second conversation turned on the topic of what would constitute appropriate reading and writing assignments at each undergraduate level, taking into account that most of the students in first- and second-year courses were not majors, but that those courses still had to be used to teach majors how to be classicists.

The next step in our curricular revision was to bring the adjunct faculty into the discussion, since they teach the majority of first- and second-year courses. This in itself reflected a revolutionary shift in our thinking, as we had never discussed curriculum amongst the entire teaching faculty. We scheduled a half-day meeting with the several goals: 1) to determine what type of writing exercises would teach research skills at each level; 2) to establish a set of common skill-based learning outcomes for each of our lower-level classes that would not impinge on each instructor's choice of content.

The outcome of the meeting was a rubric of assignments that met the skill goals at a particular course level, as seen below:

	1000-level	*2000-level*	*3000-level*
Textbook	Summaries, questions based on the text, identification questions, essay questions	Summaries, questions based on the text, identification questions, essay questions	
Primary Source	Summaries, questions based on reading, guided essays (with prompt)	Summaries, questions based on reading, guided essays (with prompt)	Summaries, questions based on reading, guided essays (with prompt), contextualization
Secondary Source		Summaries, questions based on reading	Literature review, annotated bibliography, literary analysis, research paper

Among the most important decisions we made was to ban "research" papers at the 1000 and 2000 level. Such research papers, while a long-standing tradition, were almost always of poor quality and often heavily plagiarized from online sources. We challenged the instructors instead to design several short written assignments that would build a student's ability to read and understand primary sources. Likewise, we recognized that secondary scholarship is entirely inappropriate reading for first-year students who have no grasp of the subject matter or primary sources.

After a semester of classes taught with the newly structured assignments, the entire faculty came back together to share assignments they had designed and to discuss further refinements to the research scaffold. All the faculty agreed that shorter assignments had elicited higher quality work from students, and had eased their grading burden (this was also a goal, since many classes are large and there is no assistance in grading provided). All in all, this process lead us in a straightforward manner to develop

the outcomes required for program assessment, and assured that our majors had the requisite skills for engaging in meaningful research before they graduated.