Collaborative Student Research in Classical Mythology: Beyond the Lecture

Even in the fast changing environment of higher education, classical mythology classes continue to enjoy broad-scale popularity, especially with freshmen and early-career undergraduates. For this reason, mythology classes are an excellent venue to introduce students to the discipline and methods of classical scholarship. The most common pedagogical approach to such courses remains the magisterial lecture accompanied by essays, research papers, exams, and quizzes. In addition to these methods, collaborative research initiatives using digital technology have proven useful in classroom experimentation conducted by the Perseids Project team at Tufts University (http://sites.tufts.edu/perseids/) over the past few years. The objective of these experiments was to offer students a professional-level research experience by participating in the creation of datasets for the advanced study of classical mythology while exploring one assigned myth in depth. This paper will describe the approach taken at Tufts, reflect on lessons learned from these experiments, and propose avenues for new iterations of the class.

The work undertaken at Tufts relied on the formation of student research teams for the duration of the semester. Starting on the first week of class, students chose one or two teammates and were assigned a myth represented on an object in the Greek and Roman collections on display at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. They were responsible for researching the object and the myth it represented, and for building an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources over the course of the semester. Students appreciated the opportunity to delve deep into one subject. At the end of the semester, one student commented in the course evaluation: “The intense focus on one myth for the paper showed the class what it's actually like to be a classicist and do real research.”

The production of professional-level work that could benefit the research community was indeed the objective of the class. To reach this goal, students were asked to analyze primary sources in detail with the help of digital tools, which in turn served to preserve and disseminate the result of this work online.

The first tool we used was Timemapper (www.timemapper.okfnlabs.org), a timeline generator developed by the Open Knowledge Foundation. Students were asked to organize all the primary sources they found concerning the myth represented on their object according to the time and place of their production. The display then showed a timeline coupled with a geographical map (see an example of student work here: http://timemapper.okfnlabs.org/anon/rr83vj-map-spreadsheet#13). This process allowed students to gain an understanding of the chronological and geographical place of their object within the broader evolution of the myth, and to identify patterns of popularity and change through time and place. From a technical standpoint, the Timemapper workflow is user-friendly: students simply entered their data into a public Google spreadsheet according to a preset template. Then, they copied the url generated by Google into the Timemapper interface and obtained a timemap. Finally, in order to stabilize this data and to make it reusable for further projects, we ingested it into the Perseids platform and serialized it according to the Open Annotation data model (http://www.openannotation.org/spec/core/, example available here: http://sosol.perseids.org/sosol/publications/5824/oa_cite_identifiers/7901/editxml).

The second tool we used was Hypothes.is (https://hypothes.is/), which allowed us to annotate personal names and place names in Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*. Our objective was to study the social relationships among the characters of Greek mythology in relation to their geographical appurtenance (see

http://www.perseids.org/sites/joth/#book/urn:cts:pdlrefwk:viaf88890045.003.perseus-eng1). The result is an emergent social network of Greek mythology which we visualized through an adaptation of the GapVis interface (http://nrabinowitz.github.io/gapvis/#index). In each entry, we annotated a specific character's genealogical and social relationships, the places they are associated with, and finally the attestations of these relationships in ancient texts (example here: http://www.perseids.org/sites/joth/#book/urn:cts:pdlrefwk:viaf88890045.003.perseus-eng1/read/urn:cts:pdlrefwk:viaf88890045.003.perseus-eng1:S.scylla_1). For each entry, we gave student contributors credit, and we also ingested the data into Perseids to stabilize it and preserve it (http://sosol.perseids.org/sosol/publications/8400/oa_cite_identifiers/10881/preview).

In time and over many iterations of this classical mythology class, the resources produced by the students will contribute to a better understanding of Greek mythology and will offer new research paths for scholars as well as a consistent and interoperable dataset to work with. In this way, we offer students a hands-on research experience while giving them a chance to enter the world of scholarship through micro-tasks such as annotation that are fully manageable for an undergraduate student.