

Towards a Trauma-informed Pedagogy in the Online Classroom: A Case Study in Teaching Classical Mythology

Important studies in recent years have addressed the challenges inherent in teaching classical mythology, and, in particular, its frequent episodes involving sexual violence (Kahn 2004, Gloyn 2013, James 2014, Thakur 2014). Such studies are in keeping with a growing bibliography on “trauma-informed” (TI) pedagogy, a field which explores issues related to teaching traumatic content and its effects on students with experience of trauma (e.g. Butler & Carello 2015). This paper presents the implementation of TI approaches in an online mythology course, Introduction to Classical Mythology, at the University of Texas at Austin over a two-year development period beginning in 2016. The paper also reports student survey responses on TI content, to be gathered during the academic year 2017-2018.

The special emphasis in classical mythology on the precariousness of human existence has often provoked productive classroom discussion on vulnerability and the human body (cf. Kahn 2004), although students’ direct experiences of trauma and violence are not always explicitly acknowledged. Recognizing the risks of “retraumatization” when due consideration is not given to the range (and uneven distribution) of traumatic experiences in the classroom, a TI approach to pedagogy suggests methods for actively confronting traumatic material without ignoring students’ needs for an affirming and secure learning environment (e.g. Jolly 2011). Specific recommendations adopted in the course under discussion include: self-care statements in the syllabus; journal writing and student check-ins; collaborations with campus-based and other local organizations raising awareness of interpersonal violence; and, filmed conversations with counsellors and outreach officers from these organizations interpreting specific episodes involving violence. In addition to reducing student stress, and, correspondingly, advancing

student development, such approaches also offer a response to intense contemporary debates over the value of “trigger warnings” and “safe spaces” in higher education, since TI pedagogy emphatically does not advocate the removal of difficult material from curricula (on the contrary, since this move would only contribute to the stigma attached to such material).

The literature on TI pedagogy has yet to include specific measures for online classes, despite the growing prevalence of such classes in higher education. A factor in this lack of development may be the strangeness of embodiment in online education, where the agency of participants is not as fully or intuitively recognized given the digital distance across which teaching takes place (Collier 2017). This paper argues that classical mythology presents unique opportunities to advance this conversation. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, for example, emotional responses to trauma are frequently embodied as physical transformations, as in the stories of Daphne (*Met.* 1.452-566), Io (1.567-753), Callisto (2.401-531), and Procne and Philomela (6.412-676, cf. Curran 1978). In conjunction with a TI approach, these texts can therefore not only prompt productive, compassionate discussion of the realities of sexual trauma, but also play a key role for teachers and students contemplating their own agency and embodiment in the context of the rapid proliferation of online and digital education.

Bibliography

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