

## Inclusive Strategies in College-Level Classical Literature Courses

Through “Disability Services” centers and the push toward “Universal Design,” universities are making strides in the accommodation of students with learning disabilities. Ultimately, however, these steps do not take us far enough, for they do not change how the teachers in the classroom actually teach. In this paper, I will address some of the common issues that students with learning disabilities face in Classics courses in translation and some strategies that allow instructors to teach more effectively to students of all abilities.

This is a particularly important topic to think about with regards to Classical literature courses in translation. For various reasons, but especially because of discrepancies in phonological processing ability, students with learning disabilities often have a difficult time in foreign language courses (Sparks 1995). For many of the same reasons, courses in mythology or ancient literature can present difficulties; though the reading material is in English, the unfamiliar names are difficult for LD students to process efficiently. There is often a great deal of reading assigned in these classes, and, especially if the professor focuses on primary literature, the narrative structures and phrasing (e.g. epithets) can also be problematic. Thus the strategies I will discuss contribute to the success of those students with LDs who have difficulties with reading comprehension, spelling, memorization, dealing with large chunks of material at one time, and poor organization.

The first – and simplest – strategy is to forgive spelling. Students may use abbreviations or descriptors on assessments, to lessen the anxiety over correct spelling. Meanwhile, instructors can also use a multi-sensory approach to encourage retention of the correct spelling. Students should *see* a word or name, whether on a power point or chalkboard, as the instructor *says* it.

Thus students with phonological processing difficulties can see the phonemic-graphemic correspondence of the word.

On a larger scale, I have found two strategies that help with students' reading comprehension difficulties and poor organization of notes. The first is to focus on the "big picture." This is a good practice anyway. What is it that we want our students to get out of, say, a mythology class? The ability to list the names of the heroes in the Trojan War, or the ability to discuss what the Trojan War means for our understanding of how the ancient Greeks thought about issues of violence, fate, and the relationship between the sexes? Foregrounding relevant themes and issues gives students a "road map" to consult when approaching various unfamiliar works. In courses that involve a specific genre – like Greek and Roman Epic or Greek and Roman Comedy – I give students a list of generic characteristics/expectations to consult as they read, or, alternatively, I provide online discussion questions before they begin a new work. Though answering these questions is not required, students can use them to help guide their reading. These strategies do not simply accommodate students with LDs; they make the class more accessible to *all* students, and framing the material in these ways leads to more productive discussions and more active student engagement. The second strategy is to put class notes, slides, and materials online; this allows students to approach them at their own convenience, and, moreover, allows them to access the material repeatedly, which aids retention.

Finally, there are two important strategies for assessments. The first is to make expectations clear, including describing the format of the assessments. The second is to give students choices. For example, if they are required to write five responses to short essay questions, put seven prompts on the test. This does not necessarily mean the questions are *easy*. For example, I might ask students to give examples of fair vs. unfair punishments in Ovid's

*Metamorphoses*, and to make an argument about Ovid's arrangement of these episodes. Or, for a larger essay, I might ask students to discuss how the Roman epic poets adapt their Greek predecessors. These are important questions and ones that highlight the broad issues students have considered in their coursework, but they do not require students to remember every specific detail that they have read about. Rather, they can choose from what they *do* know. In other words, both in which questions they decide to answer and in *how* they answer those questions, students have a *choice*.

I am by no means the only instructor incorporating such strategies into a curriculum. Nonetheless, by describing my own practices in the classroom, I hope to show that accommodating students of diverse abilities is not a difficult task, and, more importantly, that these accommodations benefit *all* students without decreasing the level of academic challenge that our courses present.

#### Bibliography

Sparks, Richard L., 1995. "Examining the Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis to Explain Individual Differences in Foreign Language Learning," *Annals of Dyslexia*, 45: 187-214.