

Ancient Rome Online: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

It is now increasingly common for humanities departments, including Classics, to be asked to offer at least some of their lower-division, larger enrollment courses online. This is particularly true at publicly funded institutions. At the same time, there are enormous challenges in designing, implementing, and maintaining a successful online course, particularly when institutions lack the appropriate infrastructure to support such endeavors. In this paper, I will review my own experience with designing, building, and then implementing a large-scale online course on the cultural history of ancient Rome at a very large public institution.

My paper has several aims. First, I want to review some “best practices” for designing and teaching ancient history and similar topics to a large group of students (100-500 students), from diverse backgrounds and with variable experience in learning online in addition to highly variable preparation for college-level work. I will review a number of strategies that I have developed over the five years that I have worked on my own class, including careful discussion of the logistics of managing a large-enrollment course while maintaining academic integrity. Second, I want to look closely at the advantages of investing time in developing online courses in Classics. As part of this, I hope to use this opportunity to connect with other instructors who might be interested in working with me on a project to create an Open Access Online Ancient Rome Textbook that could then be adapted as needed by a range of secondary and college/university instructors.

In the final part of my paper, I want to look at a few of the very serious challenges of developing, implementing, and maintaining an online course. Instructors should be well-versed on their institution’s Intellectual Property stance and ensure that they have a signed agreement in

place about IP as well as any royalties or other compensation they will receive if their course materials are used by other instructors, for instance. They should understand the advantages of a course that is technology-lite. They should make an informed decision about how to separate the “textbook/content delivery” part of the course from assessments on institutionally owned LMSs. Finally, online course developers should ensure that a plan is in place to maintain their course, either personally or by the institution. Such maintenance can be very time consuming and instructors should be prepared to request compensation for this work.

Many colleges and universities are still in the process of figuring out how to create sustainable online courses and degree programs. At many institutions, faculty-led efforts have failed to provide sustainable, pedagogically sound courses. Consequently, we are facing a situation where institutional leadership is increasingly turning to outside vendors, Online Program Managers, to advise them on creating sustainable courses and programs that can act as new revenue streams. This shift poses significant threats to many departments as it, in effect, has the potential and likelihood to create yet another class of underpaid and overworked adjunct faculty.

As a field, we cannot ignore the demand of students for online courses, especially lower division courses that meet graduate requirements. We need to continue to engage in this conversation, to be willing to build and instruct online courses, but do so in informed and thoughtful ways. I hope to use this paper to share some of the most important parts of my own substantial experiences but also to start a more enduring conversation about online teaching with like-minded instructors.