CLASSICS (CLSX) 148: Introduction to Greek and Roman Mythology (Online)

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BACKGROUND

CLASSICS 148 is the gateway course in the Classics department. Its goals are twofold:
1.) breadth, acquired through studying ancient myths across a variety of literary and visual genres;
2.) relevance, acquired by looking at how ancient myths shape modern culture, especially popular entertainment

The course invites students to analyze stories that, before entering college, they had probably not thought seriously about. It therefore lays the groundwork for taking other Classics and Humanities courses.

PUTTING IT ONLINE

HOW DIFFICULT could it possibly be to transfer a class online? Fall 2014 was the first time I taught CLSX 148 online, after having previously taught it once as a hybrid course and once as a traditional lecture. A major goal was to increase the rigor of the online course so that it was more closely aligned with the demands of its face-to-face counterpart.

Key Similarities
Several assignments and assessments were imported from the face-to-face course:
- No textbook – all readings were of primary sources
- Quizzes, writing assignments, and tests all drew upon assigned readings; there was little additional support material beyond the Blackboard discussion boards

Key Differences
Changing the medium of interaction seemed most important:
- Lectures about major themes in the reading were translated into questions for discussion on the online discussion board
- Group projects required electronic rather than personal interaction

Nonetheless, office hours were held to help students in need of real-time assistance

THE MIDTERM—AND REDESIGN

THE MIDTERM revealed that students were not acquiring the knowledge that students usually acquire in Classies 148.
- Average: 72.3 points
- Range: 51.5 points
- Grade distribution was erratic

For the second half of the term, the final exam was keyed to the assignments, which were written with an eye toward the kinds of analyses that the final exam would require.

THE REVISIONS

STUDENTS STRUGGLED on the midterm with:
1.) recognizing passages from the assigned readings—
   - so on final we gave them the title from which the passage came;
2.) relating a given passage to events later in the plot—
   - so on the final we cut down on this type of question;
3.) using the assigned readings to support their answers—
   - so on the final we created questions that could be answered with examples from the passage ID section of the test. The final had an “open book” feel, which allowed us to hold students to a higher standard since they had citeable material right there on the test.

MORE GENERALLY:
1.) assignments became thematically oriented and less centered on specific texts;
2.) each assignment became a form of test review. We encouraged students to treat assignments as a form of preparation for the types of questions that they might be asked on the final.

THE FINAL

THE FINAL revealed that the mid-semester redesign was successful.
- Average: 85.3 points
- Range: 26 points
- Grade distribution was a standard bell curve

David aided this improvement by holding real-time review sessions via Blackboard Collaborate. Students went over sample passages and questions with him, and worked on strategies for how to approach similar material on the final.

REFLECTIONS

DIFFERENT FORMATS create different courses. By teaching the same class with the same reading material but in two formats, I learned a valuable lesson about how this material should be presented to, and engaged with, by two different audiences.

On the one hand, the online class took a big-picture approach that was far less amenable to the memorization of details. The goals became:
1.) to enable students to trace themes and images within a text;
2.) to enable students to connect different texts together by comparing their respective themes.

On the other hand, students in the online course did more writing and discussion, and completed a group blog project. These are the types of assignments that I will further develop in future iterations of the online version of CLSX 148. Finally, in place of the traditional passage identification tests, I hope to implement short-essay tests that will allow students to synthesize material.