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# Creative Classics *in Exeter*

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In 2014, as part of a wider move to think about non-traditional assessment in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at Exeter, my colleague Karen Ní Mheallaigh came up with the idea of a creative project module for our third year students designed to deepen their understanding of the ancient world through critical practice.<sup>1</sup> The idea was based on the principle that we can more intensely understand the remote worlds of the past not just by writing about them, but by engaging directly with them through creative means. Now in its third year, the module continues to attract a steady stream of students and has been highly praised by our external examiners for the quality of work produced. Projects completed so far include a symphony based on Aeneas' descent to the underworld, a museum workshop for children on ancient Egypt, an embroidered wall-hanging depicting Ovid's metamorphic women, a translation of *The Gruffalo* into Ancient Greek, and a reworking of *Antigone* based on the WikiLeaks scandal.



**Fig. 1** Molly Jehan, *The Transformation of Women into Trees in Ovid's Metamorphoses*

In designing the module, one of the first challenges we encountered was to decide upon the credit-weighting. We felt that it was important to keep the credit weighting quite low, since the module is so different from anything else the students will have undertaken so far, and therefore settled on a small 15 credit

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<sup>1</sup> I became the module convenor after Karen was awarded a Marie Curie research fellowship at AIAS (Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Denmark) from 2014-6. Credit for the original idea and much of the early design of the module must go to her.

module spread out over two terms.<sup>2</sup> This had the benefit of minimising risk and allowing students to spread out their workload, but it also meant that we had to encourage the students to be realistic in their ambitions, since this module would account for only 1/8<sup>th</sup> of their final year. With this in mind, we insisted that students who signed up for the module submit a brief outline of the proposed project in the first week of term, as they would for a dissertation, so that we could ensure projects were feasible.

The second and more significant challenge was to think about how to assess creativity in an objective and transparent way. After researching whether similar modules already existed, we were immensely grateful for the advice of the Department of Classics at the University of Nottingham – and in particular Lynn Fotheringham – who were already running an enormously successful Independent Second Year Project module. The material they shared with us was crucial for drawing up our own assessment criteria for the module, especially in terms of ensuring that we make our criteria explicit but also sufficiently general to allow for the huge variety of projects undertaken.

We also had some concern at this point about the difference between projects that were more tangible in terms of the skills and critical thinking on display and those less so, and between more autonomous creative outputs (such as a painting) and those that might rely on others for their realisation (such as the production of a play). In conjunction with work already done in Nottingham, a piece by architects Rob Cowdroy and Anthony Williams on assessing creativity helped us to think about how to evaluate multiple levels of creativity, including the initial thinking and the development of the idea in addition to the end result.<sup>3</sup> We therefore decided to add a 2000-word written critical interpretation to the assessment, asking students to reflect critically upon their project and explain its interpretative value.<sup>4</sup>

The module was taught through a combination of workshops and seminars in the first term and work-in-progress sessions and individual supervision meetings in the second term. The idea of the taught seminars and workshops was to stimulate and enhance students' creativity and to provide a critical framework for thinking about the interpretative value of their own projects. This was achieved by exploring prior creative responses to the classical world, from Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* to Frank Miller's *300*, and thinking critically about relevant scholarship on these pieces. The student evaluations at the end of the first year of the module



Fig. 2 Helen Skinner, *The Golden Apple Collection*

<sup>2</sup> Students are required to take 120 credits in each year. We offer a variety of 15 and 30 credit options. Ordinarily a 15 credit module would run for one term and a 30 credit module over two.

<sup>3</sup> Cowdroy, R. and Williams, A. (2006) 'Assessing creativity in the creative arts', *Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education* Vol. 5 No. 2: 97-117.

<sup>4</sup> The project itself accounts for 60% of the credit for the module and the critical interpretation 40%.

suggested this had not been entirely successful, as students had struggled to see the relevance of the work we were doing in class to their own individual projects. In the second year, therefore, I addressed this issue more explicitly, asking students to identify collectively at the end of each seminar some generic questions that had arisen during the course of our discussion about the nature of creative engagement with the ancient world. These were collated in a single document and it is clear that students made good use of this in the written critical interpretation to accompany their project. It was particularly gratifying to see that at the end of the second year student evaluations were much more favourable in this regard, with one student commenting: “The reading and especially the seminars challenged my project in ways which I had not expected.”



**Fig. 3** Kirsty Gage, *The Hollaback Girls: Love Elegy's Mistresses Bite Back*

Students also found the written critical interpretation difficult in the first year and, although they were given written guidance on how to approach it, 14 out of 15 students performed considerably better in the project itself. Several had struggled to articulate the critical value of their project or identify the most important questions to address. In the second year I therefore also used written comments on the projects as a feedforward opportunity to provide more specific direction towards the critical interpretation. With permission, I also provided a handful of anonymised examples from the previous year to help students approach the exercise with confidence. The average mark for the critical interpretation rose from 61.4% in the previous year to 66.8%, which was much more in line with the average mark for the project itself.

In terms of the development of the module, there are still some practical issues to resolve, in particular guidance relating to what students should submit and how, especially if projects are bulky or fragile. There is still a large working replica of a Roman scorpion sitting in a colleague's office while it awaits transportation to a more permanent home with a Roman re-enactment group! For the first time this year, I organised an exhibition of the projects to coincide with graduation, which was a fantastic way of celebrating students' efforts and achievements, and the College of Humanities at the University of Exeter has devoted some [webspace](#) to showcasing and archiving the projects. I am keen to share our experiences of introducing and developing this module, as I think it is a model that could easily be adopted more broadly within our own discipline and beyond. It has rapidly become one of my favourite modules to teach as I am hugely inspired by the work students produce and the exciting ways in which they challenge and provoke my own thinking about the ancient world.



**Fig. 4** Aldert White, *A Reconstruction of a Roman Scorpion*