

# Research-led Teaching in Classics

by Daniel Ogden

I've been asked to write a piece on 'Research-led teaching' because I was given the 2016 prize for the same in my university's Student Guild (i.e. Union) Teaching Awards. Full disclosure: that victory almost certainly had more to do with the brilliant dynamism of our undergraduate Classical Society, whose officers campaigned hard on behalf of me and my colleagues both with the wider student body and with the university brass, than it did with any objective achievement on my part.

So much for the truest cause; but let's talk about the pretext. I imagine that the students perceive there to be a particularly strong link between my research and my teaching because I teach two courses out of my own published sourcebooks, and in both cases there is a clear relationship between the sourcebooks and research monographs I have also published. So, my third-year special subject course 'Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts' is supported by my sourcebook *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., OUP USA, New York, 2009), behind which stand my monographs *Greek and Roman Necromancy* (PUP, Princeton, 2001), *In Search of the Sorcerer's Apprentice* (CPW, Swansea, 2007) and *Night's Black Agents* (Hambleton, London, 2009); my MA course on 'The Western Dragon in Lore, Literature and Art' is supported by the sourcebook *Dragons, Serpents and Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds* (OUP USA, New York, 2013), behind which stands my monograph *Drakon: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (OUP, Oxford, 2013), together with further work in preparation.

How did this all come about, and are there any recommendations to disseminate here? Initially it came about by accident, and actually as the result of a research agenda rather than a teaching one. I have always held that the primary and the highest duty of a scholar is the collation and close analysis of evidence (a view for which the gatekeepers of our subject have persistently punished me over the three decades of my career). With that conviction, I chose to prepare for the writing of the *Necromancy* monograph by assembling for myself, in a binder, all the portions of ancient text (literary, papyrological or epigraphic) that ostensibly had any bearing upon the subject, together with translations of the same. Initially the process was a rough-and-ready one: I just wanted to get, at as early a stage as possible, a big picture of what was actually out there. I was provisionally content to use (credible) published translations

where they existed, just making my own translations of the obscurer stuff. Inevitably, as the process of writing the monograph got under way, further texts of interest were found and added, and the constituent passages were re-sorted and re-sequenced. Eventually the point came when I realised that this material had its own interest and value, and that I would have on my hands a useful sourcebook for Ancient Magic (which was at that point becoming a popular subject in Anglo-Saxon Classics depts., especially American ones), if I could knuckle down and provide my own translations for the major texts and fill the collection out in the (relatively few) fields of ancient magic that did not have some sort of connection to necromancy. (No real competitor existed: Georg Luck's admirable *Arcana Mundi* would have been better described as a sourcebook for intellectual esotericism than for magic as such.) With this material together in samizdat form, I began teaching a course on Ancient Magic in my then university of Swansea, and the early classroom experiences with it of course enabled me to refine it further before publication.

This way of working appealed to me very much: I enjoyed the security of pursuing my research on the basis of a full and quite formal source catalogue, and I also liked the idea of getting two books out of one! When I came to embark on my large-scale research project on the ancient dragon, I was determined from the start to generate a monograph and a sourcebook in tandem. But since the *Necromancy* project I've begun all my monographs by assembling fairly formal source-catalogues in this way too, always with a view to some additional pedagogical gain, even when no separate sourcebook is planned; the process is often visible (for better or worse) in the finished products, and not least in *Aristomenes of Messene* (CPW, Swansea, 2004) and *The Legend of Seleucus* (CUP, Cambridge, 2017), both of which books aspire to incorporate, in course, translations of all the key sources for their respective legend (in an emboldened font in the latter case, so that they can be easily picked out).

What are the gains for one's students in working in this way? The self-evident one is that it does make it easy for them to perceive the link between the research and the teaching. Of course many of us teach directly out of our research without the benefit of an intervening sourcebook, and the link between the research and the teaching is, in reality, no less emphatic in those cases. In this sense, the students perhaps read a message out of the professionalism and formality of a published sourcebook that perhaps works unfairly to the detriment of others. But one hopes, at least, that the gesture they find, in the fact of the sourcebooks, of a fundamental commitment to pedagogy is an honest discovery.

The students get two more specific gains from working directly with the person that wrote their textbook, one perhaps merely psychological, the other more tangible. The first is that they do evidently feel that it's a privilege to be learning a subject directly with the man that wrote the book about it, and on this basis they value rather more than they might otherwise the teaching they are getting, and indeed they value themselves for getting it. The tangible gain is partly in tension with this one. I am quite

open and confessional with them about the process of writing the book, discussing the decisions I took in doing so, fessing up to the howlers I've discovered in it since, telling them frankly what I wish I'd done differently, sharing a variety of anecdotes and associated dirty linen about the life of the book, and generally bringing them, in an accessible and congenial way, to the heart of the knowledge-making process. Again the students clearly feel, at one level, that it's a privilege to be able to peep behind the curtain of authorship in this way, and to be entrusted with little secrets; but at another level the process of soldering the book to the real (albeit eccentric) person they see before them, and openly airing the fallibility of both, is an efficient way of encouraging them to develop a healthily critical response to other scholarly tomes they might be presented with, dauntingly shielded by OUP and CUP logos though they may be.

But it's not all milk and honey. There are pitfalls to teaching from one's own books. Most readers will doubtless be ahead of me here. Particularly when the sourcebooks were brand-new (which happened twice in the case of the *Magic* one, given that OUP allowed me to do a second edition of it), I initially found it difficult to establish much critical distance from my own work. Understandably, the views I'd expressed in the publications still seemed to me to be the right ones, and the conundrums I'd articulated in the books still seemed to me to have been expressed there in the most helpful and lucid way. And so in the case of those students that had dutifully read, marked, learned and inwardly digested the relevant portions of the books the night before class, I could find, with a certain embarrassment, that I had relatively little additional value to offer them in our discussions.

The other pitfall is that my students too, of course, can find it difficult to establish a critical distance from my own material. This is not merely for reasons of deference or of advisedly preferring not to appear to be disagreeing with the chap that's going to be awarding them their marks. It is also because, I suspect, for a number of topics in particular, they feel rather swamped by Ogden and his works: Ogden is the author of their textbook; Ogden is the author of the book that ties in most directly with their textbook (for good or ill); Ogden is often the author a third item of relevance too, lurking somewhere in the offing. A case in point is the understandably popular topic of the tale of 'The sorcerer's apprentice', about which my students are always keen to write (I find that many established Classicists remain unaware that the tale originated not with Walt Disney, nor yet with Goethe, but actually with Lucian). And yet there is hardly anything of substance available in English, good or bad, for the students to read on this fascinating subject, apart from the notes in my sourcebook, the corresponding chapter of my *In Search of the Sorcerer's Apprentice* book and a couple of articles I've published elsewhere. Where are the poor students to turn? In the past I have sometimes adopted the expedient of attempting to conceal the existence of some of my publications from my students, in order to reduce the percentage of unwholesome Ogden in their diet, but, alas, Google now lays everything bare in an instant. And the

students, ever vigilant in the hunt for new sources of anxiety, can be particularly perturbed to discover that one is not recommending (or even drawing attention to) one's own relevant publications.

Some years ago I was told, sternly and piously, by a representative of the TQA regime (cue for a warm nostalgic glow ...) that it was my duty to make all my teaching materials publicly available online. Had I obeyed this foolish diktat, I wouldn't have been able to publish the sourcebooks. The TQA is long gone, but I find to my dismay that Research Councils are now requiring that all 'research materials' (a term which would surely embrace my provisional source-catalogues) for funded projects be made Open Access. I fear this may represent a serious obstacle to others interested in following the source-book-in-tandem approach I advocate. It doesn't really present a problem for me myself, however, grant-proof as I am.

University education bosses and their wonks have been going starry-eyed in recent years at the mention of 'Teaching-led Research.' Between you and me, I'm not sure it's a 'thing.' There are reasons to suspect that teaching led by research might thereby have some special qualities (usually good ones, one trusts, despite some of the paragraphs above). But I can't see a good general case for the notion that research inspired by teaching ipso facto possesses any special qualities, good or bad. Of course one's students are thrilled by the idea that one's teaching of them is in some way informing one's research, that they are themselves actually contributing in some indirect way the research process. And that thrill is worth having - but it's a teaching end, not a research end. As it happens, I am currently engaged for the first time in a research project that I certainly would never have come to had it not been for the teaching: a project on the ancient werewolf. In response to student demand, werewolves have become an ever greater part of my 'Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts' course over the years (for the innocent, ancient werewolves have strong affinities with both witches and ghosts), to such an extent that I now feel that I have accumulated sufficient source-material and have honed a sufficiently distinctive and robust set of views about it to attempt a *libellus*. If I do eventually find that the finished book is possessed of any special qualities as a result of its origin in teaching, perhaps I could let you know at a later stage?

Daniel Ogden  
Professor of Ancient History  
University of Exeter  
[D.Ogden@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:D.Ogden@exeter.ac.uk)