

EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IN CLASSICS TEACHING IN ST ANDREWS

by Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis



For details of this image, please see Figure 1 below

How do we decide on the subject of a new module? A wide variety of factors shape our new teaching ventures: the landscape of existing courses, the legacy of old courses that students or colleagues expect to continue in revamped form, our existing repertoire of teaching, and, at a deeper level, our evolving research directions embedded in current scholarship. Added to these considerations are pressures on our time, not least from research, institutional expectations and practical constraints – for example the number of contact hours, types of assessment, number of students, and whether there is any budget for trips. All these elements contribute to moulding new teaching initiatives, and to curtailing blue-sky thinking.

In 2017 I took up a permanent lectureship in a supportive institution, the School of Classics at the University of St Andrews, following a long career break. I was given a free hand to develop my own research-led Honours module. What were the elements that shaped my choices? My research is on Greek material culture and literature of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and I had extensive experience of teaching Greek and Roman art. Looking at and, where possible, touching the objects under consideration has always been a central part of my teaching practice. In my previous posts at King's College London and at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, I had often taken my students to the British Museum, the Sir John Soane Museum and the Ashmolean Museum, to look at objects, draw them and even handle them in sessions arranged with the curators.

What could St Andrews offer? The School of Classics has the [Bridges Collection](#) of antiquities comprising mostly Cypriot material with a chronological range from the Bronze Age to the Byzantine period. I admit that in comparison to the material I had taught with in the BM I was underwhelmed by the array of terracotta vessels, many undecorated! (Although I did use the collection for handling sessions in a number of other modules I was involved in, and I have since become an enthusiast.) As a new arrival in St Andrews and being a commuter from London, it was a priority for me to embed myself in the local geography and community, and this played a part in the choices I made. At the time, therefore, I was looking out for local monuments or collections including figural art with an emphasis on bodies and the marvellous. I soon homed in on the remains of St Andrews' C12th [Cathedral and its museum](#), and the

University's C19th [Bell Pettigrew Museum of natural history](#) (more on which below). But perhaps the most important element in the development of my Honours module was my involvement in the School of Classics Equality and Diversity Committee at a time when we were feverishly preparing our Athena Swan Bronze application. It was a time for reflection on these values, not least in the curriculum. This was the broader context in which I designed a Classical Studies module on Classical Bodies, focusing on artistic and literary depictions of bodies marginalised by race, gender, disability, social status and age.

The concept of Equality and Diversity was at the heart of the module design. The range of bodies studied was broadened well beyond that of a youthful idealised male elite, as was the range of possible viewers of this material in antiquity. The diversity of bodies in art and life was foregrounded in the module and not relegated to a small section on 'others' as is the case in many courses on Greek art and indeed in much scholarship. The inclusion of local, non-classical comparanda at the Cathedral and the Bell Pettigrew Museum was part of this broadening of outlook. The values of Equality and Diversity, then, affected the choice of objects of study and intellectual approaches we explored in the module. I also aimed to enact these values in the delivery of teaching: not only in offering my students the opportunity to create their own agendas for discussion in each seminar, based on their reading of four 'essential' scholarly articles; but also in setting up two out of the eleven sessions I had with my eight students into public engagement sessions with a class of 21 six or seven year-olds from a local primary school. In developing these sessions I carefully defined learning aims both for the students and for the pupils, the latter in consultation with their teacher. For the students these were specific to the module and also included the development of transferable skills. A key aim was for the students to engage with a group of learners different to them in age and, in many cases, background and nationality, and at the same time, to foster links between the University and the local community. I describe below the activities and related assessment, explaining the rationale that underpinned them; feedback I received and modifications which I plan for the future; and the organisational and practical challenges entailed. The venture was experimental, and I hope it may be useful for colleagues considering models for embedding an Equality and Diversity agenda into their teaching practice, innovative teaching methods as well as public engagement. I use the term public engagement rather than impact, as this conveys the notion of a dialogue between the participants and the value of a multiplicity of voices; but the possibility of having impact through such activities if linked to one's research (and being able to demonstrate that for REF) is clearly also there.

But just how innovative are such activities bridging Classics Higher Education and schools? Many of us go into schools to give talks or run active learning workshops (my most successful activity in this regard was a workshop on Archaeology for KS2, which included setting up an excavation in a sandpit with very small cheap replicas of vases from different periods carefully positioned at varying depths to demonstrate stratigraphy). Meanwhile undergraduates have been going into state primary schools on the Iris project to teach Latin since 2007. How are things different when undergraduates go into a school as a group, as part of a Classical Studies module?



Figure 1: Session one - visit to St Andrews Cathedral

Perhaps the first thing to say is that Classical Studies offers a plethora of subjects that might be relevant to a school curriculum; and embedding the subject of the session in an existing theme that the school has to cover is key to a successful collaboration with teachers, who are under immense pressure to deliver the curriculum. In our case, in Fife, our sessions were linked to the theme of the locality, St Andrews, in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence. Our two sessions were on 'Marvellous Bodies in St Andrews' and 'Marvellous Bodies in Classical Greece'. In

the first session we focused on the story of St Andrew's miraculous relics coming from Greece to Scotland and becoming a focus of Medieval Christian pilgrimage, and on extraordinary specimens of animals mostly brought here from faraway lands to the Bell Pettigrew Museum. This session took the form of a trip to the Cathedral and to the Bell Pettigrew Museum; at the Cathedral we explored the idea of the miracle-working relics of St Andrew at the centre of the great building, and in the museum we searched out stone carvings of extraordinary human bodies such as a gargoyle and a mortar stone in the shape of a head which 'vomited out' crushed grain; in the Bell Pettigrew Museum we searched for animal specimens at the margins of normal, for example the Japanese spider crab as the largest species of crab, a deformed starfish, and an Australian platypus which C18th Europeans thought was a hybrid fake made up of parts of other animals familiar to them. Both at the Cathedral and the Bell Pettigrew Museum we had brief presentations by experienced Access and Learning curators before each student accompanied two or three pupils around the museum to look at specific exhibits, making use of worksheets which I had prepared. The second session, 'Marvellous Bodies in Classical Greece' was in the school classroom a week later and we focused on eight examples of hybrid or extraordinary mythological creatures through student presentations to the whole class and then drawing hybrids and monsters in small groups. In both sessions students worked with the same group of pupils; this was mentioned in feedback in very positive terms as it offered the opportunity of building up a rapport and a relationship between student and pupils.

Student preparation for these sessions occurred in one of our regular weekly seminars on the topic of 'Marvellous Bodies', in which we examined literary and visual depictions of bodies transgressing Classical norms and causing wonder, and we explored the concept of hybridity. At the end of the seminar the students had a brainstorming session in which they distilled the concepts of normal, extraordinary and hybrid Classical bodies and came up with innovative ways in which to communicate them to six and seven year-olds. Their ideas included linking classical material to books or films that the children were likely to be familiar with (such as the *Percy Jackson* and *Harry Potter* series and Disney's *Hercules*), and active learning through designing a hybrid creature that represented themselves, or through acting out a Greek myth involving a marvellous creature. In this brainstorming session the aim was for students to learn to translate complex ideas into simpler ones appropriate for a different group of learners; and

to develop creative methods of active learning to communicate these effectively. At the sessions themselves the students practised important transferable skills of communication and interaction in the small group work and effective public speaking in their individual presentations to the class; in addition they listened to a variety of voices about the subject they had studied in some depth.

To support the students in these activities I met them and went around the Cathedral site prior to the arrival of the children; we had a debriefing after each session; and after the last session the students filled out a questionnaire that prompted them to reflect on the experience in terms of expectations, challenges, and the way that it linked to the theme of the module as a whole. Finally, there was an element of assessment attached to these activities: there was one compulsory essay question in the exam, asking the student to reflect on the public engagement sessions, which counted for 16.8% of the total module assessment.



Figure 2: Session two - student presentation on Cerberus in the classroom

I had three sources of feedback to digest after the events: from the class teacher by email, from the pupils in the form of postcards on which they wrote down what they liked best about the two sessions, and from the students, both in the questionnaires and exam essay mentioned above and also in the form of the official anonymous module feedback. The teacher was extremely positive about the trip and the class session, and invited us back the next year. In response to my question of what we could improve on she said that the students could have been more confident in their presentations to the class – something which I will emphasise to my students in the future. The pupils clearly enjoyed themselves! Two things stood out for me in their response postcards: the bones of St Andrew, which we had discussed at the Cathedral but of course not seen (they were lost during the Reformation) came up several times as a favourite; and also spending time with us was mentioned. Student feedback was very positive on the whole, with five out of eight saying that having two sessions was exactly right, two asking for more, and one for fewer (one session). Particular mention was made of being taken out of their comfort zone, having to explain complex ideas about the classical world to people partly or completely new to the ancient world, and that the experience was very enjoyable. They also said how difficult it was to keep the attention of the children and to balance following the children's on-the-spot interest in the exhibits with what they wanted to convey using the worksheets; and that they had been very nervous before the sessions and in making their presentations to the class. This insight into the difficulty of teaching was particularly gratifying to hear! A sharpened awareness of the teaching and learning process is, I think, beneficial for students and applicable to their entire academic career. I observed that a couple of the most nervous students did particularly well, developing a new voice appropriate to the audience, something I could judge as I had also seen them give assessed presentations in our regular seminar. It was confidence-boosting, and one student said that as a result of the experience she was now considering teaching as a career. Something that drew negative comment was that the sessions had not been clearly advertised in the module description; this is a fair point, but arose because at the time the module was advertised the arrangements with the school had not been finalised and I erred on the side of caution in not promising these joint sessions. In the future I would make sure to signpost the sessions and related assessment very clearly; I would also be more ambitious in the topics we tackled. 'Marvellous bodies' translates easily into 'Greek monsters', but the students said that they would have felt able to distil ideas from seminars on much more challenging topics including those of race and disability. I would

therefore allow ten minutes at the end of every seminar for the students to discuss ways of communicating the ideas in a simplified and effective way, both in order to use some of these but also for the intellectual exercise of cutting to the nub of the issue. I would also give more time and scope for students to prepare any worksheets (as I had done all this in advance, not knowing what to expect and feeling a considerable responsibility towards the school as well as my students for the smooth running of the events).



Figure 3: Session two - designing a hybrid in the classroom

Setting up these sessions was very time consuming. I made contact with the school through calling and emailing the school secretary, who sent out my proposal to the teachers, one of whom got back to me in response. She was impressive and a pleasure to work with, although clearly she had limited time to give. I also had to book the venues for the trip, and liaise with our professional support staff to arrange coach and taxi transport, and to carry out a risk assessment for the trip. We were not required to get police checks as I was accompanying my students and the class teacher was present; the School of Classics covered the transport costs which amounted to approximately £200. Now that I have a blueprint of how to go about organising such activities, and I have a contact in the school, organising events in the future should be easier. Part of my thinking was to choose and develop a topic that I could easily adapt for a different module (as they run on a two-yearly cycle), both to make the most of the work I put into this, and also to enable more pupils and students to participate. I realise that these activities could not have occurred without the support of my institution: not just the School of Classics but the University as a whole which ran a stimulating 'Small group teaching' training course which prompted me to review my teaching practice, mostly established in Oxford tutorials and seminars, and in particular it prompted me to find ways to cultivate students' active learning. I am aware that the activities described here were designed for small numbers of students (though it would be possible to replicate the sessions in other local schools, particularly those with two class intakes to accommodate more students). I am also

aware that the time investment at the outset and the longer-term nature of the rewards means that this model may be unworkable for staff on fixed term contracts.

The ideal of linking research, teaching and public engagement, and even mutual influence between these, was realised in a number of small ways in this venture, both for the students and for myself. For example, we had discussed in depth in seminars the idea of the variety of ancient viewers engaging with body imagery; but it only struck the students at a much deeper level when they were physically next to six year-olds looking at sculptures in the Cathedral museum. So the students' experience of teaching and public engagement fed back into their understanding of the core 'subject'. One student on the module successfully applied for a paid Undergraduate Research Assistantship with me: she did further work on the worksheets, particularly in terms of layout and visuals but also appropriate discourse for young children. She also created a map to illustrate the journey of St Andrew from Patras to Fife, complete with magnetic relics! These materials will be used in future public engagement sessions. Furthermore, together with another Undergraduate Research Assistant not on the module, she carried out research on the marvellous in contemporary St Andrews: through a series of interviews with golfers on the Old Course, the two students gathered evidence about the locality as a centre of secular golfing pilgrimage and of the experience of the marvellous in this. They will be making a short presentation of their research at a [conference on Classical Marvels](#) that I am convening in May 2019. The values of Equality and Diversity have shaped the organisation of this conference no less than the module on Classical Bodies: it brings together a multiplicity of voices which do not normally engage with each other, including established and early career academics, postgraduates, a visual artist and a magician performer. The addition of undergraduate voices on the local 'marvellous' creates further diversity.

Experimentation and even, at times, failure are a valuable part of teaching practice; they are necessary in staying engaged with the object of study and with successive groups of learners. Although I think this venture was successful, there is certainly scope for ongoing change and improvement as I outline above. To critics who might feel that the activities described did not enhance the students' understanding of the classical world I would point to the insight on child (and varied) viewers; and the insights gained when we are forced to make the case for Classics to a new audience. I would emphasise that the module also encompassed traditional teaching methods (lecture-style and seminar discussion) and assessments (oral presentation, essay, exam including commentaries), and cultivated skills of close reading and analysis of primary evidence in conjunction with scholarship. But fundamentally I would make the case for a broader understanding of the ethics of what we do as Classicists and educators: to help our students grow in confidence, in empathy and skills of communication; to ask them to engage deeply and critically with the classical world, something which entails keeping one eye on similar phenomena in the contemporary world; to encourage them to share the privilege of their classical education and to be open to varied audiences and different perspectives. In fact, this comes very close to the values of Equality and Diversity. Ultimately the answer to how valuable a couple of joint sessions between university and a local school are depends on much deeper positions we hold about what education is for.

Dr Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis

Lecturer in Classics & School of Classics Equality and Diversity Co-Chair
School of Classics, University of St Andrews
aipd@st-andrews.ac.uk