

When teachers direct researchers: optimising public engagement activities by partnering with classroom practitioners

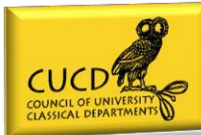
by Arlene Holmes-Henderson



Maria Wyke, Arlene Holmes-Henderson, Matthew Fitzjohn, Aylin Atacan and Rebecca Langlands

Showcasing education-focussed Classics public engagement

At the Classical Association conference in Warwick (April 2024), I organised and chaired a panel which showcased examples of public engagement with Classics research. Project leaders explained how these initiatives had been improved by involving classroom teachers at an early stage in project design. They outlined the background to collaboration, the methods of cooperative working, and the results. Panelists also reflected on the knowledge exchanged and suggested top tips for both researchers and teachers who might like to become involved in similar future projects.

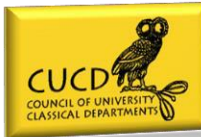


The panel concluded with an interactive workshop in which this co-design process took place in real time. Professor Maria Wyke's AHRC-funded *Museum of Dreamworlds* project, focusing on silent films, is currently in its early stages. She asked researchers and teachers to pool their knowledge and experience, discuss routes to engagement, and identify which teaching and learning resources should be the priority for development. This 'worked example' allowed attendees to practise approaches to knowledge exchange and relationship building which will, I hope, stimulate further co-designed and co-delivered Classics research and engagement projects.

In this article, I provide an overview of the different case studies presented via the panel in order to give a sense of the variety of education-focused engagement activities currently taking place, and hopefully to inspire more co-creation between university and school-based classicists. To that end, I conclude this article with top tips for future projects in this area.

Case Study 1: *Thinking, playing, learning: using LEGO to develop collaborative learning and understanding of the Classical world*, Dr Matthew Fitzjohn, University of Liverpool

This presentation examined methods of teaching that encourage play and foster collaboration to enhance learning and writing about the classical world. Matthew explained his motivations for working with LEGO, as well as the creative opportunities that arise to think about the classical world with plastic bricks. The presentation focused on *Grand designs in Ancient Greece*, an AHRC-funded collaborative research project between The University of Liverpool and primary and secondary school teachers. The project created innovative and engaging cross-curricular lessons about archaeology and classical Greece. Matthew reflected on how, by introducing some of the outcomes from collaboration with teachers, he has enhanced his own teaching and activities at university level. Via hands-on activities, participants explored how LEGO can be used to scaffold pupils' learning and support their discussion of different aspects of the classical world, including historical events, myths, literature and language.



Case Study 2: *How teachers and school children shaped the Sex & History project*, Professor Rebecca Langlands, University of Exeter

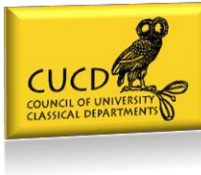
The Sex & History project has developed over the course of many years of collaboration with school teachers, sex education professionals, and youth workers, as well as with the young people they work with. Rebecca outlined some of the ways that these collaborations have informed, and continue to inform, the approaches educators take to history and historical artefacts.

Case Study 3: *Advocating Classics Education: curry, conferences and curriculum!* Professor Arlene Holmes-Henderson, Durham University

The Advocating Classics Education project, co-directed by Professor Edith Hall and Arlene Holmes-Henderson, was established in 2017 with funding from AHRC. From the outset, this project brought academic researchers and school teachers together to boost access to the study of Classical Civilisation and Ancient History in state-maintained schools across the UK. Arlene explained how an initial advisory board meeting (featuring curry at lunch) led to teachers presenting alongside academic colleagues at conferences and culminated in a range of co-designed curriculum resources which have positively impacted the knowledge and skills of researchers, teachers and learners. Arlene shared her top tips for creating equitable partnerships between academics and practitioners and reflected on the lessons she has learned.

Case Study 4 and interactive workshop: *Museum of Dreamworlds: Silent Antiquity Films in the Classroom*, Professor Maria Wyke and Dr Aylin Atacan, University College London

The three-year research project *Museum of Dreamworlds* started in October 2023 and asks how early encounters between Classics and cinema, from the 1890s to the 1920s, shaped the understanding of classical antiquity in the modern world and the history of cinema. Using the surviving silent films in the British National Film Archive, the team aims to: trace how cinema designed its Greek and Roman dreamworlds (their



geographies, exterior and interior sets, furnishings, costumes and props, as well as the stories they serve); investigate what might be the determinants of those designs; and consider how those recreated worlds were used as instruments of mass education – an education that, in its frequent focus on women and slaves and address to audiences diverse in gender, ethnicity and class, appeared to challenge the authority of elite cultural institutions like the public school or museum. Read more about the project here: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/classics/research/research-projects/museum-dream-worlds>.

The interactive workshop put attendees into small groups to discuss how students might benefit from analysing extracts of these films and using them as platforms to make their own. By involving teachers at the start, we learned lots about what kinds of public engagement activities would best service their interests, and established what they think silent films about Greece and Rome could do for their teaching of Classics.

Towards the end of the session, panelists and participants worked together to identify the common barriers to success in HE-led Classics outreach, engagement and impact activities. Responses are summarised below.

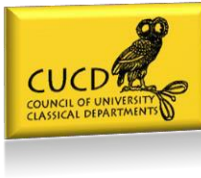
What do school teachers wish academics knew BEFORE they launched engagement activities?

Communication

- Link your research and activities to the syllabus (e.g. OCR A Level Ancient History, Greek Religion). Teachers have little opportunity to venture beyond the specifications.
- Communicate the value of this opportunity to teachers clearly and succinctly (if you're not sure, ask a teacher!).

Format

- Teachers won't follow your lesson plans; they will always adapt them, so build in some flexibility from the outset.



- Not death by PPT, please!
- The ability to record and share one-off events is really helpful.
- Better awareness of differing student access to technology. If it is essential for your activity, provide it.
- Consider a realistic attention span for students (going for 10-minute segments is a good guide).

Professionalism

- Teachers have to complete lots of paperwork for any trip or visitor – academics should be aware of this and give plenty of notice (at least 3 months).
- Recognise the pedagogical expertise of teachers. There are opportunities here for knowledge exchange, not just knowledge transfer.
- Adapt your engagement to the needs of the partner school(s) rather than expecting them to adapt to your needs.
- Time constraints exist around 'enrichment'. Teachers may have to decline your offer based on limited contact time with students.
- Pinch points in the school year are different from universities: don't plan your activities for university reading week and assume that teachers and students will be available. Conversely, make an effort to understand teachers' free time (e.g. INSET) and offer to work with their schedules.

Next steps

The panel yielded many constructive suggestions for improved collaboration between university academics and school teachers. As REF 2029 looms, it will be important for impact case study leads to take note of teachers' advice as they build equitable relationships with non-academic stakeholders. The Classical Association is keen to support work in this area. If you would like to co-develop a toolkit, or contribute additional ideas, please contact the CA's Partnerships Officer Arlene Holmes-Henderson at the email address below.

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