

Research Article

Forum

‘Translating’ Classics for Generations Z and Alpha

Eleni Bozia, Anastasia Pantazopoulou and Anthony J. Smith

Department of Classics, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

Abstract

This paper presents a public outreach program developed by the Department of Classics at the University of Florida to introduce school-age children to Classics. The main goal is to emphasise the value of Classics and the practical skills it teaches by engaging students with hands-on exercises and materialising connections between the past and the present. The paper focuses on the importance of Classics and the humanities in the development of engaged citizens, the types of programs and their content, and ways to ensure the sustainability of such initiatives through the involvement of graduate students, faculty, and administrators.

Keywords: Public outreach, school-age children, girls’ empowerment, practical skills, sustainability

Introduction

There were times when Classics was the cornerstone of education in both the United States and Europe. Students were expected to acquire proficiency in both languages and gain insights from the socio-cultural and political histories of Greece and Rome.¹ When it came to politics and the building of nations, such as the United States, the Founding Fathers imitated the Roman Republic in many respects.² When it came to comprehending languages, Greek and Latin were seen as the meta-grammar, the torch to light the path to learning. Ælfric’s Grammar, for instance, was the first translation of Latin grammar into a European vernacular language. Ælfric himself calls the text ‘the key that unlocks the meaning of books’.³

In popular culture, the 1989 American drama film *Dead Poets’ Society* summarises its message with *carpe diem*, a motto for an elite school where knowledge of Latin is a *sine qua non*. While in a lesser-known film titled *Rushmore*, a petition circulates to maintain the Latin curriculum in the namesake preparatory school.

Over the past decades, politics, personal and societal priorities, financial realities, and misuse of the lessons of the Greek and Roman worlds have turned the focus to more vocational than liberal priorities. And one of the most important lessons of the Renaissance regarding the ingenious combination of sciences and humanities seems to have been lost.⁴

Now, however, we are past the time to regret, complain, assign blame, or do anything that is not actionable. It is time to reckon with the present and re-present our discipline to the students. Our efforts should focus on younger generations and how to make them not necessarily admirers but conscious students and critical

thinkers of the Greek and Roman worlds. Our approach should favour meaningful engagement and building a relationship of trust and reciprocity between students and Classics.

With this in view, this paper focuses on public outreach initiatives undertaken by the Department of Classics at the University of Florida in the city of Gainesville to introduce school-age children to Classics and increase their level of engagement. Such activities are meant to explain the skills and lessons from history that classical studies can offer, make them available to children of all backgrounds, and ultimately ensure the sustainability of the field.

The *foci* of this paper are the following:

1. The reasons behind these initiatives and the larger context
2. Types of programs (after-school, national competitions, university visits)
3. Involvement of faculty and graduate students to ensure sustainability

Contextualising the Past and the Present of Classics

The Greeks and their intellectual accomplishments and the Romans and their political supremacy have captured the imagination of generations in countries across the globe.⁵ So, is this type of cultural imitation a modern phenomenon, then? According to Plutarch, Cato intimates to the Athenians that he admires the virtues of ancient Athenians – no doubt, a not-so-subtle comment on their contemporary profligacies and the selective process of imitation that one applies when studying or observing the past (Plut. *Cat. Mai.* 12). Later, Aelius Aristides, in his *Panathenaic Oration*, compares the Athenian Empire with the Roman Empire to determine where the former failed. Conversely, Josephus critiques the Romans and presents the Jewish perspective in a Greco-Roman-dominated world. So, Greeks, Romans, and the rest of the

Author of correspondence: Eleni Bozia, E-mail: bozia@ufl.edu

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known world studied each other, imitated selectively, and pointed out political, cultural, and societal differences and *faux pas*.

Skipping ahead to modern history, imitating these two ancient cultures has served as a litmus test of political and intellectual prowess. Whether it is the German Empire, the British Empire on which the sun never set, or the fledgling United States of America, the ancient Greeks and Romans provided a model for politics, administration, law, sciences, arts, and architecture. The fact that these two civilisations have left remnants in large parts of many continents through travel and colonisation has made their existence rather pervasive. Their aura is still quite distinct in the United Kingdom, Sicily, France, Germany, Africa, and Syria, among other places. One can also discern architectural nuances in prominent modern buildings, such as the Lincoln Memorial and the Old Post Office in Washington, DC. Additionally, beyond the tangible and visual connections, the Founding Fathers called upon Greek and Roman conceptual paradigms to create the blueprint for the new world. The main point from all the above is that at every juncture in history, politicians and everyday people fought to (re)define the status quo, looking for archetypes, learning from the past while questioning it, (re)considering the present, and trying to form the future.

Fast forward, though, and all the above must be questioned and reconsidered. Colonial models are toppled, as are statues. The citizenry is more variegated than any of our ancestors could have imagined. Calls for change reverberate throughout the world and breeze through ancient sites and modern monuments. So, is there a future for the study of Classics and Greco-Roman antiquity? In all fairness, the past has never been merely copied and pasted as is. Instead, it was tailor-made to fit the circumstances, even though there have been multiple occasions in history when it has been misused. Admittedly, each time, it has been up to the people to customise their choices and engage in *mimetic kainotes*, a resourceful, not blind, imitation of the models. So, with the help of classicists and enthusiasts of the Greco-Roman world, Classics can rise to the occasion to open up the discipline to new readings and interpretations, as well as constructive criticism to show its relevance to new generations worldwide.

Contextualising our Initiative

The main reason that motivated our initiatives is the belief in the value of history and the lessons of the Greco-Roman world. We are not implying that the classical past should be emulated wholesale. However, one cannot deny that cultures, societies, and histories are edificatory – they teach us by example or simply show behaviours that do not work and must never be repeated. And the products of any civilisation are the conduits via which we get the privilege to evaluate the past critically. Of course, this does not only hold for Classics but for other humanities disciplines, too.

Kazuo Ishiguro, in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, contemplated these issues on a personal and a societal scale:

A little while later, I was speaking before an audience in Tokyo...the questioner pointed out that my books had often concerned individuals who'd lived through times of great social and political upheaval, and who then looked back over their lives and struggled to come to terms with their darker, more shameful memories. But in the future, what I really wished to do was to write a story about how a nation or a community faced these same questions. Does a nation

remember and forget in much the same way as an individual does?... What exactly are the memories of a nation? ... How are they shaped and controlled? Are there times when forgetting is the only way to stop cycles of violence, or to stop a society from disintegrating into chaos and war? On the other hand, can stable, free nations really build on foundations of willful amnesia and frustrated justice? (Ishiguro, 2017).

More specifically, the study of the Greek and Roman worlds develops critical thinking, feeds the imagination, cultivates facility with language learning, builds appreciation for art and creativity, and can contribute to nurturing generations of people who are more than a job title. The value of such skills should not be diminished and cannot be overstated.⁶ Unfortunately, Greek and Latin are not available to all students. In our case, in Gainesville, Florida, students in disadvantaged neighbourhoods do not have the chance to be introduced to Classics.⁷ But this is also the case in other schools where Latin might be an option but not necessarily the students' favourite. With this in view, we developed a program focusing on students without prior experience in Classics. The goal was to introduce them to the field while also showcasing its contemporaneity.

Types of Programs

As educators in the field of Classics, we aim to help students at different stages of their learning path to 'engage in a dialogue between the ancient and modern worlds' (Gephardt, 2011, p. 12). With that principle informing our endeavours, in the Fall of 2019, we started developing an outreach plan for schools in our area. Initially, intending to focus on East Gainesville middle and high schools in underprivileged areas, we sharpened the focus further to girls' education. According to studies, 'by high school, less than one-third of girls feels confident and positive about themselves', and middle school, in particular, is a pivotal time for physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development.⁸ Furthermore, we recognised that the practical skills cultivated in Classics courses can develop thoughtful leaders, educate young people about civic responsibility, and encourage young women to develop a sense of power and self-worth. Moreover, in the artistry and imagination of classical stories, students can find pleasure in mythology and appreciate the lack of gender-specificity that some stories offer. In general, we wanted to open a new area of classical reception that would be defined by the receiver and create an atmosphere in which each student would find their own space in the Greco-Roman tradition.

The initial plan included school visits, invitations to our campus to meet, interact with, and learn about us and why we love Classics, as well as games and activities designed for middle-school girls. Unfortunately, we had to modify the program's in-person activities due to the SARS-CoV-2 health situation since volunteers were not allowed in schools.

Our first program allowed us to materialise a series of events in collaboration with a local organisation called Girls Place, which works with a diverse group of young girls to inspire and challenge them to reach their greatest potential. The program was entitled 'Growing Strong: Empowering Girls in the 21st Century through Stories of Classical Female Mythological Figures and Contemporary Women'.⁹

Our collaborative public engagement project was structured around our interpretation of the five 'Cs' of promoting Classics to

the educational community: communication, culture, connections, comparisons, and communities.¹⁰ As such, it sought to create an interactive, thought-provoking space for young girls to reflect on their identity as active community members and the multiple roles they can assume, by discussing the stories of inspirational ancient Greco-Roman goddesses and other figures alongside contemporary women. Respecting our partner's rules and values and adjusting to the pandemic, we designed a series of virtual events incorporated into the Girls Place after-school activities. Our project concluded with an open-to-the-public virtual event.

Description of Activities

We planned five events tied together by common threads of instilling confidence, building communication skills, facilitating first contact with the vastness of the Greco-Roman world, and connecting the ancient and modern world through engaging activities. At the beginning of the program, the girls received a questionnaire to contextualise the planned activities and create some goals and expectations of their own. For our sessions, we used *Goddess Power: A Kids' Book of Greek and Roman Mythology* (Chae, 2020), a book chosen in collaboration with our community partner, as a reference tool, along with a supplementary workbook we created.

Below, we outline the planned events (four in the main program and one final open-to-the-public event) to showcase some of the program's intended outcomes.

Event 1: Council of the Gods

Our first activity aimed to introduce a story where a female character (in this case, the goddess Athena) emerges as a leading and articulate figure that stands up for what she believes is right and encourages the participants to think critically and not be afraid to make decisions.

The girls participated in a court-like situation based on the council of the gods in Homer's *Odyssey* Book 1, which takes place on the top of Mount Olympus, where the gods decide Odysseus' fate. We adapted our modern script and acted in the roles of Poseidon and Athena, as plaintiff and defendant of Odysseus, respectively, and the girls had the roles of the judge and the jurors. After listening to the cases Athena and Poseidon made, the girls were invited to decide whether Odysseus should return home. Participants experienced an example of strong female leadership and, at the same time, practised skills of active listening and collaboration crucial to making informed decisions.

Event 2: Guess Muse

This activity aimed to introduce the story of multi-talented ancient female characters, explore different paths one can follow in life, and familiarise the girls with the world of the humanities.

The girls worked together to learn about the nine Muses. They watched short clips which featured the Muses played by our costumed facilitators and volunteers. One organiser, as Apollo, guided the girls through their journey of identifying the Muses and their characteristics. Presented with the varied humanities fields as portrayed by the ancient Muses, the participants sharpened their problem-solving skills through the discovery process of the activity.

Event 3: Parallel-o-Gram

This activity aimed to foster creativity and teamwork. The title is a combination of the final syllable of the social media site Instagram

and the adjective 'parallel', which we chose as the activity was meant to create a bridge between women in the Greco-Roman world and contemporary society.

The girls created a storyboard to showcase what an inspirational ancient female figure and a contemporary empowered female figure would talk about if they met. In addition, the focus on past and present inspirational women encouraged the girls to contemplate the importance of supporting one another while working together towards a common goal.

Event 4: Career Week

This interactive session introduced successful female professionals from diverse backgrounds representing multiple aspects of the humanities.

For the final session of the main program, the girls met and interacted with three guest speakers from the University of Florida Classics Department. Participants addressed the panel with insightful questions that opened up an active dialogue about the career paths of accomplished women in humanities-based professions and the dynamic roles they hold inside and outside of academia. In addition, the activity allowed the girls to envision themselves in future careers where they would use the confidence and leadership skills displayed by the female figures in earlier activities.

Event 5: Final Public Virtual Event, Empowering Girls: What We've Learned

At our final event, the girls were invited to share their thoughts and feelings about their place and role in their community and consider how knowing about empowered ancient female figures and contemporary women can help strengthen their voice.

At the beginning of the closed sessions, the girls completed preliminary surveys, which indicated they had little or no prior knowledge of the ancient and contemporary female figures we would discuss. They furthermore noted that they were unfamiliar with the term humanities and had different experiences with female leadership. In the exit surveys at the program's conclusion, the girls indicated that they had acquired a greater understanding of the humanities' role in education and had familiarised themselves more deeply with figures from the classical world, as they gained confidence in their abilities to think critically and see themselves as leaders.

The ultimate goal of the entire program was to establish a long-term collaboration channel between our community partner and the department so that similar projects could be materialised in the future with other local organisations and schools in the broader Gainesville area. This aligns with the University of Florida's motto, *civium in moribus rei publicae salus* ('The strength of the state is in the ethos of its citizens').¹¹ Such an attitude also comports with the overall picture of the American higher education system, which 'ascribes to a tripartite missions composed of research and discovery, teaching and education, and public service and outreach' (Furco, 2010, p. 380).

Other Outreach Activities

Another one of our outreach activities involves sending a delegation of our undergraduate and graduate students to assist at a National Classics Competition entitled *Certamen*. *Certamen* is a quiz-bowl-style game for students of Latin, Greek, and classical civilisations. It allows them to demonstrate their knowledge of the Greco-Roman

languages, cultures, and the relationships between them and the modern world.

Open *Certamen* provides an opportunity for students without much previous practice to engage in friendly competition. On the other hand, Competitive *Certamen* is for those students who wish to play *Certamen* at a competitive level. The three divisions are Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced.

Further plans for the future include bringing students to the university to attend some of our classes, opening our language courses to school-age children who wish to learn Greek and Latin (when these languages are not offered in their school), and creating a network with public school teachers who would like to include classical material in their courses to provide them with a 'how-to' approach.

Sustainability

One of the major issues that such initiatives face is sustainability. How do we engage more people? How do we make such programs the focus of colleagues so as to serve more school children and ensure that such initiatives become something stable and long-standing and not just one person's quest?

The most effective pathway forward is motivation. There is the motivation that rests on people knowing they are doing the right thing. Therefore, they are engaged and willing to take the extra step and work the extra hour for worthwhile causes – to bring about change. That is not to say that people who are less willing to participate doubt the significance of such efforts. However, there are realities on all ends, such as the reality of how much time and other constraints one has that limit the time for such activities.

So, to motivate people more actively, Professor Bozia has focused on the following: For undergraduate and graduate students, both MA and Ph.D., she emphasises the significance of gaining real-world experience and how such initiatives can enrich their CVs, strengthen their job applications, and cultivate skills beyond the academic. Additionally, the students are encouraged to apply for grants to finance these activities. Grant writing is yet an additional skill of its own accord. So, she puts them in touch with the Center for the Humanities and the Public Sphere at the University of Florida, for instance, which offers public engagement grants, and helps them put the application together. Finally, she coaches them, gives them feedback on their applications, and writes support letters. Depending on the type of program, she also connects them with other colleagues who can guide them, thus involving other faculty members or administrators in the process.

Regarding colleagues, faculty must submit an Annual Activities Report every year detailing their activities in three areas – research, teaching, and service. Similarly, they report on all such work and are evaluated by the department, the college, and the university when they apply for a promotion, award applications, or monetary awards. So, these outreach activities can be presented as opportunities for them to contribute to the social good and benefit the field and as additional items that can be acknowledged and rewarded.

There is no recipe or one-size-fits-all approach for this. Each of us – each school, region, and country – needs to customise their plans and, more often than not, improvise. The bottom line is that younger generations should be approached as the strong and determined-for-change generations that they are and should be consulted in becoming well-rounded adults and contributing citizens of their communities, nations, and the world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is our time to unmake and remake Classics. The beauty of the languages is there, as are the history, the civic skills, the philosophy, the art and culture, the positive lessons, and the behaviours to be critiqued and avoided. All we have to do is show children how freeing a liberal arts education can be; how the trivium can pave *their* way to success.¹² To sum up, it is fitting to close with a quote from Norman Augustine, the former Lockheed Martin CEO:

So what does business need from our educational system? One answer is it needs more employees who excel in science and engineering... But that is only the beginning; one cannot live by equations alone. The need is increasing for workers with greater foreign-language skills and an expanded knowledge of economics, history, and geography. And who wants a technology-driven economy if those who drive it are not grounded in such fields as ethics?... Certainly when it comes to life's major decisions, would it not be well for the leaders and employees of our government and our nation's firms to have knowledge of the world's great philosophers and the provocative dilemmas found in the works of great authors and playwrights? I believe the answer is a resounding 'yes!' (quoted in Zakaria, 2015, pp. 89–90).

Notes

- 1 See Bulwer (2006) on Classics and teaching in Europe. See Kelsen (2012) and Moroney (2001) about Classics in American education. Santini (2018) offers a modern perspective through an analysis of Nietzsche's appreciation of the teaching of classical studies.
- 2 See Richard (2012) for a discussion of classical principles in the founding of the United States.
- 3 Kiss (2005) analyses ancient languages, including Ancient Greek and Latin, as instantiations of a universal grammar.
- 4 For relevant discussions on the current state of affairs, see Nussbaum (2010), Said (1994), Zakaria (2015). For discussions on the misappropriations of Classics, see Dee (2003–2004) and Zuckerberg (2018) for an extensive relevant bibliography. See also Pharos (<https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/>) and Goldman and Futo Kennedy (2021) that offer suggestions as to how one should navigate efficiently and avoid misappropriations of classical antiquity.
- 5 See Alvares and Li (2020) who present a Greek and Latin program in the People's Republic of China. See Claassen (1999) for a discussion of classical education in Africa. Reid (1996) discusses the history of Classics as a discipline and a field of inquiry in Egypt. The contributions in Laird and Miller's (2018) volume present classical reception in Latin America.
- 6 Gentili (2017) discusses the skills that classical studies cultivate within the framework of the Italian Liceo Classico and proposes methods on how they can be integrated with the new job market values. Walsh (2019) argues the contemporary value of Classics and its continuous relevance to modern technologies and methodologies.
- 7 Jarratt (2009) presents the significance of Classics in the curricula of historically Black Colleges. See also Goings and O'Connor (2015), and Ronnick (2011) on black classicism.
- 8 <https://www.accreditedschoolsonline.org/resources/girls-health-happiness/>.
- 9 This program was generously funded by the University of Florida Center for the Humanities and the Public Sphere.
- 10 See Gephardt (2011) for an analysis of the five Cs, the goals for classical and modern languages produced by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages as part of the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project and adopted by classical organisations such as the American Classical League and the American Philological Association (now the Society for Classical Studies).
- 11 The Latin of the motto is sourced from <https://brandcenter.ufl.edu/the-university-seal/>. The English translation is our own.

12 The trivium along with the quadrivium comprised the seven Liberal Arts, the cornerstone of a Liberal Arts education, and included the study of grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.

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