Structuring the Large Myth Class for Better Papers and Less Grading

Classical Mythology courses are one of the most popular and most commonly taught courses by Classics programs across the country. Instructors have a wealth of material to choose from when we design the content of our courses. The difficulty comes when we move from *what* we want our students to know to *how* to guide them to think about it and assess that thought. We can assess their knowledge of content through quizzes which are easy to implement in the context of a large class, but our ability to assess desired outcomes such as an understanding of how Classical Myth fits into the wider ancient world, how myth functioned in the lives, art, thought, literature, and society of the Greeks and Romans, the impact of Classical myth on later societies, and the possibilities for new interpretations of these ancient myths is much more difficult and time-consuming to implement and assess, since this usually requires that the students produce essays, papers, or projects. This becomes particularly difficult when we acknowledge that the students who take myth come from a variety of majors and at different levels of academic preparation, and so they may not have experience writing papers or essays that analyze society, art, or literature. Thus, a typical myth class that is content heavy and relies on content or fact-based quizzes can grant an implicit advantage to students who have already had exposure to Classical Myth; a myth class that assigns papers and essays about that content risks giving an implicit advantage to students who have already had training in writing in the social sciences and humanities. My university is a STEM-focused institution and our Classical Mythology course is an entry-level class that fulfills core requirements for the university; if I structure my class to include implicit advantages and disadvantages, I risk further turning students off from the humanities.

Thus, I implement two parallel strategies in my classes, both of which reduce the impact of these advantages and have produced better outcomes for me and my students. My quizzes are focused primarily on content and can be taken online and graded automatically. I produce question banks for these quizzes and allow students to take them as often as they want until they get the score they are hoping for. This practice both lowers anxiety around the quizzes, allows students to learn what they need to know, and creates opportunities for students who come to the class with less exposure to Classical myth to catch up with their peers. These quizzes set them up with the facts and content knowledge that they need to make paper writing easier.

In my experience, assigning papers to large lecture classes without much guidance results in a huge range of quality in those papers, and thus a great deal of time spent in figuring out how to grade such a wide array, in writing comments, and in meeting with students unhappy with their grades. I realized that the comments I was give centered around how the paper did not use our primary source material (both ancient and modern), made vague or unsupported comments about the meaning of the sources, lacked focus, argument, or organization, or simply reproduced what was in the textbook or in lecture. As a result, I developed a series of activities and assignments organized around developing these skills in my students. In this talk, I will share the materials and strategies that I have found help students read closely, ask productive questions of source material, build an argument, and think creatively about myth. I will also share how I assess the students in a way that encourages engagement and reflection on their part and keeps me from too much time spent grading.

The result of these activities has been two-fold: 1) I see a much narrower range in paper quality with far more students able to write a successful (i.e. passing) paper without my needing

to curve their grades and 2) a higher level of engagement with the material and the class and more creativity in the students' papers and projects.