

Bread & Circuses: How an Ancient Historian put the Classics back in the Gen Ed.

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“Like my grandma always said, there is nothing new under the sun!”

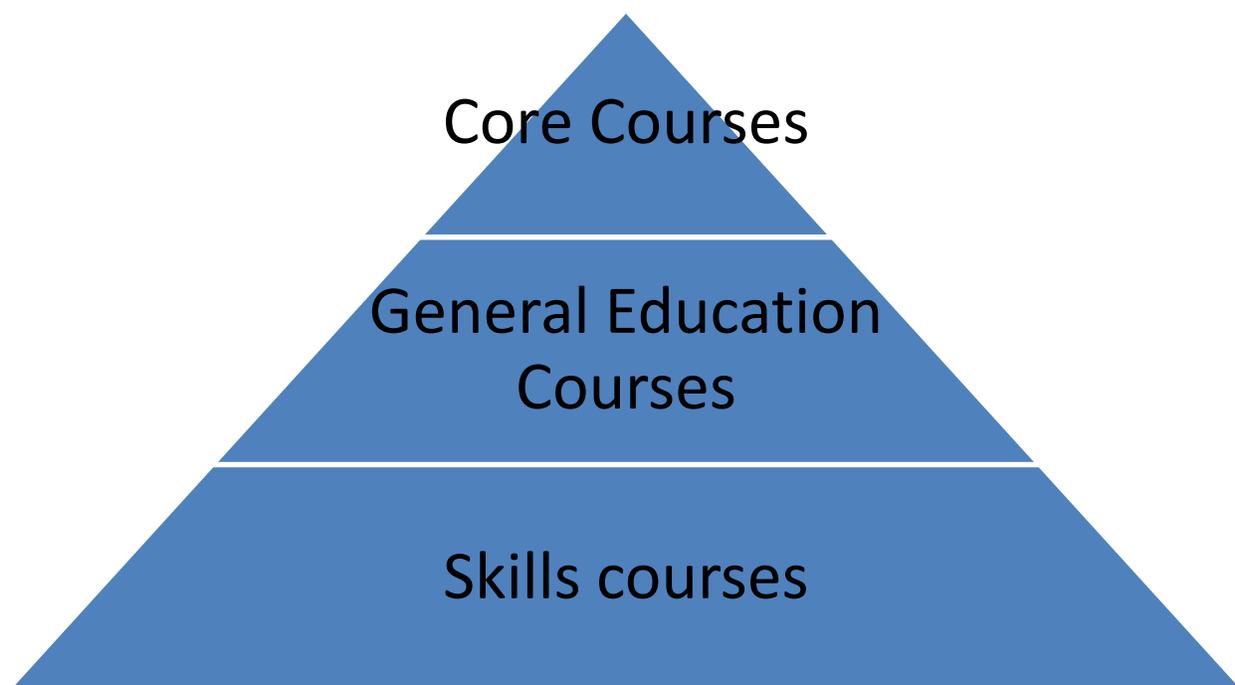
My student’s exclamation was inspired by his reading of R.O. 73 lines 1-45, presented by Valerie Warrior in her *Greek Religion*.¹ The selection describes the preparations for the celebration of the Artemisia in 4th century BC Eretria. Gabriel, a so-called “non-traditional” student, noted with excitement how the planners of the Artemisia offered vendors a tax break to set up shop at the festival. Gabriel is a professional events producer. His experience includes everything from rodeos to the National Junior Olympics. Gabriel knew first-hand how modern festival organizers tangle with city governments to win such sales tax concessions. He was impressed that the organizers at Eretria were so practical in their preparations and so easy to get along with.

Never in my planning to deliver a course on the city and the arts did I imagine such a *eureka* moment. Gabriel’s connection to the materials he was reading and his ability to convey that connection to his colleagues is but one example of how we as ancient historians and classicists can help our students see the relationship between the world in which they live and the world of antiquity. The course is my *NSP: CS 4303 Bread & Circuses: The City, the Arts & Entertainment*. The title is ridiculously long. Still, all the elements are necessary. This course is a **capstone, interdisciplinary** course meeting the **Creative Spirit** component of the **Newman Studies Program** at Newman University. This paper aims to show how a revision to the general education curriculum can allow for renewed appreciation in our students and our faculty colleagues for the foundational importance of the classics and the ancient world.

¹ Valerie M. Warrior, *Greek Religion: A Sourcebook* (Newburyport, MA: 2009): 114-115.

The Newman Studies Program

To begin, Newman University is a Catholic Liberal Arts University of approximately 2800 students, founded in 1933 by the Sisters Adorers of the Blood of Christ in Wichita, Kansas. Named for John Henry Cardinal Newman, we support education in both the liberal arts and the professions, with the mission of preparing our graduates to transform society. The Newman Studies Program (NSP) was developed by the faculty as a whole and implemented in 2011 as our new general education curriculum.



The NSP includes a series of courses and experiences throughout a student's time at Newman. It is three tiered and progressive, starting with universal academic skills, followed by the study of content and theory provided by individual disciplines in our general education courses. The NSP concludes with capstone Core Courses that examine problems, questions or issues from an interdisciplinary perspective. The NSP is a universal core: all majors must complete the same skills, general education and capstone courses to earn the bachelor's degree.

This in itself is extraordinary and a feature of a liberal arts college. “The NSP recognizes that, while faculty knowledge, experience and ability are an essential part of any university education, students also teach each other and do so best in relatively small courses with a diverse body of students.”² Finally, the Newman Studies Program is informed by four core ideals or themes. These are the Human Story, the Creative Spirit, the Universe We Live In and the Quest for Meaning. These four themes permeate the general education and core course offerings. My Bread & Circuses is a core course that aims to meet the goals of the Creative Spirit.

The Challenge for the Ancient Historian

This change in the general education curriculum presented both challenges and opportunities. The first challenge was to the discipline of history. The previous version of the general education curriculum required that all students pass two sections of the History of World Civilization, insuring that all students would have at least a passing acquaintance with the ancient world, its institutions and contributions to western and world cultures. The changes in the general education with the advent of the NSP meant that students could opt out of the history of antiquity (and history all together) in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. With the change to the NSP, it became imperative to craft courses featuring the lessons and examples from antiquity to meet the needs of the NSP and our students. Because the NSP emphasizes both skills and content acquisition in various disciplines at the general education level, an upper division interdisciplinary Core Course emphasizing the classics seemed an obvious choice for development.

² Newman Studies Program Proposal, Newman University Faculty, October 5, 2010.

Students could be both introduced to and challenged to further explore both the methods and content offered by the classics and ancient history in an upper division, interdisciplinary Core Course. Upper division Core Courses can present a thematic, narrow focus, more attractive and challenging to both the professor and the student than a typical World Civilization survey. In addition, the NSP Core or capstone courses are meant to be interdisciplinary. Ancient historians are inherently interdisciplinary. We can call upon both the methods and the rich content offered by the classical world to develop and sustain interdisciplinary methods and analysis. Our use and combination of the methods found in such disciplines as topography, literary analysis, archaeology and art history – to name a random few – suit the aims of the NSP Core Courses well.

Bread & Circuses: Civic Space, the Arts & Entertainment

Juvenal, *Satire* 10.77-81

[...] iam pridem, ex quo suffragia nulli
uendimus, effudit curas; nam qui dabat olim
imperium, fascas, legiones, omnia, nunc se
continet atque duas tantum res anxius optat,
panem et circenses. [...]

Once upon a time we sold our votes to no one.

Since then the people have given up their responsibilities.

Back in the day they gave out power, offices, legions, everything.

Now they refrain from all that, and anxiously hope for two things:

bread and circuses.³

³ The translation and liberties taken here are my own.

The well known quote from Juvenal inspires an analytical approach to the city and the arts that offers multiple avenues for examining the relationship between the community and the arts through time. We can explore the political and social aspects of art and entertainment. How does a city identify itself through theatre, through museums, public monuments, the layout of public space? How does the public patronage of arts and entertainment by a community both reflect and shape that community? The topic allows for a comparative approach, moving from city-states in Mesopotamia, to Greece, Rome and beyond. While there are certainly limitations to comparative “big” history, a comparative approach allows for an introduction of the various methods of inquiry employed by the ancient historian and classicist in a significant way. NSP Core courses are reading and writing intensive; the Classics are reading and writing intensive. Finally, because the class invites students to consider civic space set aside and intentionally designed for arts and entertainment, this class is an active one. We can compare modern cityscapes and their use of space with those of the ancient world.

All of the above considerations also support the aim to create a sense of relevancy for the student. How did ancient cities support and view the role of the arts? Why do cities today – given persistent economic issues – continue to make the arts and public entertainment venues priorities? How do the arts help to define who we are as members of a particular community? What do we today have in common with most cities that have used public funding for public venues; what makes the modern era unique in that regard? These kinds of questions and explorations not only help to support inquiry in the course, but serve to promote continued inquiry beyond the classroom and beyond the academy. The kinds of questions posed are complex, requiring critical thinking that crosses several disciplines in order to suggest

satisfactory answers. Grounding the course in the classical world gives us a logical starting point, further supporting the role of the classics in the liberal arts.

The readings assigned for the class cover a variety of arts and entertainments supported by a variety of cities. In addition to reading Juvenal's *Satire* "Against Rome," students read Sophocles' *Antigone*, selections on religious festivals and processions in Greece, Keith Hopkins on the political elements of the gladiator games at Rome, Stephen Greenblatt's analysis of the influence of London on Shakespeare's writing and imagery, Mary Ryan on the elements and changes seen in the uniquely "American Parade" hosted by New York, New Orleans and San Francisco. Students are encouraged to examine the evidence of graffiti from Pompeii and the graffiti movement in New York of the 1970s. We look to an economist's analysis of the fiscal benefit of the Superdome to New Orleans, and a geographer's call for the need to connect civic physical and virtual spaces in the 21st century.⁴

This is an active course, bringing in a variety of experts on campus and off to challenge the students to connect information from a variety of sources. Students participate in lectures, experience arts and entertainment venues and complete creative projects both in and outside the classroom. We visited the NU Performance hall for a discussion with Mark Mannette, NU Theatre Director, on the role of Theatre in a community. Michael Austin, our provost and noted authority on satire, offered an analysis comparing Juvenal to Dennis Miller. We visited living history museums meant to celebrate the city of Wichita. We walked the Arkansas River in Veterans Memorial park, analyzing and discussing the topographical and artistic choices made by city planners in that setting. Students engaged with the Graphic Design instructor at NU, Pam Pancake, for a hands-on, original creative project. Finally, Gabriel Lippincott—my now former

⁴ Please see the sample bibliography appended.

student – offered a lecture on the economics of large scale arenas for entertainment in the city of Wichita.

Throughout the course, students presented their analyses and conclusions in formal writing assignments, oral presentations and group discussions. Finally, students were challenged to participate in Newman University's Scholar's Day. In this project, students were to identify a topic or question, conduct research and make a formal professional presentation, demonstrating how their research related not only to the city and the arts but also to the goals of the course as an NSP Creative Spirit Core Course. Some students were particularly successful; some less so. We hope the remainder will be better prepared at the next opportunity. The experience overall was successful for the majority of the class. Once they got past the nerves, they genuinely enjoyed the opportunity to present in a conference style setting, fielded questions from the audience and supported one another with reasoned critiques.

Conclusions:

Is the class successful? Most of my evidence at this point is anecdotal. We have begun the assessment process of the NSP program and the Core Courses like *Bread & Circuses* in particular. Gabriel's example is a great success. Introduced to some elements of the classics, namely Greek epigraphic evidence for civic religious festivals, he made connections to his own life experiences. He continues to pursue these themes outside the classroom and has returned to lecture on his ideas. Another student had a eureka moment as to interdisciplinary approaches. While explaining the requirements of the final project to the class – she interrupted (very unlike her) in an excited manner: "Don't you guys see what she's done? The assignments all work together and help us with our final presentation!" Others have been equally interesting. One

student learned enough Latin to read all the references in *The Hunger Games*, having recognized references to the passage quoted above from Juvenal.

For the purposes of our Newman Studies Program and my university community concerned with recruiting, retention, the successful transition of non-traditional students and all that, I am pretty certain that my Dean would call my offering of *Bread and Circuses* a success. The accolades from colleagues and consultants coming my way, praise my teaching methods and my ability to connect with students. While I am grateful for the positive reinforcement, I have more work to do to demonstrate that the success of the course lies more with the subject matter. The ancient city's extraordinary patronage of the arts, from architecture to poetry, its staging of the spectacular, from the sublime to the grotesque, still resonate. I have had the opportunity to remind colleagues of things they have forgotten about the ancient world, whether it be the role of women in Greek processions, the political power of the Roman people at the games, the lesson learned about society from seating arrangements.

Juvenal's condemnation of Roman citizens who preferred the easy spectacle of the arena and festivals to the hard work and responsibility of governing themselves certainly resonates even with the most cynical of my students. City spaces suited for gathering for the arts and entertainment have long been sites for civic conversations. Their number and use are on the decline. Whether they be an open air theatre, a parade route or speakers' corner, such spaces facilitate conversations and engagement of citizens to exercise their rights and their responsibilities. Chris Hedges bemoans the loss of such spaces where full throated, face to face engagement could once be had. He believes we have lost the places "where we could once carry out meaningful discourse and debate, where we could participate in our society as citizens. Community centers, village squares and town meetings, the public space that made democratic

participation possible, have been replaced by privatized spaces, by shopping malls, where we are permitted to enter as consumers and forbidden to enter as citizens. The privatization of public space has pushed us into the lonely virtual worlds of television and the internet.”⁵ Brian Hracz argues that as we continue into the 21st century, city planners must support public venues for people to gather both physically and virtually, “to encourage civic conversations about the state of the world and to provide citizens, agencies of the state and the media the opportunity to hear the views of others.”⁶

Bread & Circuses speaks to us on so many levels. We must sustain our communities if we are to keep them. We must keep the classics in the general education curriculum of the academy, and if possible, enhance their position, if we are to sustain them. The Newman Studies Program at Newman University offers a potential model for the small, liberal arts college to reinforce the classics and ancient history in the general education curriculum. As John Henry Cardinal Newman advocated in his *Idea of a University*, a university must support both the liberal arts and the useful arts of the professions, for the sake of our students, our colleagues and our university. A liberally educated citizen is a good citizen. A good citizen understands the value of the arts for a community. Good citizens recognize and exercise not only the privileges of urban society but also the responsibilities. We as ancient historians can engage our students and colleagues in the materials and methods of our profession, and of our calling. While there certainly are caveats to a comparative, “big history” approach that merely introduces the materials and methods of the ancient Mediterranean to students, there are benefits. By passing on

⁵ Chris Hedges, *I don't believe in atheists* (Free Press: New York, 2008): 175

⁶ Brian Hracz, “Places/spaces of celebration and protest: citizenship, civic conversations and the promotion of rights and obligations.” *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*. June, 2008: 22

the lessons of our fields in an imaginative, creative and relevant fashion, we can sustain our community. In sustaining the classics, we sustain so much more.

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