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Putting the Greek Back in Greek Mythology

We present the results of an experiment in the pedagogy of large myth courses which we introduced at the University of New Hampshire in the Spring semester of 2000 and continued (with the aid of our colleague R. Scott Smith) this Fall. The experiment consists of a series of exercises that introduce students in our large 270 student myth classes to aspects of the Greek language as they relate to myth. We hoped thereby to tie our civilization courses more closely to our language curriculum. While it is too early to assess the results for this term, clearly the introduction of the exercises in Spring had positive effects and contributed to our doubling the number of beginning Greek students over the previous year, filling to capacity our sections of introductory Latin, and may be responsible for the enrollment in first-year Sanskrit of 15 students.

Last Spring students were given an introductory lesson on the Greek alphabet and then asked to learn the alphabet and a list of simple rules for basic transliteration (kappa > k, pi > p, etc.) on their own. The students were then given an in-class exercise on performing transliterations of names that were familiar to them from their readings. A few weeks later they were introduced to the concept of case and given an extra credit exercise to demonstrate and reinforce their new knowledge. This term the exercises have been expanded and have been made part of the regular requirements for the courses. The first assignment teaches and tests basic transliteration skills, while the second takes students through the process of Latinizing and Anglicizing the names they have transliterated. The third lesson (not yet given) will introduce the dative case by showing students how to translate dedicatory inscriptions and is designed to be part of a more general discussion of Apollo and Delphi. The fourth will come while the students are dealing with Greek heroes and will revolve around the concept of ‘speaking’ names. The fifth and final lesson will teach students some principles of Greek meter and of oral composition in connection with their reading of the Iliad.

Although our evidence is merely anecdotal at present, we think our efforts have paid off in more ways than simply increasing the enrollments in our language classes. The exercises give students a greater insight into what we do as classicists and has raised our visibility across campus. They also provide the opportunity for us to break out of a strictly lecture format and the students have responded well to that. Students now have a different and more successful path to grappling with the huge number of names and terms that must be learned and (no small benefit) we have found that we now less concerned about how names are transliterated in the texts we use. Finally, on a day-to-day basis the knowledge the students now have can be used as a springboard to teach certain concepts more efficiently. For instance, we tie in the introduction of the alphabet to Near Eastern influences that we already discuss (Succession motif, myth of Kadmos, etc.) and the dedicatory inscriptions help us really get across the idea of do ut des. The techniques we have developed for integrating some language instruction into our mythology courses can be transferred, with similar benefits, to many other Classical civilization courses.