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Teaching Multicultural (or Comparative) Myth as a Web-Based Distance Learning Course

To survive (and, one hopes, continue to thrive) in an academy increasingly organized along corporate models, Classics must compete on every front. For good or ill, moreover, administrative enthusiasms (and consequently economic resources) have recently been lavished upon web-based distance learning. This discussion will review how a course in multicultural mythology that was designed for mass appeal in the lecture hall at a large state university was successfully converted into a web-based distance learning course that has not only continued to attract large numbers of students (thus helping to "pay" for small Greek and Latin classes) but has also, so I shall suggest, provided significant, although different, educational opportunities for those students.

We shall begin with an overview of how the course was originally organized for the lecture hall and how this organization was translated into a web-based design. Other structural adjustments made to accommodate standard course components such as student assessment, classroom discussion, and office hours will be addressed as well. There are of course difficulties of a practical nature that confront a classically trained instructor who must translate lecture notes into web pages, and these we shall review briefly.

After (re)constructing the course, we shall turn to practical matters of teaching. How does one, as an instructor, become acquainted with and maintain contact with students one never meets? How does one build a community among students who do their work at all hours of the day and night? There are likely many answers to these questions, but the method I shall discuss is the use of required participation in a class mailing list or web board (I shall also address the relative merits of each) as a means to simulate classroom discussion and to stimulate exchange not only between instructor and students, but even more to foster a sense of community and group inquiry among the students themselves. The results were surprising to me, and may prove of general interest to anyone contemplating the construction of such a course. These electronic discussions have also provided a basic means of measuring participation as well as tools for measuring intellectual growth and evidence for the acquisition of critical thinking skills.

Other practical questions for discussion include how the time spent managing a web-based class compares with teaching a lecture course and, more importantly, how students fare. Do they learn as much? Do they learn more? Are they satisfied with the experience? Here the results are mixed. We find both successes and failures. I shall crunch some numbers, and furnish context with commentary.

Web-based distance learning, despite its many laudations and significant costs, has not yet received enough formal study from Departments of Curriculum and Instruction. Nevertheless, if the experiences of multicultural myth are any guide, web-based distance learning can, with certain caveats, provide an effective alternative to the lecture hall. Why this may be is the very reason that perhaps makes the web appear ominous to many: its inherent anonymity. Classroom discussions become rather more democratic and abundant

on the web than in the lecture hall. In short, we may be a long, long way from the banks of the Ilius, but web-based distance learning may just offer us an opportunity to engage in the sort of Socratic dialogue which we, as classicists, often idealize, but frequently fail to spark in cavernous lecture halls.