The course in question: CLCV 203, "Mythology"

Every fall, the Classical Studies Department offers the survey course CLCV 203, "Mythology." This course serves several important functions: as the core literature and culture course for all Classical Studies majors; as a gateway course into the department and its majors, especially for incoming first-years; and as a required course for the recently re-organized interdisciplinary minor in Mythology. It also fulfills the college graduation requirement in the humanities, leading some students to choose Mythology as the one humanities course they take here.

As a survey course, Mythology requires a student to master a good deal of content knowledge in order to participate in conversations about what myth is and how a corpus of myths provides insight into a given culture group and its traditions. This corpus of narratives and their constitutive elements, derived from a wide variety of texts representing many literary genres over more than a millennium, comprise a cultural language with its own grammar, according to which the world of classical myth is built. The sheer volume of information that students must learn to achieve fluency can very easily lead to reliance on testing that covers a lot of ground rather than asking students to go in depth.

At Trinity, I've taught Mythology three times. The first time, I employed assessments that privileged such testing: semi-weekly multiple-choice online quizzes and in-class midterm and final exams consisting mostly of three-sentence short-answer questions. Apart from a take-home essay with the midterm and a modest paper (ca. 5-7 pages) to supplement the final exam, I rarely used written assessments because I was overwhelmed at the thought of having to grade such work in a class that regularly enrolls, on average, 40 students. But I was also dissatisfied with assessments that felt too shallow and insufficiently qualitative for the liberal arts environment, where we cultivate students to do more than merely catalog data and (re)produce it on command. Writing exercises better serve the goal of creating engaged participants in society.

The second time I taught Mythology at Trinity, I replaced half of the multiple-choice quizzes with a weekly "writing to learn" exercise: 500 words of low-stakes, credited but ungraded writing in response to one of the two prompts I provided to stimulate review of the week's new material. However, given the number of students in the class, I didn't feel capable of doing much more than opening that cognitive door; just getting them to write so frequently was sufficient to

my immediate goal of emphasizing the utility of informal writing as a reflective mode of learning. I determined that the next year's iteration of the course would ask students for more meaningful engagement with writing to learn.

My Writing Fellows experience

In my application to the Writing Fellows program, I proposed developing my students' engagement with course material by requiring that they select one informal response from each of the course's three units to revise and expand, thus creating a portfolio of written work in place of the final exam. This choice to privilege deeper engagement with course material over sheer breadth of knowledge would better suit the liberal arts project.

The Writing Fellows seminar provided enriching and even provocative discussion about not only how, but also why, to incorporate writing exercises into course design. There are few other structured opportunities on even our small campus for generating a sustained conversation with colleagues across divisions about a deeply human activity that we all care about, as both a tool and a craft. The instructors from the Writing and Rhetoric program were all effective discussion leaders on a varied range of topics, and the readings that they selected provided us fellows with insight into various trends in writing pedagogy over the past three decades. These discussions were often revelatory, as we outsiders to that community could both productively question some of its tenets from our own disciplinary perspectives and gain new perspectives on our own practices and assumptions through their lens.

A recurrent discussion that most fundamentally influenced my thinking about the use of writing in course design concerned the concept of objective reality. The dominant trend in writing pedagogy rejects this "modernist" idea and embraces the post-modern position that there is no objective reality, only points of view through which representations of reality are constructed. In its broadest form, this contention was challenging not only for fellows whose disciplines entail understanding the world through empirical research, but even for a humanist like myself who observes that actions occur and materially impact the world, in reality. At a basic level, we all must agree on what has existed and occurred and what does exist and is occurring. For example,

it is crucial that we all agree the Holocaust did occur; the unwillingness of certain social actors to recognize that objective reality creates other real effects.

Over the year's discussions, it became clear that such rejection of "modernist objectivity" arises from a concern that no one interpretation of events be privileged as necessarily "true" to the exclusion of all others, in the vein of an "official history" that simply reinforces the values and interests of whoever holds power in society while masquerading as "just the facts." Seeing as all accounts entail rhetorical positioning, no particular account can claim absolute and exclusive truth-value. Our students come to us at a point in their own negotiation with the world and how to know it that requires our drawing attention to the ubiquity of such contestation. Focusing their attention not only on "the data" but also on the interpretive work already performed by the vehicles for that information, and on their own enmeshment in those acts of interpretation, is crucial to their ability to grow from passive recipients of someone else's truth into engaged participants capable of sorting through varied positions.

Under such circumstances, instructors must strike a balance between identifying "the data" necessary for world-building and inviting students to grapple with the rhetorical vehicles through which that content has been preserved and transmitted over time. Many accretions and inflections of interpretation have re-shaped how audiences have interpreted that material—including in our own time. Understanding this complex dynamic is central to my own research as a scholar of the historical reception of classical antiquity in the United States between World War II and the "War on Terror" era. This level of critical engagement with course material is, however, predicated on knowing "the data" conveyed by these rhetorical vehicles. These engagements with course material cannot happen simultaneously for students in an introductory, no-prerequisite course like Mythology. They must be practiced in stages.

Take-aways for next year's iteration of CLCV 203, "Mythology"

The Writing Fellows program has inspired me to redesign learning activities in Mythology so that they induce students to more consciously engage in this multi-step interpretive process. The first step will remain multiple-choice quizzes, which allow students to assess how much of the new "data" they have absorbed and provide me with a mechanism for highlighting crucial inflection

points in the narratives that provide this "data." This type of exercise establishes a baseline of knowledge about the world in which these narratives play out. On that basis, students will engage in writing exercises that explore how conflicts over knowledge are endemic to these narratives.

The first set of essay prompts will ask students to engage in the apparently benign activities of summary and paraphrase. These prompts will have the dual benefits of inducing students to review certain passages of the week's reading and to attend to certain word choices that inflect the reader's sympathies in assessing a consequential encounter between characters with mutually exclusive goals. Such a framework emphasizes the importance of granular knowledge for making broader arguments about competing values and the use of close reading to build such arguments.

The next set of essay prompts will tackle conflict among our sources: not all agree on some key "facts" about the world in which classical myths take place. In historical Greek and Roman societies, there was no such thing as scripture or orthodoxy in mythic narratives, nor any authority tasked with policing variations on received knowledge. Indeed, variation characterizes much of our corpus of texts, creating some irreconcilable "facts." For example, did Herakles kill his family <u>before</u> undertaking his famous Labors, as Apollodorus says? Or did he kill his family <u>after</u> he returned from his Labors, as Euripides says? Because of the tendency to turn sequential relationships into causal ones, this difference is deeply consequential for framing the meaning of his Labors, which touch every corner of the cosmos. Such essay prompts can direct students to think about what criteria they use in assessing irreconcilable data and how privileging one version over another changes meaning within that world.

A third set of essay prompts can draw attention to the multivocality of many sources. Because of the agonistic nature of Greek and Roman cultures, even representations of autocratic societies feature characters debating over proposed courses of action that have serious stakes for their shared reality. It is generally clear who the higher-status character is, and sometimes an internal audience's reaction provides a proxy through which we external audience members might assess the positions in such a debate. Yet in these conflicts, higher status does not necessarily correlate with being in the right. This set of essay prompts may ask students how to identify the dominant "voice" in a given scenario and how they know whether dominance there

does or does not correlate with moral correctness. Students who choose to revise one of these essays would also identify a challenging or suppressed position within a given scenario and re-tell that conflict in a way that treats this position as centered rather than marginalized. Both in antiquity and in modernity, such re-interpretive activity animates many receptions of mythic narratives that seek a novel take on a familiar story.

This multi-level approach toward course content creates an iterative process in which each encounter with "the same" material productively changes the students' terms of engagement. As students advance deeper into analysis of the rhetoric that encodes our "data," they will also be creating the conditions for thinking critically about their own rhetorical positioning as interpreters of those sources. Ideally, students will recognize that this interpretive apparatus is operative not just in this class, and not just in college, but more broadly in their social actions.