



January 19, 2018

Dear members of the UCCC:

With this letter, I nominate CLSX 148: Greek and Roman Mythology (KU Core 1.1, 3H) for the Christopher Haufler KU Core Course Innovation Award. We believe the Myth course is a strong addition to the menu of courses for Goal 1.1 – or will be, since it is now pending UCCC approval for that goal (it has always counted for goal 3H).

Overview

For many years, CLSX 148 has been among the largest KU humanities courses, and it is very popular with first year students. In CLSX 148, students become acquainted with mythological tales by reading ancient works of literature and studying ancient artworks, supplemented by some lecture; they discuss the concepts that arise in the course; they show mastery of the details through objective quizzes and exams; and they complete in-depth assignments that foster their critical and responsible approach to the material. This structure remains the same across all formats of the course (large face-to-face, small face-to-face, hybrid, online) and for all instructors, even though any offering of the course might rely on different readings or ancient sources.

Over the past 4 years, a team of faculty members in Classics (Pam Gordon, Emma Scioli and I) redesigned the course as part of a large collaborative grant run through KU's CTE. Our aim was to improve students' critical thinking skills. The redesigned course consists of a set of innovative assignments focused on helping students master two core aspects of critical thinking: identifying (passive) or articulating (active) a thesis or argument, and evaluating (passive) or deploying (active) evidence in support of that thesis or argument. We have documented student achievement of our critical thinking goals across all assignments, and we have used (and will continue to use) the extensive data collected in order to identify aspects of the course or of assignments that would benefit from improvement.

The redesigned course has been successful beyond our hopes. The data show that our students are achieving higher levels of critical thinking across the course, and this alone is sufficient reward for our efforts. Better still, students with the weakest backgrounds coming into the course show the most benefit, which aligns with our aim as a department to meet students where they are. Best yet, the DFW rate for the course has dropped significantly, a phenomenon we hope will help KU in its efforts to retain and then graduate vulnerable students.

Innovations

After three years of experimentation and scrutiny of the resulting student data, we reduced dramatically the quantity and changed the nature of examinations, and increased the quantity and quality of the critical, analytical work we ask students to do. For the latter, critical work, we allow students to practice and thus gain experience on a certain topic or methodology by giving assignments that call upon the same skills across several assignments. To this end, we designed seven assignment clusters, each with three parts: an online preliminary assignment, an in-class discussion, and a component that is turned in for nuanced evaluation, often a writing assignment. Each of the assignment clusters was designed to enable students to practice the same skills – paying attention to details of context, such as plot and structure while reading a text, and iconography and medium while studying a work of visual art; gathering evidence to support an argument; and learning to synthesize these preliminary observations in a plenary assignment. What is more, students repeat these skills in three thematic areas: two of the seven assignments focus on close textual reading, two on secondary sources, and two on analysis of visual art. The seventh assignment combines text, art, and secondary sources. The seven assignments are appended to this application, or are linked at <https://cte.ku.edu/chrp/portfolios/classics#implementation>.

Achievement of the learning outcomes

We assess (and grade) the analytical assignments using a rubric adapted from the AAUP's rubric for critical thinking (attached). Our rubric focuses on identifying or articulating a thesis or argument, and evaluating or deploying evidence appropriate to a given thesis or argument. The analytical assignments count cumulatively for 60% of the student's grade. Please see the discussion under "Data" below for evidence that our students are achieving the desired outcomes.

Student engagement

We were especially attentive to this aspect of the course, for three reasons: the audience is mostly freshmen; we desire active engagement across all teaching formats; and we enjoy teaching more when students bring their most engaged selves to the experience. In addition to the fact that even our lectures are conversational and involve discussion, we crafted the first two components of each analytical assignment to promote student engagement with the material, with each other, and with us. Part 1 involves online discussion on a limited topic and Part 2 is in-class guided discussion in small groups and then the whole. Some of the assignments ask students to reach beyond the ancient world and make connections to our own society, as with a topic involving KU's common book and life on campus. There are three compelling pieces of evidence that students are actively engaged with the material and in the course. First, the completion rate for assignments is extremely high compared to rates before our redesign (95% completion rate on Assignment 7.3 in Fall 2017, vs. 82% in Fall 2013). Second, the DFW rate is much lower (15% in F17 vs 27% in F15). Students are staying in the course. Third, student evaluations routinely mention engagement.

Feedback loop

In each of the past 3 years, our redesign team has evaluated the data and worked on improvements; the shape of the course now is not what we anticipated it would be when we started redesigning the course, nor is the course in its final form. But we have a well-defined path for improving it as we go: each semester, the current and upcoming myth teachers confer about best practices and changes that could improve the course. In Fall, this means the instructor for the large format face-to-face course helps the Spring instructors adapt the material to the more varied formats (online, hybrid, small-enrollment) we offer in Spring. And each Spring, this means the instructor of the prior Fall's large course meets with the instructor for the following Fall to work out changes. While each teacher in every format is given wide latitude to choose which myths, texts, and artworks will be the focus of the class, and what thought-topics the analytical assignments will cover, the basic structure will remain consistent and will, we hope, always improve.

Quantitative data

We have gathered extensive data for this course. Though we are still analyzing the data for Fall 2017, data and analysis for the prior few years can be found in our course portfolio on CTE's website: <https://cte.ku.edu/chrp/portfolios/classics#summary>.

Sharing results

We have already shared our results (and the trials and experiments that led to them) with many KU faculty and faculty beyond KU as part of the CTE's CHRP working group (Collaborative Humanities Redesign Program). We also presented our findings at a larger conference, "(Re)Imagining Humanities Teaching" (KU June 2017). A report about this work and other course design activities is scheduled to appear in this Spring's CTE issue of *Reflections from the Classroom*. We will be excited to share our findings and learn from others around the KU community and beyond.

Conclusion

We are grateful for the opportunity to submit this nomination for the Haufler Award, and grateful for Dea Greenhoot and Dan Bernstein for shepherding us through the redesign process. Every effort we – in Classics, on the UCCC, and at KU – can do to help our students achieve more is effort well spent. Please feel free to contact me for clarification of any material here presented, or for further documentation.

Sincerely,

Tara S. Welch
Professor and Chair