

Reclaiming the Classics for a Diverse and Global World Through OER

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Résumé de l'article

In the 2019–20 academic year, I redesigned a course on the classics to make both the texts and the context in which they were taught more accessible for and relevant to the predominantly female students of Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame. The course was re-centered on the dialogue between the ever-evolving and diverse cultures within Greece and the Roman empire and surrounding regions such as Egypt, Ethiopia, and Persia; issues caused by slavery and economic inequality; conceptions of gender roles and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and migration and citizenship; the troubling appropriation of classical motifs and texts by fascist groups in the twentieth century and some alt-right groups and sexual predators in the twenty-first century; and on recent initiatives meant to demonstrate the diversity of both Greek and Roman cultures through documentary, artistic, and archaeological evidence (particularly in the digital humanities and in museums and libraries). I also wanted to make the course close to zero cost for students and to shift to digital texts which lent themselves to interactivity and social scholarship. Our librarian, Catherine Pellegrino, obtained multi-user e-books for modern reinterpretations of classical works still in copyright. A LibreTexts grant enabled the co-authors of this article—the course instructor (and lead author) and two paid student researchers—and a team of summer-employed student collaborators to edit, footnote, and create critical introductions and student activities for various key texts for the course. Many of these texts are now hosted on the LibreTexts OER platform. Beta versions of enriched OER texts and activities were user tested in a synchronous hybrid virtual/physical classroom of twenty-five students, who were taking the course (HUST 292) in the fall semester of 2020.



TEACHING REFLECTION

Reclaiming the Classics for a Diverse and Global World Through OER

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In the 2019–20 academic year, I redesigned a course on the classics to make both the texts and the context in which they were taught more accessible for and relevant to the predominantly female students of Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame. The course was re-centered on the dialogue between the ever-evolving and diverse cultures within Greece and the Roman empire and surrounding regions such as Egypt, Ethiopia, and Persia; issues caused by slavery and economic inequality; conceptions of gender roles and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and migration and citizenship; the troubling appropriation of classical motifs and texts by fascist groups in the twentieth century and some alt-right groups and sexual predators in the twenty-first century; and on recent initiatives meant to demonstrate the diversity of both Greek and Roman cultures through documentary, artistic, and archaeological evidence (particularly in the digital humanities and in museums and libraries). I also wanted to make the course close to zero cost for students and to shift to digital texts which lent themselves to interactivity and social scholarship. Our librarian, Catherine Pellegrino, obtained multi-user e-books for modern reinterpretations of classical works still in copyright. A LibreTexts grant enabled the co-authors of this article—the course instructor (and lead author) and two paid student researchers—and a team of summer-employed student collaborators to edit, footnote, and create critical introductions and student activities for various key texts for the course. Many of these texts are now hosted on the LibreTexts OER platform. Beta versions of enriched OER texts and activities were user tested in a synchronous hybrid virtual/physical classroom of twenty-five students, who were taking the course (HUST 292) in the fall semester of 2020.

Keywords: classics; Greek; Roman; OER; social scholarship; gender studies; ancient history

Introduction to the Design Principles and Goals of HUST 292: Reclaiming the Classical Past for a Diverse and Global World

In HUST 292: Reclaiming the Classical Past for a Diverse and Global World, a literature-based course at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, students evaluate Greek and Roman conceptions of selfhood, family, love, spirituality, gender, and power by analyzing major works of classical literature in English translation. Traditionally, HUST 292 was taught within a “great books” Western civilization framework. It offered one option for fulfilling the literature requirement for our college's liberal arts program and also served as an elective for students pursuing a major or minor in the Department of Humanistic Studies. As a tenured associate professor and medievalist who teaches within the Departments of Humanistic Studies, History, and Gender and Women's Studies at Saint Mary's, I received funding in the 2019–20 academic year to redesign this course to meet the changing nature of the humanistic studies program and to fulfill diverse curricular needs within a small, historically Catholic and women's liberal arts college.

With these goals in mind, I wanted to leverage my educator's training in course design (as both a professor and a certified middle and high school English language arts and social studies teacher) and apply the principles of discussion-based and student-driven learning (Henning 2008; Whiting 2021), universal design for learning (Zaloudek et al. 2018), and social scholarship (Brown 2016; Seatter 2019) both to a newly reimagined course on the modern relevance and accessibility of classical literature and to the course's texts. If the classics were and are to be accessible for all (including those unable to read Greek or Latin), they must continue to be translated, annotated, and made available as open-access resources. Students in HUST 292 needed accessibility in terms of open-access low- or no-cost texts, accessibility in terms of accommodations for different learning styles and schedules, and accessibility in terms of accommodations for disabilities. Every text created for the course—whether hosted on our school's learning management system, Blackboard Ultra (Blackboard n.d.a),¹ or LibreTexts,² an online platform for creating and disseminating open educational resources (OERs)—was crafted to enable as many different forms of reader accessibility as possible. The course syllabus, assignment descriptions, and instructor-created course texts were assessed by and made available in different formats through Ally (Blackboard n.d.b), an accessibility tool embedded in the Blackboard operating system. All materials and lesson plans were designed to follow accessibility guidelines and were posted in advance, enabling students to work at their own pace. High-stakes assessments were designed to allow students choice in the materials analyzed and the modality of demonstrating that analysis.

These decisions about course design and delivery originated from my pedagogical training, but their soundness was confirmed by events in March and April of 2020. After the advent of COVID-19 and the ensuing campus and library shutdowns had students and faculty scrambling for access to printed texts, I determined that all materials utilized in my redesigned survey of ancient literature (developed from May to August 2020 and offered in the August to November semester of 2020) would be available as OERs or multi-user e-books available through our library. Many students at Saint Mary's College are recipients of federal grants based on financial need, and I did not want to force students to purchase multiple expensive primary texts. Moreover, I knew that students would have access to electronic texts through laptops they already owned or that had been loaned to them by our college. However, texts from the ancient world can be difficult to access without the mediation offered by translation into English, multiple notes, critical introductions for context, and activities which model the kinds of questions that students should be asking to meet the learning objectives of the course. Locating or developing reliable, robust OERs with the components necessary for student comprehension thus became a fundamental part of the course redesign.

I also quickly realized, after initially providing fully mediated texts as models, that it made sense to involve the students taking the course in the mediating process, so that future edited texts spoke to their generation's needs as readers. I wanted students to become involved, both as participants in the class and as paid student researchers, in the active interpretation of these texts for audiences such as their classmates, future undergraduate and high school students, or general readers simply searching for information on a text or character online. I hoped that students would realize that the completed translations and editions they saw in OER and e-book form were the result of multiple choices made during curation, translation, and annotation, choices which conveyed individual interests, preferences, agendas, and biases. I likewise envisaged that students would carry that analysis into their consideration of the contexts shaping not only the original authors' agendas and choice of genre and rhetoric but the ways in which different audiences potentially interpreted the texts over the course of millennia. Student users began by reading largely completed OER editions of texts, some created by student researchers, such as selections from Herodotus on various cultures (Bird, Blagburn, Noone, et al. 2021),³ *The Odyssey*, Euripides' *Medea* and *The Trojan Women*, and *Lysistrata*, complete with critical introductions, notes, reading questions, and guided activities. By the later stages of the course, students were required to outline how they would teach texts to others (the Teach to Learn assignment, discussed in more detail below) and to design a creative assessment which encouraged a specific hypothetical audience to reinterpret an ancient text through creative writing, artwork, dramatization, or other means. Students also participated in the editorial process; one of the course's final activities required students to use the Hypothes.is social annotation tool to comment on and annotate a proto-edition of

¹ Of course, similar results could be achieved by using a simple course website or another learning platform to host texts or to link to externally hosted texts.

² See all texts published at: [https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Saint_Mary's_College_\(Notre_Dame_IN\)/Humanistic_Studies](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Saint_Mary's_College_(Notre_Dame_IN)/Humanistic_Studies). Specific texts are discussed in greater detail below.

³ Translated selections from Herodotus were originally posted in PDF form to Blackboard. These have since been re-edited and published as an OER on LibreTexts.

Satyricon.⁴ Students were therefore encouraged to see themselves as makers and interpreters of texts for themselves as individuals, for the class, and for various hypothetical communities (drama, reading, or art clubs, etc). The remainder of this article will therefore reflect on how OERs were fundamental to the redesigned course and supported students' active roles in knowledge creation. After outlining the learning goals and major themes of the course, I will describe the activities and assignments supported by OER texts, and will conclude by identifying some challenges related to incorporating OERs in a hybrid class during COVID and possibilities for using OERs in future teaching. In addition, two key student researchers, Brittany Blagburn and Marirose Osborne, quickly became leaders in source creation and editing, and they share their reflections on that process in this piece. Both young scholars are therefore listed as co-authors of this reflection.⁵

Course Learning Goals

The course's learning goals included identifying some of classical antiquity's attitudes toward gender, love, and relationships in personal, political, and religious contexts; examining how women's contributions to Greek and Roman cultures were shaped by ancient constructions of activities appropriate to performed gender roles; analyzing how some elements and issues of ancient culture relate to aspects of modern culture or are (re)appropriated or (re)interpreted within modern culture; and evaluating modern reinterpretations of classical texts by diverse authors. In addition to acquiring and honing the mutually reinforcing skills of critical reading, discussion, and writing, students were expected to evaluate the ways in which the structures and values of protean and diverse Greek and Roman societies nonetheless problematized "foreigners" and "barbarians," women, freed persons, and slaves; to consider the ways in which Greek and Roman texts have been appropriated by political and intellectual groups to marginalize other groups perhaps denied access to or interpretation of these texts; and to weigh the mutual influence of cultural, political, and socio-economic factors on the production of literature within the Mediterranean region in antiquity. Another theme quickly emerged which will be added to the course's learning goals in future semesters: evaluating how open access to ancient visual and literary texts and reinterpretations of them can be used to empower individuals and communities.

In line with the original learning goals, key topics were interwoven into the course and built into activities and assignments throughout the semester. These topics included contacts and exchanges between the diverse cultures of ancient Greece and Rome and surrounding cultures such as Egypt, Ethiopia, and Persia; issues caused by slavery and economic inequality; conceptions of gender roles and sexuality, race and ethnicity, immigration and citizenship; the troubling appropriation of classical motifs and texts by fascists, some sexual predators, and alt-right groups (Davis 2017); and recent initiatives, particularly in the digital humanities and in museums and libraries, to demonstrate the diversity of both Greek and Roman cultures and resituate them in dialogue with surrounding cultures through documentary, artistic, and archaeological evidence (Talbot 2018; Bond 2017). Some of these topics were chosen to challenge prevailing misconceptions about the diverse cultures of ancient Greece and Rome: that all women were kept from public view, were universally illiterate, and did nothing but keep house and raise children; that the ever-evolving cultures of Greece and Rome were either hermetically sealed off from surrounding cultures, perpetually at war with them, or sole carriers of the "torch of civilization"; that ancient views of sexuality and gender were the same as prevailing opinions expressed during the twentieth or twenty-first century in the United States; and that "classical literature" and "classical art" were either irrelevant, elitist, resoundingly "White," or not applicable to the dilemmas posed by the global modern world.⁶

Assignments and Activities Supported by OER Texts

As noted in the introduction, the course sought to situate students in somewhat familiar territory by having them first read OER editions of translated selections from Herodotus and the entire texts of *The Odyssey*, *Lysistrata*, and *Medea*, and a major goal of the course was to stress the enduring allure and reinterpretation of these works by pairing the classical texts with modern reimaginings of them. A custom OER edition of *The Odyssey* (Bird, Blagburn, Caldwell, et al., *Annotated and Translated Odyssey*, 2021) was coupled with Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2005)⁷ and allusions to *The Odyssey* in film, prose, poetry, and art; Euripides's

⁴This text has now been published. See Jessalynn Bird, ed. (2021b), "*Satyricon*: Translation with Critical Introduction and Activities."

⁵Publication of this paper received clearance from the Saint Mary's Institutional Review Board.

⁶On the multicultural nature of ancient Rome, see Talbot (2018), Bond (2017), and Antonio et al. (2019).

⁷Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018) could also have been used. It is currently taught as a companion text to Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey* in the humanistic studies program.

The Trojan Women was compared to Yasmin Fedda's *Queens of Syria* (2014); Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* (Bird, Blagburn, and Caldwell 2021) was paired with Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq* (2015); and Euripides's *Medea* was compared to selections from Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr.'s *Black Medea* (2013). As discussed in further detail below, these pairings were deliberately chosen to stress that artists of all backgrounds and walks of life have found inspiration in ancient texts, sometimes by adapting them to speak to contemporary concerns (feminism, displacement, urban violence, racism).

In addition, in order to address the problems posed by fragmentary sources and the under-representation of certain groups in artwork and literature, the course also included the manifold translations and contested interpretations of the surviving fragments of Sappho's poetry⁸ and used the trial of Neaira (Bird 2021a) to examine the plight of a trafficked sex worker and resident alien in Athens. Similarly, *Satyricon* (Bird 2021b) proved a key text for exploring conceptions of sexuality and the status of freed persons and slaves in Roman society. Plutarch's *Life of Antony* (Bird and Blagburn 2021a) provided an important opportunity to examine one Greek-speaking Roman author's attitudes towards and portrayal of a powerful female ruler of Egypt, Cleopatra, and the construction and policing of "acceptable" masculinity and femininity. Student-led discussions engaged with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*⁹ from the perspective of current conceptions of gender fluidity and self-transformation as well as modern concerns over sexual harassment and assault. Students also participated in or led discussions regarding the issues posed by male authors representing female voices, typified by Ovid's *Heroides*. In addition, the instructor used a summary of Donna Zuckerberg's *Not All Dead White Men* (2018) to encourage students to consider how modern social media trolls and pick-up artists might turn to passages from Ovid's *Ars amatoria* and *Remedia amoris* (*The Amores*) to justify harassment, stalking, and sexual assault, not to mention the mistaken idea that concepts of love, marriage, and gender roles are universal and timeless rather than socially negotiated and performed. Students likewise embodied the negotiation of concepts of love and relationships through re-enacting the speeches from Plato's *Symposium* in class, translating them, if and where possible, into modern terms. These activities helped students to process the different ways in which various forms of love, sexuality, and gender were defined and represented by multiple authors, translators, and philosophers, both ancient and modern.

In addition to instructor- or student-engineered discussion and presentations, students also completed two short analysis papers and two additional short projects. One of these projects was a Teach to Learn project in which students were required to select an audience and construct a lesson plan (complete with assessment) for teaching one classical text (see the example by Abigail Knopps in Appendix A). Hypothetical audiences ranged from theater groups to art classes, book clubs to high school or middle school students. The other project was a Creative Assessment project. After they had selected a theoretical audience, students were required to outline how they would encourage that audience to creatively reimagine or reinterpret one section of a classical work through a restaging or creative response. The students then generated and assessed, according to their self-determined criteria, a creative sample (examples included TikToks, YouTube videos, podcasts, visual artwork, poems, blogs, letters, etc.). The goal here was to encourage students to evaluate the differing challenges and advantages posed by various audiences and to understand the need to tailor their assignment and assessment to that audience (working with incarcerated individuals, for example, would be an entirely different project than working with retirees, a book or drama club, or middle or high school students). Requiring students to generate and assess their own creative sample enabled them to gauge the feasibility of completing their assessment and encouraged them to outline the key learning outcomes they were hoping to measure through that assessment.

These two assessments prepared students to be able to complete their final project: individually created public-facing websites analyzing the modern (re)interpretation of a classical work or figure. Projects included examinations of the reimagining of Circe, Medea, Minerva, Atalanta, Arachne, Helen, Orpheus and Eurydice, Narcissus, Sappho, *The Odyssey*, the Sirens, Perseus and Medusa, Jason, and Agamemnon. Some of the best sites included analyses of Helen of Troy's representation by Margaret Atwood and other female poets; political appropriations of the tale of Perseus and Medusa in the midst of #MeToo and #BLM;¹⁰ reconsiderations

⁸ For Sappho, a compilation of translations created by my predecessor at Saint Mary's College, John Shinnery (emeritus), was posted to Blackboard under a fair use license.

⁹ Students were encouraged to consult the translations of Ovid's works—*Metamorphoses*, *The Heroides*, and *The Amores*—by A. S. Kline, part of *The Ovid Collection* hosted by the University of Virginia (<https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/>).

¹⁰ For example, what statements were being made when Killer Mike wore a necklace modelled after Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* while addressing the citizens of Atlanta during protests there or when Luciano Garbati's controversial statue, *Medusa with the Head of Perseus*, was erected before the courthouse where Harvey Weinstein was tried? See CBS46Atlanta, "Rapper Killer Mike gives impassioned speech during Atlanta protests," May 29, 2020 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxHWVJYXkeU>) and Julia Jacobs, "How a Medusa Sculpture from a Decade Ago Became #MeToo Art," *New York Times*, October 13, 2020.

of Sappho within the context of the LGBTQ+ community; and several stunning student interpretations of Luis Alfaro's *Mojada* (2020), an adaptation of *Medea* that depicts the gut-wrenching struggles of a fictional immigrant family (e.g., Pilon 2020).

As the reader can see from the attached syllabus (Appendix B), all of these projects were centered on OER texts, with the addition of two modern, copyrighted e-books (*Black Medea* and *Penelopiad*) and two copyrighted films (*Chi-Raq* and *Queens of Syria*). Many of these OER texts were annotated and equipped with critical introductions created specifically for the course, piloted by student users in the fall of 2020, and then re-edited in the winter of 2020–21 based on student reports on usability and accessibility. Over the summer of 2020, a team of paid student workers used Hypothes.is to create reader notes and also contributed to a critical introduction and undergraduate question and activity guide for *The Odyssey*, a high school version of which will be published shortly (Bird, Blagburn, Caldwell, et al., *Annotated and Translated Odyssey*, 2021). I did the same for an OER text of *Lysistrata* (Bird, Blagburn, and Caldwell 2021) and for documents on Roman men and women and the trial of Neaira, with the assistance of Brittany Blagburn (Bird and Blagburn 2021b). John Shinnery's translation of the tale of Cupid and Psyche from Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* was likewise reformatted by Brittany Blagburn (Bird, Blagburn, and Shinnery 2021). The piloted and course-annotated version of the *Satyricon* has since been revised and is now published on LibreTexts as well (Bird 2021b). All texts were enriched with artwork that sought to break down conceptions of Greeks and Romans as bleached white marble statues in museums and to instead stress the diversity of the ancient world. Other texts from Bill Thayer's *Lacus Curtius: Into the Roman World*,¹¹ A. S. Kline's *Poetry in Translation*,¹² and Fordham University's *Ancient History Sourcebook* (Halsall 2021)¹³ were also utilized, in order to showcase the range of OER material published and the different levels of scaffolded reader support available, depending on the date the website was created and the editors' target audiences. Students were also encouraged to examine potential biases in editorial and translation choices and became editors themselves as they used Hypothes.is to track elements of satire and insert questions and comments into a beta-edition of *Satyricon*.

Throughout the course, a focus was maintained on Scythians, Persians, Ethiopians, Libyans, and Egyptians and their interactions with the Greeks and Romans; mobility and migration; trade and colonization; diverse individuals represented in Greco-Roman art; and why this diversity has not been reflected in museum collections until recently. Some of the first texts we analyzed in class were instructor-curated selections from the Greek historian Herodotus's descriptions of and reactions to surrounding cultures and regions (Phoenicia, Persia, Libya, Egypt, Asia Minor, Ethiopia, Scythia). In response to student commentary during a class discussion on concepts of ethnicity in the ancient world and student readers' needs for introductory material and editorial apparatus on this subject, those selections have now been edited and posted as a resource on LibreTexts (Bird, Blagburn, Noone, et al. 2021). In another class, one devoted to primary documents outlining diverse authors' expectations for Roman men and women, we also examined depictions of and archaeological evidence for diverse groups inhabiting the Roman empire (for example, the Ivory Bangle Lady in York [York Museums and Gallery Trust 2021], the Fayum portraits [The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2000], etc.).¹⁴ The course also stressed the construction of gender roles and sexuality in antiquity and the differing situations of and opportunities available to individuals who were resident aliens, enslaved individuals, and/or freed persons (for example, Trimalchio, Encolpius, Giton, Medea, Neaira).

The Benefits and Drawbacks of OERs

The benefits of using electronic editions included the great reduction in cost and the increased accessibility of materials via a smartphone or Wi-Fi-connected laptop. Many of these OER texts were also downloadable as PDFs or e-texts and therefore were both printable and/or readable offline (and, through Blackboard Ally, in alternative formats). OER texts also broke down the barrier between producer and consumer. Students saw that texts (and presentations of them through illustrations, commentary, and translation) were highly

¹¹ For an example of an excellent scholarly translation directed towards undergraduates and classicists, I directed my students towards Bill Thayer's online edition of Plutarch's *Lives*, particularly his *Life of Antony* (https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/plutarch/lives/antony*.html). This specific life has since been annotated and published as part of a unit on Cleopatra housed on LibreTexts (Bird and Blagburn 2021).

¹² These translations were selected to represent OER editions geared towards students and a non-academic or general readership.

¹³ This website was chosen to represent one of the oldest surviving online sourcebooks for materials in translation. The translations posted there, however, tend to be in outdated English prose (in order to avoid copyright issues, older out-of-copyright translations are posted) and often lack footnotes. They were chosen as examples of how expectations for the accessibility and mediation of online primary sources in translation have changed over time. A selection of these texts is now re-edited and annotated on LibreTexts as *Readings on Roman Men and Roman Women* (Bird and Blagburn 2021b).

¹⁴ See also Talbot (2018), Bond (2017), and Antonio et al. (2019).

manipulatable. This realization aligned with the course learning objectives and facilitated student projects comparing the “original” presentation of a text or figure to the creative reinterpretation or appropriation of the same. Student-led discussion and creative reenactment, the Teach to Learn assignment, the Creative Assessment assignment, and the final website project all led to greater critical reading and thinking skills as students grappled with adapting, dramatizing, and reinterpreting classical texts for varied audiences and questioned what was gained or lost in the process. There were important moments of discovery, as students of color saw that these texts could become their texts too and speak to modern issues. For example, one student working remotely from California was captivated by Luis Alfaro’s adaptation of *Medea* to speak to the experiences of some Latin American immigrants in the United States and chose that text for her final website project. Ancient texts and artwork were not seen as dead fossils to be venerated but as living pieces that could speak to the concerns of the twenty-first-century world. The same could be done with innovative student curation of artwork through the creation of website “museums” (e.g., “Africans in Ancient Greek Art” [Hemingway and Hemingway 2008]) and in art classes through modern artistic reinterpretations of ancient texts or artifacts (e.g., *Medusa with the Head of Perseus*).

One of the lead student researchers, co-author Brittany Blagburn, describes her experience in the following terms: “From the very beginning it was apparent just how easy it is to manipulate a text in order to make it fit a certain narrative. During one of our very first team meetings we discussed how the version of *The Odyssey* that we were working on [that of Samuel Butler] used the term ‘servant’ instead of ‘slave.’¹⁵ We made the conscious decision to address that [issue] in order to inform our audience on topics such as class structure and slavery in ancient Greek society. Our specific word choices for each text had an impact and consequences on the understanding of readers, so we had to always be thoughtful of even the smallest of nuances when it came to phrasing.”

In addition, Brittany notes that there were also occasional struggles with managing time and assessing what students might need to know in order to make sense of an ancient primary source: “When it came to the actual formatting of our texts on the LibreText platform, I learned very quickly that there is a delicate balance between what students need to know and what students could [potentially] know in regards to the footnotes. I wanted to give students as much information as I could in the footnotes to enrich their experience with the text. However, I had to match that with the knowledge that giving as much information as possible would take an astronomical amount of time [for both the editor and the reader]. While the footnoting process is not particularly difficult, it is tedious. As such, I had to train myself to separate information that would be interesting to know from information that would be vital to know to contextualize the reading. Being a student while working on this project was very valuable, especially while working on question guides and critical introductions. It allowed me to focus on certain themes and topics that I thought would be of use to students while they were working on assignments, leading discussion, and writing papers. Additionally, I felt that all of my fellow students working on the project were able to write in a fashion that was very approachable and accessible to a wide range of students.”

Another lead student researcher, co-author Marirose Osborne, acknowledged that “the LibreTexts project was difficult at first. I honestly felt a bit intimidated by the work. I had read the texts as a student myself, not as someone analyzing for the sake of other students. However, having a team to bounce ideas off of, talk through the meanings of passages, and to just discuss the historical context was invaluable. It blended together history, literature, culture, and presentation skills. I had to think about the texts in a variety of ways—as a student, as a researcher, and as a teacher. As a [college] student, I thought about my knowledge in high school. I asked myself what I would know, what my friends would know, and what other students would know. This allowed me to see what gaps in the text needed to be filled. As a researcher, I thought about the text in context. What was the author writing about? What would the audience take from it? These questions weren’t necessarily something I, as a student, would know to look for, but they provided valuable insights into the texts that could be passed on to others. Finally, as a teacher I thought about how these insights could be presented in an engaging and thoughtful way. It would have to be a method that showed respect for the past while maintaining relatability and staying recognizable for a modern audience. In the end, I think we achieved this balance through careful teamwork, discussion, and research. It was a long road, but one with a very satisfying conclusion.”

¹⁵ The discussion originated when comparing Emily Wilson’s translation to the older translation we were revising and annotating for OER publication. Neither the students nor the instructor are versed in classical Greek.

Challenges Posed by OER Texts in the COVID-Era Classroom

Despite the benefits of OER texts outlined above, some challenges emerged once these student-created editions were piloted in the classroom. As mentioned above, beta versions of enriched texts and activities were audience tested in a synchronous but hybrid virtual/physical (HyFlex) classroom of twenty-five students, who were taking the course in the fall semester of 2020 to fulfill an introductory literature requirement in our general education program or as a required course for the history major or humanistic studies minor. The course was initially envisaged as meeting fully face-to-face, but no discussion-oriented classrooms (rooms equipped with mobile tables and chairs so that the classroom can be pivoted to small-group clusters or set up to facilitate whole-class discussion) were available which would enable the accommodation of twenty-five students with the mandated social distancing. In order to avoid teaching in an auditorium-style classroom which, by virtue of fixed seats and social distancing, would prevent most class discussion, I decided to pivot to a fifty-fifty model. That is, a discussion-based classroom was split fifty-fifty between students who were physically present and those participating synchronously in the online classroom via Blackboard Collaborate, as the classroom was fully equipped with a moveable camera and microphones. Similar to other virtual conferencing platforms, Collaborate enabled the instructor and students to present and share materials to all attendees and provided opportunities for participating interactively via chat and live-feed video discussion, for recording classes for later review, and for regrouping students into smaller discussion groups.

However, as each class session was split between students physically present and those online, the actual face-to-face teaching of the course proved particularly challenging. The physical/virtual split meant that both students and instructor proved unable to divide their attention equally. Moreover, as the pandemic progressed, the fifty-fifty split at points skewed to two-thirds of students attending online, due to mental and/or physical illnesses or other student preferences and challenges. Some of the factors contributing to virtual participation included quarantine or isolation requirements, anxiety, depression, and students returning home mid-semester (there were students dialing in from California, Texas, and other states). The design of the course (all materials available online, recorded classroom sessions, fifty-fifty virtual/physical split), which was intended to facilitate student engagement and retention, had in some instances a contrary effect: some students realized they could make themselves a permanent member of the online group and attend class from their rooms or simply review recorded sessions. This option was compounded by the lack of a clear college policy on requirements for attendance and participation and an institutional focus on getting students through the COVID crisis through flexible accommodations.

Combining physically and virtually attending students in small group discussions in breakout “rooms” on Collaborate and in shared synchronous activities (many hosted on Google documents and Google slides) helped to break down divisions and engage students. Students enrolled in the course were also required to create pedagogical assignments for and teach mini-presentations on key texts in the course, putting them in charge of selecting approaches and modalities. These presentations worked well whether student teams were presenting via Collaborate, in person, or a mix of both. I anticipate that future versions of the course will retain the usage of OER texts and digital tools, but that individual class sessions will meet either fully face-to-face or fully online. The course’s digital resources and tools can thus be used in crisis situations (pandemic synchronous hybrid teaching), but would probably function best in a fully online course, deliberately designed hybrid course, or fully face-to-face course. I have talked with many instructors at various institutions who experienced the phenomenon of attempting to fully engage both physically present and virtually present students simultaneously. We all agreed that it was a fatiguing process for both instructors and students because of the attention to multiple informational inputs that it required. While the HyFlex approach enabled institutions reliant on in-person teaching and resident students and students experiencing quarantine or isolation to weather the pandemic, we agreed that it was not ideal from a pedagogical perspective.

Student evaluations stressed that students learned the most from the student-driven activities but that they felt overwhelmed by the total amount of reading and writing required for the course. For this reason, in future renditions of the course I will likely remove the two short standard analysis papers (substituting informal journal posts instead), while keeping the student-led classroom activities and creative projects. The lack of page numbers in OER texts and some e-books sometimes made proper citation practices difficult for students to follow; for this reason, I will be including section or chapter numbers in all future OER text editions. Students also felt ambivalent about Hypothes.is. They liked the ability to collaboratively comment on a text but also realized that this demanded more engaged and in-depth reading practices; this was a challenge in the midst of a COVID-determined compressed semester where all traditional mid-term breaks

had been eliminated. Without the customary mid-term vacation to regather their energy, students were burned out.

The actual user interface for Hypothes.is is quite simple (it functions similarly to the comments feature on Google Docs), and that semester we had a free pilot version available within our LMS for use with PDFs not yet uploaded onto LibreTexts. For those working outside Blackboard or another LMS, one advantage of the LibreTexts platform is that the Hypothes.is social annotation tool is also built into the LibreTexts website. Students may therefore use it (as individuals or as a class) to annotate OER texts hosted on that platform without institutions having to pay a license fee. (The same, however, may not be true for institutions that wish to add Hypothes.is to an LMS such as Blackboard in order to annotate texts hosted there instead.) The sticking point regarding Hypothes.is seems to have been that students were fatigued and unable or unwilling in some instances to indicate questions or comments on the text. It did, however, empower some individuals who were more comfortable with asynchronous discussion through commentary in Hypothes.is than with in-person class discussion. Their written comments on the text enabled me to call on them as an authority to contribute to class discussion.

Overall, electronic surveys conducted at the end of the course showed that students were pleased that the texts were free and available in multiple formats and that they had input into how these texts would be presented to future readers. They felt that the barrier of mythical instructor infallibility and expertise was left permeable as they became trained readers and annotators leaving comments which would be incorporated into future OER editions of the text. Students were far more enthusiastic about creating lesson plans or creative assessments—which might be used in future renditions of HUST 292 or posted online as OER resources—and a public-facing website than writing yet another essay-based exam or textual analysis paper intended for the instructor's eyes only. OER texts also prevented economically disadvantaged students from experiencing unequal access to the materials needed to participate and to complete assignments; every student had access to and was working from the same text.

Future Directions in OER Texts and Lesson Plans

Because of these proven benefits, and despite the immense amount of effort required to produce workable OER materials, I will continue to apply for grants for the creation of more OER resources for the humanities. In the summer of 2021, a paid student team re-edited and enriched the segments from Herodotus, as well as visual materials and translated texts on Cleopatra, Boudicca, and Zenobia of Palmyra, for both undergraduate and high school use. They also worked on medieval texts and lesson plans to be hosted on LibreTexts as part of a project co-sponsored by the Medieval Academy of America K-12 Outreach Committee (John T. R. Terry and I are co-presidents of that committee and joint project leaders this year). In future years, I anticipate that Reclaiming the Classical Past will continue to use OER texts and that its students will pilot a proto-edition of one new text per year; this work will enable students to be active participants in the curation and display of literary and visual texts. Candidates for pilot editions may include Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, selections from Juvenal's *Satires*, and/or Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*.

Appendices:

- Appendix A: Sample Teach to Learn Assignment by Abigail Knopps
- Appendix B: HUST 292 course syllabus

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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on the LibreTexts.org platform in the Humanities Subsection, Campus Bookshelves, under the Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, IN) Humanistic Studies Course Shell.

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