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Transforming a Text, Transformative Education

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Ignatian Pedagogy Certificate Final Project

Transforming a Text, Transformative Education

Introduction/Definition of Topic

This project was inspired by the idea of transformative education in the Jesuit tradition and revolves around a class assignment that I have already implemented, but plan to rework and improve. For a final project in my UCLR 100 course, which is based on reading Classical literature, I gave my students an option to take an ancient text we read over the course of the semester and re-imagine it as a movie. Through transforming a work, a student is actively engaging with a text on a different level in a way that will stay with a student beyond the class and create a lasting impression. Furthermore, through this project, students interact with all the elements of the Ignatian Pedagogy Paradigm and transform their own thought process as well as themselves. Finally, it provides a unique way to assess student learning—by seeing which elements of a text students focus on, the instructor can see what they are really getting out of the things they read and what is meaningful to them.

UCLR 100 is a course that all Loyola students must take (usually as freshman), and while the broad title is Interpreting Literature, each faculty member who teaches it chooses their own approach and texts. UCLR faculty come from the English, Modern Languages, and Classical Studies Departments, so there is a broad range of approaches and teaching methods in the classroom. I am in Classical Studies and my class is focused on the depictions of foreigners, barbarians, outsiders, and other marginalized groups in Ancient Greek and Egyptian literature. It is a diversity course, and so is designed to teach students about inclusivity, mutual respect, and giving everyone a voice as well as listening to it. This relates directly back to the Jesuit belief that God is found in the “other”, that is, in people, places, and experiences different from one’s own. We look at questions of xenophobia, racism, and Orientalizing, mostly in the ancient world, but also reflecting on what that means today.

Here is the course description for my class, which I subtitle, “Strangers, Outsiders, and Foreign Worlds: Identity and the Other in the Greek Imagination”.

Course Description:

In this course we will examine representations of “barbarians”, foreigners, marginalized groups, and other worlds (utopias and dystopias) in Greek literature. Along with a focus on close reading and analysis, discussion will center on reconstructing Greek notions of self and society in relation to those of non-Greeks, both real (e.g., Persians and Egyptians) and imaginary (e.g., Cyclopes and Amazons). We will also read Egyptian texts as a countermeasure to see how Egyptians express their own identity and to gain an Egyptian perspective on strangers and foreign lands. Readings will be drawn from a variety of Greek authors and literary genres including Herodotus, Plato, tragedy, and epic poetry, as well as Egyptian stories and poems.

Here is the paper topic I gave them, from which this final project emerged:

Topic 2: Choose one of the works we have read for this class and imagine that you are turning it into a major Hollywood blockbuster (or an independent film debuting at the Sundance Film Festival). How would you make this work appealing to a modern audience? What message would you want to convey? What would you have to change from the original? What would you make sure to keep the same? What aesthetic choices would you make (including casting, costuming, setting, etc.)?

Reason for Selecting this Approach

This project stemmed from my desire to incorporate creativity into the work that students were doing. I firmly believe in active learning and providing a variety of course activities for students. This is to make sure that I can reach students regardless of their learning preferences and give students with different strengths the ability to shine. For example, maybe a student has extreme test anxiety, but is a great paper writer, or maybe a student has difficulty expressing herself in writing, but is extremely good at giving presentations, etc. So while this project stemmed from wanting to provide my students an opportunity to do a fun, creative project, the programming from Loyola's Center for Ignatian Pedagogy led me to realize that it was so much more than that.

As I mentioned above, students interact with all the elements of the Ignatian Pedagogy Paradigm. Starting with Context, this project allows them to use the context of their own life and experience to reconsider the context of an ancient work. They must consider questions like, which work interested them and why? What about it seems similar to our modern-day context (or maybe drastically different)? How universal is the human context?

As for experience, students are developing deeper ways of understanding by reworking an ancient text. They have to sort through a large amount of ideas and facts to pick out what is most meaningful and what they are going to do with it. They are further using their own experience to understand the course material better.

Reflection is perhaps the clearest part of this, students must reflect on context and experience to then bring about a successful project. Students must thoughtfully reconsider the subject matter in order to transform it into something else.

Although students are not actually making a movie, and so actually "acting", they are still considering Action by imagining the action of bringing a text to a wider audience (and who knows, maybe one of them will be inspired enough to actually do it). By considering what "message" they would want their movie to convey, students are thinking past themselves to others.

Finally, this allows students for a unique experience to evaluate what they know, but asking themselves what is important about a text, why, and how they would want to express that to others. While this is certainly possible in a more traditional paper, often students get distracted by the idea of "having to write a paper" and so do not really evaluate what they have learned, they simply want to reach the page-requirement.

Besides giving the students an opportunity to do a fun, creative project, this assignment is also a useful tool for assessing student learning. By seeing which aspects of the text students choose to

incorporate into their “movie,” as teachers we gain insight into what students are really getting out of the assigned texts. For instance, as I mentioned, the themes of my particular class were Greek identity and the depiction of foreigners, barbarians, and “others” in Greek literature. Some students displayed a deep understanding of, say, Medea’s role as a foreigner and a woman, while others simply focused on the romantic plot.

Project Description

The goals of this assignment are to allow students to engage with a text beyond reading it, and through their re-imagining of a text, to show their understanding of the text as a whole. I ask them to think about what the text means, what message we can receive from it and pass on as a modern audience, and how it can still speak to us today.

The basic prompt that I give my students is to choose one of the works we have read for this class and imagine that they are turning it into a major Hollywood blockbuster (or an independent film debuting at the Sundance Film Festival). The format is variable. I suggest writing it as a “pitch” to a producer, part of a screenplay, or as a more straightforward description. Although I assigned this in the past as an individual project, I think it would also work well as a group project and could be submitted as a video or acted out in class.

Besides the formats I suggested, I received assignments in the form of short stories and letters. One of the more compelling projects combined elements of Euripides’ *Medea* and *Helen* and turned it into a supernatural short story set in modern times about a young woman escaping an abusive relationship. A more light-hearted project set *Medea* in high school as a teenage romance, following the example of other high school movies based on literature like *Clueless* (1995, based on Jane Austen’s *Emma*), *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*), and *Easy A* (2010, inspired by Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*).

So far, I have only assigned this project once, and I provided only brief guidelines (as shown above) because it was a bit of an experiment. It was by far the most popular of the paper topics I suggested, with more than two thirds of the class opting to transform a work. Not only did this show that it was appealing to students (it is nice to see students actually excited about a final paper), but also that it spoke to them on some level and was meaningful to them.

The next time I do it, I will provide clearer guidelines in terms of my expectations that they will focus on the issues the class revolved around (so for instance, not just romantic plots) and also that they provide a clear “mission statement” for their movie, explaining what they want audiences to understand from this movie and what they understand from this movie.

Project Implications

It can be difficult when teaching the ancient world to find a way to make the material seem relevant to students and help them reflect on issues of today. While this can be easier when talking about politics or more historical topics, it can be more difficult when reading ancient

literature which can come off as foreign, strange, and even stilted, depending on the translation. Unusual vocabulary and themes can also add to this problem. Allowing students to recast an ancient text into a modern context allows students to think about commonalities and the universals of the human condition, as well as thinking about differences and disconnects. This project also allows them to reflect on what is important to them and what the texts can tell them about themselves.

Anticipated/Experienced Outcomes

Overall, I was extremely impressed with the quality, thoughtfulness, and originality displayed by students who completed this assignment. There was a range in the work, but I definitely felt that students were putting more thought and care into this assignment than students frequently do at the end of the semester for a final paper.

To give one example, one of my students chose to rework Euripides' Satyr play, *Cyclops*. In Greek tragic festivals, each trilogy of tragedies was followed by a satyr play. We only have one fully extant satyr play (*Cyclops*) although we do have fragments of others. This makes it difficult to get an overall impression of what this genre looked like, but we do know that it generally had a chorus of satyrs (part man, part horse creatures), was more comedic than tragedy, but took place in the mythical world (instead of the contemporary world of comedy). As the title suggests, Euripides' *Cyclops* takes the encounter of Odysseus and the Cyclops from Book 10 of the *Odyssey* and reworks it, changing elements of the story and making it into a play. We had previously read Book 10 of the *Odyssey* so students already knew the background of the play before we read it.

The way that my student reworked *Cyclops* was very interesting indeed. Instead of being an actual monster, a cyclops, my student chose to make her cyclops a dangerous criminal—still someone on the outskirts of society, an “other”. Her cyclops was a serial kidnapper and cannibal, retaining elements of the original cyclops, but also making him fully human. Instead of on a mythical Greek island, she set her movie on a mythical Hawaiian island, weaving in our idea of the exotic with the setting in the play. The blinding of the cyclops in the *Odyssey* is restaged as a murder, with the cyclops figure having reoccurring dreams instead of hearing a prophecy about his fate. Details aside, the most compelling part of this paper was that it focused around the theme of power and who has it, and what that means for the powerless. This is an important topic for students to think about in the modern world, and it was very exciting to see that reflected in her transformation of this ancient play.

Further Applications

As I mentioned above, I have assigned this project (and plan on doing so again) as an individual final paper, but I think it would be very effective as a group project as well. In the future, I will give more precise guidelines and ask them to reflect on their choices in a more conscious way. I am also considering implementing this as a group project in the future. I am looking forward to

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seeing how my students in the future will approach this topic and what new things I will learn about teaching from their work.