Autodidacts and the "Promise" of Digital Classics

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Introduction

The *Digital Approaches to Teaching the Ancient Mediterranean* conference at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World addressed the pedagogical concerns of an admirable array of ancient-world topics and, at least with respect to higher education, pitched these concerns to a broad range of institutions, including so-called R1 universities, large state institutions, large private institutions, small liberal arts colleges, even humanities think tanks (like the event's host institution). Despite this broad coverage, one audience that was absent from the official program is the admittedly hard to classify and hard to quantify group of people who develop an interest in the ancient Mediterranean and seek to educate themselves on its languages, culture, history, and related fields, that is ancient-world autodidacts. As the conference's proceedings demonstrate, digital approaches have had a significant impact on college-level teaching of ancient-world topics, but for autodidacts the impact is perhaps even greater, even more transformative. Paradigm shift may not be too strong a description.

In this brief response to the *DATAM* conference, I consider the audience for Digital Classics research outside of the academy—in fact, outside of formal education altogether—namely, independent learners who are able to use our publications, platforms, tools, and datasets to teach themselves about the ancient world.[1] I argue that

[1] Much of what I have to say here is sympathetic with arguments found throughout Gabriel Bodard and Matteo Romanello's collected volume, *Digital Classics Outside the Echo-Chamber* (Bodard and Romanello 2016), especially those parts where "arguments around public engagement, reception, crowdsourcing and citizen science" (3) are addressed; particular chapters of interest include Mahony 2016, Rydberg-Cox 2016, and Almas and Beaulieu 2016.

the dominant ethos of open-source development and open-source distribution in Digital Classics demonstrates "promise" to this audience in two important ways: 1. it represents our fulfillment of a contract that our research output should be a contribution to knowledge in general (as opposed to a contribution for a select academic audience); and, 2. it activates the learning potential of an audience who for a variety of reasons will not become our students in a formal educational context.[2]

I will restrict my comments largely to digital approaches to "Classics," by which I mean the (perhaps overly narrow) study of Ancient Greek and Latin language and literature, because that is the area of "teaching the Ancient Mediterranean" that I know best.[3] That said, the larger point stands for ancient-world study in general and I invite my colleagues working in archaeology, numismatics, papyrology, epigraphy, and so on, as well as in languages beyond Greek and Latin, to reflect on who their audience of autodidacts may be and how their scholarly output may support in a substantially similar way these students outside the academy proper.

A personal anecdote to begin—I was once an ancient-world autodidact. My career in Classics began with teaching myself Latin in my late 20s from a cobbled-together collection of print textbooks, grammars, lexica, readers, and so on. At some point—as I suspect is the case for nearly all Classics students in this century—I found the Perseus Digital Library.[4] It was a profound and confusing epiphany.

[2] For a related discussion of the "promise" of digital resources, see Smith and Casserly 2006 ("the promise of open educational resources"). Thomas 2015 (on "the promise of the digital humanities") discusses the institutional requirements necessary to allow fully digital humanists to "take advantage of the networks, spaces, and audiences online to create and refine new forms of…scholarship" (534).

[3] On broadening the definition of "Classics," see, for example, Quinn 2018; Levine 1992; and the mission statement of *DATAM*'s host institution, the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, available at http://isaw.nyu.edu/about.

[4] See Crane 1998: "Even now, as our modest digital library on ancient Greek culture finds its way into homes, schools and offices where traditional scholarly publications have not reached, we can see by the patterns of use and the mail that we receive the stirrings of a vast audience." On classical language learning in this context specifically, see Rydberg-Cox 2016: 79.

Why were all of these texts here? Why was I able to click a word and see its definition? Why was this all free? (I had yet to consider the cost of "free."[5]) Who was doing this work? I spent so many hours on Perseus in these formative years of my training that it is not an exaggeration to say that I felt at times like an unofficial Classics major at Tufts.

What I did not realize then was that what was on offer at Perseus was part of a movement taking hold in the 1990s and coming into its own in the following decade, namely open-access publication, or freely available, internet-distributed content.[6] Open-access content is of course not restricted to educational content, although institutions of higher education were in a particularly good position to produce materials at an early stage.[7] Universities, for example, were already producers of knowledge with access to relatively high-speed connections, sufficiently ample storage, and often their own dedicated servers. In addition, as knowledge creators and teachers already in their vocational disposition, they also had an available audience of a similarly provisioned research community across institutions as well as enrolled students. Materials produced under these conditions for these audiences are the resources which would define the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement in the early 2000s.[8] Soon every discipline would have a Perseus (or more accurately, many Perseuses) providing academic content online.

[5] See Kamenetz 2010: 104–106 on the costs of open resources and the role of institutional support in mitigating these costs.

[6] A fuller definition of "open access" provided by the Budapest Open Access Initiative (Chan et al. 2002) is still serviceable: "Free availability on the public internet, permitting any users to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of these articles, crawl them for indexing, pass them as data to software, or use them for any other lawful purpose, without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. The only constraint on reproduction and distribution, and the only role for copyright in this domain, should be to give authors control over the integrity of their work and the right to be properly acknowledged and cited." For a review of other definitions, see Bailey Jr. 2007.

[7] On the role of open access in knowledge production and the "intellectual commons," see Suber 2006.

[8] For an overview of open educational resources, see Wiley, Bliss, and McEwen

A consequence of the widespread availability of open-access materials is that they found readily an audience outside of academia. These resources are the foundations upon which "Do-It-Yourself University," as Anya Kamenetz would describe it, rests: a "complete educational remix," the "expansion of education beyond classroom walls," and the possibility of "free, open-source, vocational, experiential, and self-directed learning."[9] Whether in the form of highly organized, institutionally-backed efforts, like MIT OpenCourseWare and the wide array of massive open online courses (MOOCs) that came into their faddish own around 2012, or smaller, distributed efforts like a professor making a course syllabus available on their academic website, opportunities to learn online using open content had become and would remain ubiquitous.[10]

Classics has participated in this open education movement for decades now. The Perseus Project stands out not only as an early player in an internet-based Classics, but because of editor-in-chief Gregory Crane's embrace of open-source development for the Perseus software and embrace for open publication standards for its content, not to mention the voluminous writings by Crane and his collaborators defending this position and advocating for its democratizing, access-expanding potential. Furthermore, Perseus was not alone here. A look at the table of contents for the three-year run (1998-2000)

2014. The idea of "promise" has been built into the OER vision from the beginning; see Tuomi 2006: 3: "Assume a world where teachers and learners have free access to high-quality educational resources, independent of their location....In the next several years, it will become possible in a scale that will radically change the ways in which we learn and create knowledge."

[9] Kamenetz 2010: x.

[10] On OpenCourseWare, see Abelson 2008. On the explosion of popularity of MOOCs, see Pappano 2012. While it is more difficult to pinpoint the direct effects of the "smaller, distributed efforts," it is worth reminding ourselves of just how novel these were just twenty years back; see, for example, Small 1998, a review of personal web pages in the short-lived *Bryn Mawr Electronic Resources Review*. Small's review incidentally refers to the "wonderful omnium gatherum" of archaeological resources on the internet by *DATAM* organizer, Sebastian Heath, evidence of a two-decade commitment to the intersection of digital resources and ancient-world studies.

of the *Bryn Mawr Electronic Resources Review* provides a convenient snapshot of early efforts in the field to find an audience outside of the academy, including projects that still offer substantial resources for an autodidact audience like *VRoma* and *LacusCurtius*, to name just two. The audience for these platforms comes across, for example, in William Hutton's review of the *Diotima* project, where he writes that the site's content on women and gender in antiquity is "potentially of use to anyone with even glancing interest in the ancient world."[11]

Here lies the first "promise" with respect to autodidactism mentioned above. At the core of Digital Classics's commitment to open resources in its formative stages was an obligation to make the discipline available to as wide an audience as possible. To put this another way, although the research and teaching output may have originally been aimed at an academic audience, a superseding responsibility emerged and continues to be a prevalent mindset among Digital Classicists that it is incumbent on us to provide materials to the "wider community" of learners.[12] As writer and English instructor Kim Wells once wrote on her "fan site [for] canonically excluded women writers," *Domestic Goddess*: "I think it is our duty as teachers not to ignore the possibilities of making research easily available on the Internet. If educators do not provide the information, who will?"[13]

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[11] Hutton 1999.

[12] Blackwell et al. 2006: "Immense digital libraries based on open access and aimed at massive audiences put scholars under an obligation to avoid a new access divide opening up between ourselves and the wider community that we serve." It should be added that there is also often motivation based on financial reciprocity here: we contribute to the public because the public has invested in us. So, Romanello and Bodard 2016: 8: "Since academic research is largely funded by public money, it is arguably incumbent upon us to find ways to engage the public with our findings."

[13] Wells 2000, as quoted in Earhart 2015: 73. There is a worthwhile, if sadly ironic, lesson with respect to Wells's quote about "research [made] easily available on the Internet." Wells's *Domestic Goddess* is no longer available at the URL www.womenwriters.net; this URL now points to the website for an essay writing service. Thankfully, because of the efforts of the Internet Archive and its Wayback Machine, Wells's contributions have been preserved. Nevertheless, this example does point to fragility in the system and argues again for the public benefit and contribution to knowledge that institutional investment in open resources provides.

The second "promise" I wish to discuss here is the promise latent in an audience interested in various aspects of the Classical world, but who for a variety of reasons will not become our students in a formal educational context.[14] It is unnecessary to rehearse here the multiple and various barriers to higher education.[15] Suffice it to say that these barriers can be compounded within a humanities discipline such as Classics. Students faced with limited time and an imposing dollar-per-credit ratio may feel pressure to take more "useful" courses with "better job prospects" in their formal course of study.[16] No less consequential are the systemic barriers, such as classism, sexism, racism, and ableism, that have long restricted access to Classics as a discipline.[17] The ubiquitous, on-demand, asynchronous, and largely cost-free offerings that are now available, in no small part due to open-source development and open-access publication among Digital Classicists, are by no means a panacea, but they can make significant inroads in expanding the community of potential learners and so, by extension, expanding the Classics community in general.

When I joined Twitter in 2011, I chose the handle @diyclassics as a nod to the widespread do-it-yourself (D.I.Y.) ethos in American hardcore punk focused on making music outside of a traditional corporate model.[18] In my case, I was beginning to think about what Classics could look like outside of a traditional institutional model.[19] For the

[14] Smith and Casserly 2006.

[15] For a discussion of barriers to higher education, see, for example, Page and Scott-Clayton 2015.

[16] Schmidt 2018. It should be noted that Schmidt qualifies the "better job prospect" idea in the article, writing: "Students aren't fleeing degrees with poor job prospects. They're fleeing humanities and related fields specifically because they *think* they have poor job prospects" (emphasis in the original).

[17] For a starting point on systemic barriers within Classics, see Adler 2017, as well as important contributions from Bracey 2017, Chae 2018, "Sankarshana" 2019, Erny, Nakassis, and Steinke 2017, and Sharples 2019, to name just a few recent examples from the online journal *Eidolon*, a leading voice during an active moment of self-reflection and critique within the discipline concerning these barriers. See also Morley 2018: 37–38.

[18] On the core values of D.I.Y., including the role of technology and the internet in reshaping these values, see Moran 2010: 62–63.

[19] For a similar way of thinking about an adjacent field, see the "punk archaeolo-

musicians, it was a matter of "taking control."[20] My vision for a D.I.Y. Classics coalesced around the field's digital output and had a similar aim. Whether it was complete ancient Greek and Latin texts through the *The Latin Library*, *LacusCurtius*, or the *Perseus Project*, dictionaries and other reference materials through *Perseus*, *Logeion*, or the *Suda Online*, even cutting-edge scholarly communication through sites like *Bryn Mawr Classical Reviews*, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* or *Classics@*, the building blocks for an autodidactic model for Classics were falling into place.[21] Someone curious about the discipline did not have to rely wholly on being taught but rather was empowered to learn on their own terms. It is true that I continued to pursue formal graduate training in Classics, but I did so in a way that fostered the "promises" described above. I am now a practicing Digital Classicist, building open-source tools and distributing open-access materials, so that the current (and future) generation of ancient-world autodidacts can pursue their studies.

Simply stated, we have an opportunity to make an enormous contribution to our discipline by acknowledging our autodidact audience and making materials available to them. This is important pedagogical work. It is also important outreach work. The digital resources—and specifically the open digital resources—presented and discussed during *DATAM* are contributions to the field which foster curiosity and engagement in the objects of our study and increase the number of people who can "contribute to a discussion of what Classics is and what it might be."[22]

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gy" essays in Caraher, Kourelis, and Reinhard 2014.

[20] See Azerrad 2001: 6: "'Punk was about more than just starting a band,' former Minutemen bassist Mike Watt once said, 'it was about starting a label, it was about touring, it was about taking control." McManus and Rubino 2003: 601 mention "control over learning" as an advantage of Digital Classics pedagogy.

[21] *GRBS* became an open-access journal in 2010 on "the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge"; see https://grbs.library.duke.edu/about/editorialPolicies.

[22] This quote is taken from the "Outreach" page on the website of the Society for Classical Studies (https://classicalstudies.org/outreach/home). Another key sentence: "At this exciting moment, the multitude of new technologies and modes of communication can make it easier than ever before to connect with the great

Thankfully, this essay is *not* a call to action. I think that it would be fair to say that open-source development and open-access distribution are the dominant practices of Digital Classics, a vanguard led by Perseus for decades now and adopted as received wisdom by much of the community since. So, not a call to action, but rather a reminder that, because of our embrace of open resources and our commitment to making them widely available, Digital Classicists have students who we never see, but whose studies are enriched by our work. Reciprocally, our field is enriched by their interest and participation, and this is a phenomenon worth noting in a discussion of digital approaches to teaching the Ancient Mediterranean.

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achievements of the past and their meanings for us now." This gesture toward outreach relates to discussions of public scholarship in general. These discussions are deep and wide-ranging; the just released *The Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship* edited by Patricia Leavy (Leavy 2019) looks promising in providing a systematic overview. Lastly, there is good Classics outreach work being done right now in the United Kingdom that deserves mention in this context; see Holmes-Henderson, Hunt, and Musié 2018, and especially the chapter by James Robson and Emma-Jayne Graham (Robson and Graham 2018) which covers the role of open-access materials at the Open University.

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