

Research Article

Teaching Classics as an applied subject

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Abstract

This article discusses the opportunities and challenges of teaching Classics as an ‘applied’ subject. It outlines the development of a new module at the University of St Andrews which asks student teams to research and design a project that draws on ancient sources, practices or ideas to address a challenge in the 21st century, such as ‘fake news’, racism, or climate change. It distinguishes Applied Classics from Public Classics and Reception Studies, defining the former as ‘the purposeful application of carefully-chosen aspects of antiquity as a useful intervention in a contemporary challenge.’ It also underlines its value as a form of ‘Citizen Scholarship’, a branch of academia that builds bridges to activism and has tangible impacts, creating change (not just disseminating knowledge) in the wider world. The article considers the ethics of Applied Classics; the mentoring that students require, to work in novel ways and on topics well outside their comfort zones; and the assessment challenges that come with project-based learning. It reflects on the skills that students acquire from this kind of module (in leadership, collaboration, creative thinking, critical self-reflection and outcomes-focused thinking), on their sense of empowerment as they identify ways to translate their studies into socially impactful work, and on the contributions they can make to wider debates about the future of Classics as a discipline.

Keywords: Citizen Scholarship, Applied Classics, future of the discipline, project-based learning, team assessments

Introduction

In recent years, students and staff in many different Classics departments have been reflecting on the discipline’s past limitations and future potential.¹ As scholars like [Dan-el Padilla Peralto](#) have argued, the study of Classics has long been implicated in multiple forms of [racist](#) and [colonial thinking](#); it has been harnessed by different groups to promote or excuse acts of imperialism, inter-group discrimination, and [misogyny](#);² and it has long been a tool in ‘class warfare’, deployed by socio-economic elites in the exclusion or marginalisation of others.³

At its best, however, Classics can help challenge and address these and other such pernicious problems. Many working within the discipline have been finding increasingly creative and impactful ways to combine study of the ancient world with critical consideration of pressing social, cultural and political issues. Take, for example, Helen Morales’ recent book *Antigone Rising* (Wildfire, 2020). Drawing lines of connection between ancient Greek myth, contemporary forms of misogyny, other gender-based discrimination, and the ‘Me Too’ (or *metu*) movement, it explores productive ways of tapping into Greek mythology as part of the solution and not just the problem. In another field, Elena Isayev has been drawing on her study of ancient experiences of migration and displacement to inform modern debates, policy-making and practice in this challenging space.⁴ Using quite different media, Neville Morley not only calls out misuses of

ancient history in modern political discussions (via his Twitter (X) handle, The Thucydides Bot [@Thucydiocy](#)); he has also developed interactive, drama-based ways of engaging with ancient Greek history to increase political literacy and deepen our understanding of the dynamics of power, justice and negotiation.⁵ The list could go on.⁶

These forms of ‘Applied Classics’ are gaining momentum at a time when the appetite for ‘citizen scholarship’ and ‘mission-oriented’ learning is clearly rising. Institutions like the [London Interdisciplinary School](#) and the [Edinburgh Futures Institute](#) have been developing degree programmes based not around disciplinary specialisms but on the development of skills like interdisciplinarity, teamwork and real-time problem-solving that are vital for addressing cross-cutting challenges such as climate change or a global pandemic. Heightened awareness amongst researchers of the value of – and need for – more dialogue between scholarship and society has coincided with a digital revolution that has made ‘public history’ and ‘citizen science’ more feasible than ever. And today’s college and university students find themselves combining academic study with workplace internships, community volunteering and multiple forms of activism. While they still enjoy diving deep into their chosen degree subjects, many welcome opportunities within the curriculum to build bridges between their studies and the wider world and to experiment with different ways of ‘applying’ their learning to contemporary issues.⁷

It was with all this in mind that I developed a new Honours-level module for 3rd/4th-year students at the University of St Andrews called ‘Classics for the Modern World: Applications and Interventions.’⁸ Launched in 2020, this ‘Applied Classics’ module

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challenges students to research ways in which our study of antiquity might help address pressing modern issues such as climate injustice, fake news, or vaccine hesitancy (to name just a few). It places a strong emphasis on students' development as 'citizen scholars', encouraging them to think of ways in which they can productively 'apply' their learning to real-world problems and make positive interventions on issues that matter to them. Students hone important 'soft skills', such as teamwork, responsible debate, inclusive listening, quiet leadership, outcomes-focused planning, critical self-reflection, stakeholder research, and impact analysis. They study ancient material – from texts to archaeological sites, linguistic patterns to cultural practices – from new perspectives, learning how to frame questions that incorporate 21st-century concerns while still exploring antiquity on its own terms. In the process, they engage in lots of meta-study, as they reflect on different approaches to engaging with Classics and the value and potential impact of Humanities subjects more broadly. As well as working in groups to design Applied Classics projects of their own, students actively contribute (via reflective blogs and the work showcased on [our project website](#)) to sector-wide discussion of the following questions:

- What does the future hold for the discipline of Classics?
- And what has Classics got to offer future generations?

What is 'Applied Classics'?

Applied Classics is not a new phenomenon. As noted above, many scholars, storytellers, activists and others have been drawing on the ancient world to contribute to contemporary debates, challenges and problem-solving, in different ways and for many years.⁹ The first few weeks of the module are spent exploring past examples, with two goals in mind: (1) to help students develop their own sense of what Applied Classics can involve, and (2) to give them opportunities to put different methodologies under the microscope. We learn a lot from reading books and articles by (for example) Mary Beard, Simone Chambers, Esther Eidinow, Peter Meineck and Josh Ober.¹⁰ And, thanks to funding from the University of St Andrews' [Enterprise and Entrepreneurial Education fund](#), we have been able to offer honoraria to a range of guest lecturers, from within and outside academia, who have generously shared their experiences of doing Applied Classics.¹¹ Students have relished the opportunity not only to study the outputs of (for example) a contemporary theatre company, a climate scientist, and a gender-equality activist, all of whom draw on antiquity in their work, but also to question them directly about their approaches, target audiences, chosen media, and measurable impacts.

Our research into other people's Applied Classics work has helped us to come up with our own definitions and ethical methodologies, which we continue to hone with every iteration of the module.¹² We distinguish Applied Classics from some related endeavours, specifically Public Classics and Reception Studies.¹³ Public Classics does valuable work in increasing access to Classics beyond the classroom, and beyond the (often very privileged) demographics that normally come into contact with the subject. It can take the form of school workshops, introducing pupils to ancient art, texts and ideas for the first time. It also happens in public lectures, via TV documentaries, in prison education, and many other contexts.¹⁴ As well as making the study of antiquity more accessible to a wider range of people, Public Classics can help make it more diverse; and everyone benefits when a wider range of people engage with the subject, because of the fresh ideas and

perspectives which then feed back into its study. Public Classics or 'Classical outreach' can become 'Applied Classics' (as Nina Papanthanasopoulou's article 'Classics Everywhere' underlines¹⁵). We are dealing with a spectrum, not a binary. But it is important to identify a clear distinction between 'sharing Classics with others' and 'applying Classics to contemporary issues.' The former is informative, educational, often inspirational and impactful – but it involves dissemination and widening participation rather than the focused deployment of Classics for specific purposes. Ideally, Applied Classics is itself informative, educational, inspirational and impactful. As my students and I have come to understand it, however, it is also much more than that: it involves the purposeful application of carefully-chosen aspects of antiquity as a useful, focused intervention in a contemporary challenge.

The study of Classical Reception is a well-established sub-discipline and has been a key component of Classical Studies since antiquity itself. Like Public Classics, it differs from our definition of Applied Classics in some important ways. In fact, one might argue that Classical Reception analyses *historic* examples of Applied Classics (among other things).¹⁶ Many of our own Applied Classics projects have a strong element of Reception analysis in them: as I discuss further below, an important part of the process of identifying productive and ethical ways to bring ancient materials into dialogue with modern issues is to explore why and how that material has been used (or misused) in the past. But we do not stop there; we move from our analysis of historic receptions and adaptations of Classical antiquity to devising and delivering focused adaptations, applications and interventions of our own. To put it another way: while Reception Studies is a valuable branch of Classical scholarship, Applied Classics is a valuable form of Citizen Scholarship – a branch of academia that builds bridges to activism and has tangible impacts, creating change (not just disseminating knowledge) in the wider world.¹⁷ Of course, pure scholarship can do this too; but citizen scholarship actively identifies specific, real-world issues to address, and creatively deploys research to contribute solutions. As we define it, Applied Classics is a dynamic, problem-solving endeavour, which engages directly with stakeholders outside academia, crafting outputs (such as training programmes, digital tools, or museum activities) that draw on the many lessons we can learn from different ancient communities to help tackle pressing challenges in the 21st century.

Uses and abuses

With its colonising history in mind, we spend time early in the module discussing the risks inherent in deploying Classical antiquity as a 'top-down' intervention or in suggesting that the Greco-Roman past contains 'solutions' to contemporary problems. Our goal is not to perpetuate its cultural dominance or keep the Classical world on a pedestal, as some kind of enduring paradigm for modern times. Rather than implying that there is something 'superior' or authoritative about Classical antiquity which modern generations should learn from, we follow the approach of Joy Connolly (among many others) in viewing Classical material as just one of many valuable resources to think with about current issues, local, national and global.¹⁸ Its particular value, as we see it, is that it offers productive points of comparison and opportunities for critical analysis which can unsettle assumptions, challenge preconceptions and reframe how we think about (e.g.) borders, identity, mobility and hospitality, or elite gate-keeping around knowledge-production and the social construction of expertise.¹⁹ Far from advocating a gung-ho approach to applying Classics

everywhere and anywhere, we reflect carefully on what exactly a Classical lens can add, mindful of the potential to do harm as well as good. Indeed, as students taking the module have articulated:

‘...for us Applied Classics comprises two connected endeavours: it is the active application of ancient material to contemporary issues; and in the process, Applied Classics plays an important role in addressing the legacy of Classics as a subject, and in challenging the many misuses of antiquity in the modern world.’²⁰

Before developing Applied Classics projects of their own, students examine a wide range of ‘misapplications’: from common misquotations, misattributions or misunderstandings;²¹ to overly simplistic or misleading parallels, such as the so-called ‘Thucydides Trap’ (critiqued by Neville Morley among others²²) and comparisons between the ‘sex strike’ dramatised in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* and women’s peace activism in 21st-century Liberia.²³ We also study more cynical, knowing distortions and the deliberate leveraging of ancient history to promote problematic ideologies, from white supremacy to the toxic misogyny that characterises the so-called ‘manosphere.’²⁴ As the founders of *Pharos* have written in their mission statement, ‘Many people, including professional scholars of antiquity, are not aware that the cultures we study or admire are being enlisted in the support of these hateful and regressive ideologies.’ For my students, helping to raise awareness of this often becomes an important first step in their own approach to Applied Classics.²⁵

In analysing how easily material from antiquity can be misapplied (in unconscious, well-meaning ways, as well as more malevolently), students work together to develop a set of checks and balances as they set about designing their own Applied Classics projects, to avoid perpetuating the same problems themselves. These include peer-reviewing the connections they hope to draw between, e.g., ancient propaganda and modern ‘fake news’, to check for false or overly simplistic parallels; and regularly asking themselves if they are interpreting their ancient material accurately and handling it with sufficient attention to its complexity (and not, for instance, misrepresenting the themes of a Roman biography or the experiences of a marginalised community to make for a neater ‘fit’ with modern discussions of ‘bad leaders’ or socio-cultural inequalities). We spend time considering the ethics of anachronism: for instance, how productive versus problematic is it to analyse Verginia’s murder as an ‘honour killing’, in order to create a ‘safe space’ (distanced in time and place) to discuss modern/culturally different manifestations of femicide; or what can be gained and lost, in efforts to shed new light on contemporary warfare, by importing concepts such as ‘counter insurgency’ or ‘PTSD’ into antiquity?²⁶

We also reflect on the fine line that academic-activists like Helen Morales, Donna Zuckerberg and other contributors to *Eidolon* have trodden between analysing their ancient sources with scholarly integrity and pursuing personal or political agendas.²⁷ Through a range of case studies (including several from outside Classics), students learn to relish the fact that academia can move into activism and advocacy, while exploring – alongside the opportunities – the challenges and pitfalls to watch out for (such as reduced neutrality, ramped-up rhetoric, more ‘black-and-white’ takes, and potentially heated/hostile responses). Thoughtful stage adaptations (such as NMT Automatics’ reworkings of *Virgil’s Aeneid* and *Homer’s Iliad*) and historic novels (e.g. Pat Barker’s *Silence of the Girls* and Natalie Haynes’ *A Thousand Ships*) offer useful models for reflecting on the combination of creativity,

historical accuracy and contemporary advocacy that *retelling with purpose* can involve.²⁸ Students quickly appreciate that there are no hard-and-fast rules, but that doing Applied Classics ethically involves regular monitoring of both motives and methods. And this helps them to sense-check their own (and each other’s) delicate balancing act between preserving the integrity of the ancient material they are working with while judiciously selecting, reframing and sometimes even re-constituting it to speak effectively to modern issues and bring about some positive impact.

What value can Classics add?

In approaching antiquity as a resource to ‘think with’, students confront important questions about exactly where its value lies on any given issue *in relation to other resources*. Having critiqued long-held ideas of Classics as a subject that offers particularly authoritative insights into contemporary war, politics and other such topics, many students experience a few weeks of doubt, as they consider what exactly it *can* contribute to problem-solving around climate change or poverty (for example), particularly when set alongside contributions from STEM subjects and the Social Sciences. While rejecting the idea that Classics is inherently useful in any given situation, we repeatedly ask ourselves (both when studying past Applied Classics projects and developing our own) ‘What value does *antiquity* add *here*?’ and ‘In what ways can *antiquity* offer *new insights*?’ As well as encouraging us to put ancient material under the microscope in fresh ways, and to handle different data sets with new methodologies, this requires students to learn more about the nature of cross-disciplinary collaboration, multi-approach problem-solving and consilience (the coming together of findings from different disciplines to develop big-picture understandings of an issue – a *sine qua non* for tackling global challenges such as pandemic control/recovery, or the varied impacts of AI). This leads to better understanding of the range of ways in which the Humanities generally, as well as Classics specifically, can make a difference.

Guest lecturers Ruben Post and Andrea Brock have been particularly helpful on this front, drawing on their experience of working at the intersection of ancient history and broader environmental studies. Post’s classroom contributions have highlighted the benefits (alongside the risks) of extending our study of climate variability into the deep past, where a different pace of change and different models of adaptation and resilience, over long periods of time, can provide instructive counterpoints for today.²⁹ In familiarising students with the kinds of questions that the environmental humanities are particularly good at asking (questions about socioeconomic inequalities, cultural differences, divergent histories, values and ethical frameworks), he has helped them to identify the ‘black box’ of issues which Classics is particularly well-positioned to comment on, but which climate scientists and politicians often overlook in their focus on (e.g.) setting emissions targets or developing more renewable energy technologies: namely, the historical, cultural, societal, political and rhetorical factors that determine (or limit) how societies respond to climate change, and the political, social, economic, intellectual and rhetorical changes which communities need to make to address environmental problems effectively, at individual, local, national and transnational levels.

Brock’s research on urban flooding in the Roman empire has provided students with a valuable case in point.³⁰ While her research sheds fascinating light on various causes of (potentially catastrophic, human-driven) environmental change that remain relevant today, it also gets us thinking about which strata of society

suffer most, which people control the problem-solving, and in whose interests they make their decisions. Students who had been worried about Classics' limited ability to address climate change *per se* have gleaned from this the value of deploying ancient case studies to talk about climate justice, past and present, as part of wider conversations about climate change. Indeed, they have gone on to identify ways in which a range of ancient sources (textual, material, archaeological) can be used to inflect discussions in different contexts (e.g. in local government training sessions, community empowerment work, and school teaching), to highlight the disproportionately harmful consequences of environmental change on economically deprived/socially marginalised groups, or the prioritisation of wealth-creation/stability for a powerful elite in both historic and contemporary environmental decision-making (to take just two examples).

In similar ways, we have explored what our expertise in Classical antiquity can contribute to wider efforts to address [Sustainable Development Goal 1](#) (the eradication of extreme poverty everywhere by 2030) and humanity's tendency to keep going to war. These are both huge challenges, which experts in many areas of science, social science and the humanities have been working on for centuries. What difference could we as Classicists possibly make? While we spend plenty of time exploring antiquity's potential to address much smaller, more local issues (such as enhancing digital literacy amongst Fife teenagers³¹), it can be equally productive to troubleshoot highly ambitious, global goals, because it requires students not only to identify what, very specifically, the ancient past can contribute but also how our expertise might most effectively complement that of other disciplines. We are lucky in St Andrews to be able to draw on Carlos Machado's current research on poverty in Late Antiquity.³² He has helped our students to look critically at the people and institutions in antiquity who controlled knowledge production around poverty, who developed categories of 'the poor' and 'the deserving poor', and who derived various kinds of socio-political influence and authority in the process. As we discuss in class, this kind of historical analysis cannot eradicate poverty in itself; but it can prompt modern social scientists and practitioners to ask important new questions about contemporary systems and structures which trap certain kinds of people in ongoing poverty, obstruct resource-sharing, and perpetuate inequalities.

As many scholars have analysed, military theorists have spent centuries drawing on antiquity to develop their own methods and strategies for armed conflict;³³ and the ongoing retelling of ancient war stories in art, politics, films, gaming and other media has helped to reinforce certain ideologies and behaviours that legitimise or even promote armed violence, amongst both soldiers and civilians.³⁴ As our students quickly appreciate, however, by engaging with the work of the [Visualising War and Peace project](#) among other sources, we can learn a lot from ancient storytelling practices about the militarisation of individuals and societies, and we can deploy ancient narratives of war and peace in fresh ways to counter militarisation in the 21st century.³⁵ Research into ancient intertextuality, its canonisation of dominant ideologies, and the complex intersection between ancient discourses of war, leadership, nationhood and gender (among other phenomena) can be transformed into hands-on workshops for documentary-makers, museum curators and other storytellers, keen to reflect on their potential impact and responsibilities when narrating narratives of war and peace for others.³⁶ We can also compare ancient representations and experiences of war's aftermath to contribute to contemporary peace studies and deepen public understanding of what post-conflict recovery and peace-building involve.³⁷ As with Classical

interventions on the climate crisis and the eradication of poverty, the study of war and peace in antiquity cannot single-handedly prevent future conflicts; but students find it empowering to grasp some of the ways in which it can aid collective efforts to build a more peaceful future, alongside complementary research in International Relations, Psychology, Media Studies and other such disciplines.

Outcomes-focused research

It helps, of course, that the study of Classics is itself an interdisciplinary endeavour – something which students come to appreciate more as they explore productive synergies with other areas of expertise. Just as the teaching team includes guest lecturers with a wide range of specialisms, so students are encouraged to form working groups that capitalise on this disciplinary interdisciplinarity, as they research modern issues with an eye to what their own respective areas of expertise (in ancient languages, literature, art history, archaeology, philosophy, socio-political history, cultural identity, reception studies, and so on) can contribute. At the University of St Andrews, many students take joint degrees; and even those on single-Honours pathways often take modules from other subject areas. We take advantage of this, alongside each cohort's wide range of extra-curricular interests, to pool knowledge and methodologies from different backgrounds.

Being reminded that they have individual and collective expertise in different fields and aspects of modern life empowers students to begin rigorously researching the 21st-century issues that interest them most. They listen to podcasts, read newspaper columns, and watch TED talks, as well as studying accessible scholarship on (e.g.) vaccine hesitancy, political corruption and health inequalities, to build a broad knowledge base around potential topics, with a view to identifying one in particular which their group will focus on. Some have found themselves diving deep into local government environmental policies,³⁸ while others (with the relevant ethics approval in place) have interviewed people with lived experience of forced migration,³⁹ examined online manifestations of toxic masculinity,⁴⁰ researched patterns of deforestation in Scotland,⁴¹ or investigated existing teaching resources and pedagogical practices for combatting fake news.⁴² While challenging (because it involves wrestling with bodies of knowledge, methodological approaches and technical terms outside their comfort zones), a thorough understanding of the modern issue which they hope to address is essential to the success of their Applied Classics project.

As well as educating themselves on 21st-century challenges, students work collaboratively to scope out and familiarise themselves with ancient sources that might speak pertinently to their chosen topic; and they read plenty of Classical scholarship alongside, to deepen understanding of ancient contexts and mitigate against the risks of 'parallelomania' or misapplication. Teamwork comes strongly into play here, as they delegate discrete research tasks according to subject specialisms, then reconvene regularly in a mix of independent and staff-mentored brainstorming sessions to peer-review each others' findings, discuss the 'fit' and relative merits of different sources in relation to their project's goals, and decide next steps. Students working on [Classical Coastlines](#), for example, dug deep into lots of archaeological site reports to identify a set of ancient coastal communities (Helike, Ephesus, Euesperides, and Lycia and Pamphylia) which could serve as productive counterpoints for modern sites that are currently wrestling with various forms of coastal erosion and its human impacts. Crucially, they also read broadly about ancient

environmental change, regional economics, relevant social history and local politics in different areas of ancient Greece and Turkey, to ensure that their 'deployment' of these ancient sites as instructive case studies reflected authentic ancient experiences, not just modern concerns. This careful research into their ancient material enabled them to capitalise on (rather than paper over) the inevitable differences in circumstance and response between different sites, ancient and modern, as an opportunity to look at the diverse challenges facing modern coastal communities from new and unexpected perspectives.

Besides selecting appropriate ancient material, and getting to know it well enough to deploy it both accurately and effectively in relation to their chosen modern issue, students conduct a third strand of research that is focused around their target audiences/beneficiaries. Students working on the [Hippolytus Initiative](#), for instance, examined the places where young people from different demographics are most often exposed to misogynistic viewpoints, toxic masculinity and 'red pill' recruitment. This enabled them to tailor their choice of media (a mix of school- and drama-based workshops, plus TikTok/Instagram and other social media interventions) and target them at real-world and virtual spaces where the promotion of 'incel culture' is particularly rife. They also interviewed theatre professionals to get some workshop design tips and to find out what kinds of training or support these potential partners might need to deliver effective drama activities based around ancient myths. The [Climate and Classics](#), [Roman Rumours](#) and [Frontinus Project](#) teams, meanwhile, examined open-source data about Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence and conducted market research amongst schoolteachers to ensure that their lesson plans, educational resources and residential programmes were age-appropriate, complemented existing timetables, and dovetailed with key learning goals. Some went as far as pilot-testing their resources with a handful of teachers.

The brief given to students at the outset of the module is to design a viable Applied Classics project, but not to deliver it; we do not have the financial resources to bring all projects to life, and many would require more than one semester's worth of work to be real-world-ready. It is also risky to tie course marks to work that is contingent on other people and circumstances beyond students' control, as would be the case if they were being assessed on their project's success, rather than on their research and planning. That said, students are required to consider the practical logistics (physical locations, production of materials, size of delivery team, recruitment of participants, length of commitment, etc) and funding implications (likely costs, set against potential sources of income) of delivering their projects as an integral part of the design process. To encourage entrepreneurial thinking, they are given the option of submitting their project pitches in the form of a detailed funding proposal, and they also experiment with business plan templates alongside elevator pitches among other coursework submissions. Our emphasis on rigorously-researched design (as opposed to delivery) enables teams to compare different models and media, weighing up (for instance) the potential reach of a series of podcasts with that of a physical workshop, or the impact of an iterative/extended intervention compared with a one-off performance or talk. Students are also asked to scope out how their proposed projects might evolve, scale up or become self-supporting over time, perhaps reaching other demographics beyond their primary target audiences. Finally, they must consider how they would evaluate the impact of their Applied Classics projects, both short- and long-term, if they had the chance to deliver them for real. In other words, their assessment tasks incorporate the basic

building blocks of any professional project planning exercise, or indeed a REF-able Impact project.

Pointing out the connections between this kind of project-planning and the more standard academic exercises that students are used to helps overcome the 'fear factor' of working in unfamiliar territory. In essence, being asked to identify and scope out a 21st-century problem to tackle is not so different from being asked, as a dissertation student, to identify the WHAT, WHY, and HOW of your key research question(s). In both cases, students must consider what work has already been done in that space; what aspects of the broad topic would benefit from further treatment; how they are best placed to contribute; what data-gathering and analysis will be required; what shape their final output will take; who they hope will benefit (be that other researchers, or stakeholders beyond academia); and what their intended impacts are, short- and long-term (from advancing understanding in a particular scholarly field to, e.g., unsettling commonly-held assumptions about democracy, influencing storytelling approaches in the film industry, or countering toxic masculinity). By returning to these questions on a weekly basis, students get drilled in outcomes-focused thinking, which is valuable for their future professional as well as academic work. Via regular updates to the class, each group learns to articulate ever more precisely their project's focus, methodologies, intended beneficiaries and goals; and their critical analysis of past Applied Classics endeavours is good preparation for reflecting critically on their own ideas as they develop.

Teamwork and public-facing projects both carry a responsibility to others, and this makes anticipating likely pitfalls, mitigating risks, responsive adjustment and ongoing self-reflection even more important than for a typical dissertation assignment. While attending carefully to this, students also relish the freedom to think creatively, experimenting with research techniques, alternative media and communication formats that they have observed at work in other kinds of citizen scholarship, from blog writing and podcast recording to museum installations and virtual reality tools. Balancing creativity with careful reflection and imagination with rigorous research is an important part of their learning journey.

Outputs and outcomes

Assessment tasks combine critical self-reflection with public communication – again, both valuable for academic and professional development. Via a learning diary and an extended reflective essay, students are required to subject their own work, other people's projects and Applied Classics as a developing phenomenon to critical scrutiny. This not only helps them to hone their own project designs; it means that they end the module with an advanced understanding of what Applied Classics involves, what it can achieve when done well, and what challenges Applied Classicists have to navigate. They are encouraged to write up entries from their learning diaries as blogs, which are published via the module's website and the [School of Classics' wordpress site](#). In this way, they find themselves contributing directly to ongoing conversations about the future of Classics as a discipline, an empowering opportunity as well as public evidence (of potential interest to future employers) that their views are well-informed, analytical, and worth taking seriously. Their project pitches are also published on the module's website, and in 2022 we held an in-person exhibition to showcase the Applied Classics projects that our most recent cohort had designed.

While the assessment criteria only require students to design, not deliver, a viable project, several teams have ended up bringing

their Applied Classics plans to life. One team created a fully-functioning website during the Covid-19 pandemic entitled *Odyssey Britannia*, with the double goal of offering people unable to travel physically opportunities to ‘visit’ ancient sites virtually, and (even more importantly) busting some myths and diversifying audience’s understanding of ancient Greek and Roman culture and society.⁴³ Another team, [the Hospes Project](#), is currently working to transform their Applied Classics idea into reality by creating an online tool that enables users to map a range of ancient and modern migration stories via virtual reality, with the aim of deepening understanding and generating more compassion for 21st-century forced migrants.⁴⁴

Mentoring students to produce outputs that are of a high enough standard to be shared with colleagues in other departments and institutions, and indeed with the wider public, is inevitably more time-consuming than the work involved in regular essay supervision. It requires a good deal of ‘office hour’ consultation during the preparation phases, both singly and in teams, in addition to standard classroom contact hours; and there is often a multi-stage editing process once the work has been graded, to support students to polish their outputs for publication. Relatively speaking, those who opt to take our Applied Classics module tend to be risk-takers, open to different ways of working and excited about studying Classics from novel perspectives; even so, the module takes many of them well beyond their comfort zones (both in terms of their knowledge base and familiar study methods), and this increases the need for regular mentoring. The more unusual the pedagogic practices, the more responsibility staff must take to support students on their learning journey.

Even when only a small percentage of the module mark is tied to teamwork, students can find this daunting; so care has to be taken from the outset to coach them in team-building and effective, inclusive team-work; and robust systems are needed so that students can report problems along the way and also give mature, thoughtful credit to team-mates, for the individual roles they have played, as they bring their work to a conclusion. Marking ‘applied’ assignments can also present challenges compared with marking more routine academic tasks, partly because standard marking criteria are not easily transposed to ‘out-of-the-box’ work, and also because students working creatively and in teams often ‘go the extra mile’ (for each other, as much as for themselves), conducting research, mastering new knowledge, thinking independently, and communicating effectively in ways that exceed expectations for ‘typical’ grade boundaries. Staff must navigate a delicate balancing act between recognising the quality of this work (using criteria that, for equity’s sake, are comparable with those standardly used for essays, book reviews, class presentations, etc) while not running a module where high marks are inevitable, because students are meeting the higher-than-usual demands that the course makes of them. Knowledge-exchange with colleagues in other, more applied disciplines and the performing arts is helpful in devising mark schemes that appropriately reward both traditional and more entrepreneurial elements.

Teaching an Applied Classics module can involve as steep a learning curve for staff members as for students; but the rewards are huge for all concerned.

‘Studying Applied Classics has genuinely changed my life! If it wasn’t for this I wouldn’t have got so engaged in forced migration – now I’m doing an internship with UN House Scotland, working with their gender and migration group.’ (Student from the 2022 cohort)

As students report themselves, experimenting with ‘Applied Classics’ can be a very empowering experience, giving them a sense of ownership over their studies alongside an awareness of – and the confidence to explore – wider possibilities. At the same time as gaining valuable skills for the future workplace, they learn a lot about themselves, developing both old and new interests, and coming to appreciate the many ways in which a Classics, Classical Studies, Archaeology or Ancient History degree can equip them to make meaningful contributions to different fields of work and sectors of society. In fact, many of them take away not just a sense of new possibilities but an awareness of new responsibilities, as Activist (not just Applied) Classicists:

‘As a fourth year nearing the end of his time reading Classics at St Andrews, the module “Classics for the Modern World” was a course that I thought would neatly “sign off” my degree. However, I was wrong in thinking it would be a conclusion to a four-year love affair. Instead, the reading I have done for it... has opened my mind to new possibilities and responsibilities.’ (Henry Bennett, ‘[The Potential for Classics to Teach us about Ourselves](#)’, April 2021⁴⁵)

‘Applied Classics encourages us to think beyond our current notions regarding the uses of Classics, to fight against age-old stereotypes concerning the discipline and to apply our knowledge to implement serious change in the modern world. I chose to take the *Modern Classics* module for entirely selfish reasons. As a student within the School of Classics, I have had to justify my chosen degree subject numerous times to various people over the years. There are only so many times you can be asked, by schoolteachers and students alike, “*what’s the point?*” and “*what job do you expect to get with that?*” With this module, I thought I could finally provide some solid examples of the real-world applications of my Classical Studies degree. I wanted to feel vindicated but already it has done more than that: I have been vindicated, but I have also been radicalised...’ (Ellis Williams, ‘[Classics for the Masses: learning for society and diversity](#)’, April 2021⁴⁶)

Along the way, students get to know the ancient world better than ever; and through their project pitches and blog posts, they model inspiring answers to sector-wide questions about the future of Classics as a discipline, how it could be developed, and why. Classics as a whole thus benefits from Applied Classics – both because ‘applying’ Classics to modern issues encourages us to look at the ancient world with fresh eyes, and also because it introduces a wider range of people to antiquity – and to what the study of antiquity can do for us in the 21st century. In the words of one recent student, Lily Talbot: ‘Applied Classics is an intellectual light, one which has the power to illuminate anew a discipline currently overshadowed by its own corrupted glory.’⁴⁷ By involving our knowledgeable, imaginative, reflective, enterprising, wise undergraduates (not just established researchers) in Applied Classics, we can experiment more than ever with its potential and learn valuable lessons about different routes to impact. As well as shifting assumptions about Classics itself – addressing its reputation for being elitist and out of touch, and setting new agenda for its future direction – this new generation of Applied/Activist Classicists has much to teach us about the value and potential of the Humanities generally in addressing social, political and environmental challenges. In 2021, *Classics for the Modern World: Applications and Interventions* competed with a range of STEM and

Social Science contenders to win the University of St Andrews' inaugural 'Sustainability in the Curriculum' prize:⁴⁸ not bad for a module rooted in the ancient past.

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Notes

- 1 For a sample, see e.g. [Changing Classics to Save Classics? A View from Below](#); also [Classics, Postcritique](#); and [On Not Apologising for Teaching and Promoting 'Classics'](#) (all accessed 28 March 2023).
- 2 Zuckerberg (2018) is a sobering read in this regard.
- 3 Charlotte Higgins analyses a serial offender in [this article](#) (accessed 28 March 2023). For more progressive work on the intersection between Classics and class, see e.g. Hall (2016), Hall and Stead (2020), and the [Network for Working-Class Classicists](#), which engages with the [2020 CUCD report on Equality and Diversity in Classics](#), among other resources.
- 4 She does so particularly brilliantly in her 2017 article 'Between hospitality and asylum'; see also Isayev and Jewell (2017–2022). James Corke-Webster's 2023 [Letters of Refuge](#) project is another example, drawing on narratives of displacement in ancient epistolography as the basis of workshops involving 21st-century forced migrants.
- 5 See e.g. [Might and Right: Thinking Through Thucydides](#), co-led by Neville Morley and Lynette Mitchell; [The Melian Dilemma](#); and [Do What You Must](#) (all accessed 28 March 2023).
- 6 Further reading might include: Chaniotis *et al.* (2009), Harrison and Hardwick (2014), Morley (2018), Beard (2013), Eidinow and Ramirez (2016), Eidinow and Lorenz (2020), and Zuckerberg (2020). Nandini Pandey's forthcoming books *Roman Diversity* (Princeton forthcoming, 2024) and *Classics for Modern Life* (Yale forthcoming, 2025) look set to make valuable contributions.
- 7 A recent report by the RSE and Young Academy of Scotland underlines these trends, in a wide-ranging discussion of the future of tertiary education: [https://rse.org.uk/student-centredness-will-become-a-defining-feature-in-the-future-of-tertiary-education/](#) (accessed 7 March 2023).
- 8 I am grateful to colleagues in the School of Classics at St Andrews – especially Ralph Anderson, Andrea Brock, Emma Buckley, Jon Hesk and Rebecca Sweetman – for conversations in the early development stages which helped to shape the module's focus and approach.
- 9 The [Research Excellence Framework](#) (REF)'s investment in 'impact' has led many more researchers to 'apply' their research to real-world challenges; but Applied Classics has long taken place well beyond the REF's impact agenda, and beyond academia itself.
- 10 See n. 7 above, and also Chambers (2009), Meineck (2018), Ober (2017), Caston and Weineck (2016), Ambühl (2016), and Capettini and Rabinowitz (2021). A longer list can be found on our project website [here](#).
- 11 My sincere thanks go to Dr Andrea Brock, Prof. Emily Greenwood, Prof. Elena Isayev, Dr Carlos Machado, Prof. Helen Morales, Prof. Neville Morley, Dr Mai Musié, Dr Ruben Post, Dr Matthew Skuse, Dr Mirna Solic, Prof. Rebecca Sweetman, and [NMT Automatics](#), for all that they have taught us.
- 12 You can read a series of blogs on the topic on our website: [https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/blog/](#); these reflections by students are packed with valuable insights into the nature and potential of Applied Classics.

13 This is not true of all Applied Classics endeavours: for instance, the [Bristol University 'Applied Classics' course](#), coincidentally also set up in 2020, embraces more of an overlap with Public Classics.

14 This 2019 CUCD blog offers a useful overview of Classics-based public engagement activity around the UK in recent years: [https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/files/2019/10/BRIDGES-Public-Engagement-in-Classics-Survey.pdf](#) (accessed 6 March 2023).

15 Papathanasopoulou (2019).

16 For instance, medieval adaptations of ancient political and military thought into crusading manuals; renaissance engagement with Vitruvian architectural theory; 16th, 17th and 18th-century re-stagings of Greco-Roman drama and myths as political commentaries on their own times (such as Handel's *Agrippina*); or fascist uses of Roman history and imagery during the 1930s.

17 As noted above, there are clear overlaps between Applied Classics and some of the outreach work defined by the REF as 'impact.' Applied Classicists are not restricted to drawing only on their own research, however; it is a more inclusive endeavour which students, novelists, broadcasters, entrepreneurs, charities and many others can experiment with.

18 Connolly (2018, p. 320). Among others, we also draw on Morley (2018, pp. 23–5), Goff (2005), Dhindsa (2020), and a range of Eidolon articles, including Chae (2018), Ram-Prasad (2019), and Padilla Peralta (2017).

19 We are particularly indebted to Elena Isayev for shaping our thinking on this: [https://www.buzzsprout.com/1717787/11764255](#) (accessed 4 April 2023).

20 'What is Applied Classics?', co-authored by the 2022 cohort of CL4467 students (December 2022): [https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/](#).

21 Social media platforms offer a plentiful supply, but we also look at examples in political speeches, films and self-help guides, among other sources.

22 E.g. Morley (2012, 2019).

23 Morales (2013) discusses the problems; see also Kenty (2015).

24 Zuckerberg (2018) is our starting point, and we draw heavily on Pharos, which documents appropriations of Classical antiquity by hate groups ([https://pharos.vassarspaces.net](#)).

25 See, for example, blogs by Reese Waters III ([https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2022/10/27/reception-and-application-in-classical-studies/](#)), Nicolette Irving ([https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2022/10/11/distance-and-proximity-to-the-ancient-world/](#)) and Lily Talbot ([https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2022/11/29/blog-draft-lat/](#)).

26 On the latter, we read e.g. Howe and Brice (2016), Meineck and Konstan (2014), and Crowley (2014).

27 The preface to Morales (2020) is particularly helpful here; also Zuckerberg (2020). We also draw on reflections by scholars working in Migration Studies and other Human Rights areas, whose research often merges into advocacy and whose stakeholders often demand that a clear 'side' is taken. Among others, we take inspiration from Prof. Ali Watson (founder of the [Third Generation Project](#)), Dr Vindhya Buthpitiya (whose research combines advocacy for post-conflict justice in Sri Lanka) and Dina Nayeri (author of *The Waiting Place, The Ungrateful Refugee and Who Gets Believed?*).

28 Each adapts ancient myths to prompt reflection on xenophobia, refugee experiences, gender, sexual violence and militarism, inter alia.

29 See especially Post (2017, 2022) and also Sörlin (2012).

30 See esp. Brock *et al.* (2021) and Brock (2022).

31 [https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/themes/digital-literacy/](#) (accessed 5 April 2023).

32 See especially Machado (2022).

33 On this trend, see e.g. Konijnendijk and Echeverría (2023), and Konijnendijk ([forthcoming](#)); for an influential 21st-century example of the phenomenon, see Allison (2017), critiqued by Morley (2012, 2019).

34 For some particularly concerning examples, see: 'Virgil's Aeneid Gives Hope to Totalitarians after Failed Capitol Attack', *Pharos* February 12, 2021: [https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/2021/02/12/virgil-aeneid-capitol-attack-augustus-trump-white-supremacy-vergil/](#) (accessed 6 April 2023); 'Capitol Terrorists Take Inspiration from Ancient World', *Pharos* January 14, 2021: [https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/2021/01/14/capitol-terrorists-take-inspiration-from-ancient-world/](#) (accessed 5 April 2023); 'Militia Group to provide "Spartan training" against domestic "insurrections"', *Pharos* September 14, 2018: [https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/2018/09/14/militia-group-to-provide-spartan-training-against-domestic-insurrections/](#) (accessed 5 April 2023).

- 35 A good example is Ewan Downie's one-man play 'Achilles', produced by *Company of Wolves*, which deconstructs ancient narratives and invites 21st century audiences to rethink models of violence and heroism that have long been promoted via retellings of the *Iliad*. Ewan Downie discusses his approach on the Visualising War podcast: <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1717787/8869403> (accessed 5 April 2023).
- 36 The Visualising War project has recently run workshops for theatre, film and dance practitioners (<https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/visualising-war/events/staging-war-stories/>) and for military and civilian communities interested in the legacy of ancient war storytelling in the modern world (<https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/visualising-war/events/from-achilles-to-afghanistan/>).
- 37 This can range from critiquing the way in which modern museums replicate ancient emphases on 'top-down', state-led, belligerent forms of conflict-resolution, at the expense of local, everyday, grassroots experiences (e.g. Consiglio *et al.* (2023)) to reflections on women's experiences of sexual violence and post-conflict recovery, as discussed, for example, in the Visualising Peace project's virtual museum of peace: <https://peacemuseum.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2023/03/12/andromaches-search-for-post-conflict-peace/> (accessed 5 April 2023).
- 38 E.g. the Classical Coastlines team: <https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2022/11/27/classical-coastlines-draft/> and the Frontinus Project: <https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2022/11/11/the-frontinus-project/>.
- 39 In the process, the Hospes Project team have contributed to wider work being done by the Visualising War and Peace project on Visualising Forced Migration: <https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2022/11/29/the-hostess-project/>.
- 40 See e.g. the Hippolytus Initiative: <https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2022/11/30/the-hippolytus-initiative-2/>.
- 41 The Climate and Classics team: <https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2022/11/04/climate-and-classics-deforestation/>.
- 42 The Roman Rumours team: <https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2022/11/11/roman-rumours/>.
- 43 You can read their mission statement here <https://rawi12.wixsite.com/odysseybritannia/about> and some of their blogs here <https://rawi12.wixsite.com/odysseybritannia/eat> (accessed 27 March 2023).
- 44 An outline and some prototypes of their digital tool is available here <https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2022/11/29/the-hostess-project/> (accessed 27 March 2023). As a result of their work, this student team has been contributing directly to the Visualising War and Peace's project on Visualising Forced Migration (<https://forcedmigration.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/migrations/ancient-migration-stories/>).
- 45 <https://standrewsclassics.wordpress.com/2021/04/14/the-potential-for-classics-to-teach-us-about-ourselves/> (accessed 23 March 2023).
- 46 <https://standrewsclassics.wordpress.com/2021/04/27/classics-for-the-masses-learning-for-society-and-ensuring-diversity/> (accessed 23 March 2023).
- 47 <https://modernclassics.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/> (accessed 23 March 2023).
- 48 <https://environment.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/the-golden-dandelion-awarding-excellent-modules-in-sustainability/> (accessed 23 March 2023).
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