

Teaching in the Round: Classical Reception Studies and Interactive Workshops

What makes a workshop truly 'interactive'? If the desired learning outcome is to get the students actively involved in the discussion and to facilitate the exchange of information then how can we best achieve that?

These were the key questions that concerned Professor Nancy Rabinowitz (Hamilton College, USA) and I as the co-organisers of a half-day workshop designed to explore the theme of *Greek Tragedy, Women and War* (27/06/2013). During the preparatory stage we discussed extensively how best to get the students involved. We wanted to avoid duplicating the framework of a colloquium with us doing all the talking and delegating the students to the role of listener who only had the opportunity to ask a few questions at the end. We were aiming for a much more 'interactive' approach, but the burning question was how best to realise this goal.

The context

This workshop was the third in the 2012-13 series organised by the Classical Reception Studies Network (CRSN) in collaboration with the Institute of Classical Studies. This collaboration has proven particularly fruitful. The network with the help of the Institute has been organising an annual series of London based graduate workshops since 2005. Professor Lorna Hardwick was instrumental in setting up the collaboration under the aegis of an AHRC research project based at the Institute and designed to investigate the state of postgraduate provision in the Classics. She felt that classical reception studies was an area of our discipline that would benefit from the organisation of more workshops designed to bring together researchers and interested graduate students. After the success of the initial round of workshops it was felt that the momentum should be sustained by establishing an annual series of workshops staffed by volunteers drawn from the network's members.

I was invited to join the team as a representative of the Institute in which role I continued until 2009. My involvement continued uninterrupted when I moved to The Open University. It has proved particularly inspiring to be involved with such an active group, particularly as my own experience as a doctoral student working on a reception thesis was an isolating one. I keenly felt the lack of personal interaction with other students working in classical reception studies and with other academic voices that could provide me with different perspectives. It is precisely this gap that the annual series of classical reception studies graduate workshops is intended to fill.

Workshops over the years have had a number of different themes including classical reception theory and methodology, a focus on careers as well as particular research clusters within classical reception studies such as cinematic receptions. What has remained a constant is the desire to involve the students in the discussion of all these themes. Before the *Annual Meeting of Postgraduates in the Reception of the Ancient World* (AMPRAW) was created, the series used to include the opportunity for a work-in-progress research day when students could present papers that featured their own research. More than that, though, one of the guiding principles set down by Professor Hardwick was that students ought to have the opportunity to become participants rather than simply passive listeners. The network seeks to foster rather than to dictate students' activities.

Advertising is key

A key way in which one can signpost that 'interactivity' of a workshop is to set it up as a participatory event from the very beginning. This is how our workshop was advertised in all the advance publicity that I sent out:

This workshop seeks to explore the impact of war on the female characters of Greek drama in light of recent trends in feminist theory and classical reception. We will investigate how the ancient texts have been appropriated to address modern concerns and how such receptions can contribute not only to our engagement with ancient Greek dramatic texts, but also our understanding of the world we live in. The contributors of the workshop will debate these themes with reference to particular case studies drawn from their own research.

Rather than packing the programme with talks by experts we deliberately left plenty of time for Q&A.

The path of interactivity

Nancy and I devoted the entire second half of the workshop to an interactive session which was headed by a series of questions that we thought would foster debate. These were agreed upon by Nancy and me from the beginning, so that they were also included in all the publicity. We asked students to reflect on the following themes/questions in this interactive session:

- The active role that female characters play in the dramas.
- Are the plays anti-war, or is it just the modern versions that are?
- How does promoting audience understanding through the ancient plays, as the *Theater of War* does, change if we emphasize women?
- To reflect on how modern theatrical revivals and cinematic receptions have contributed to public debates about modern conflicts.

Our reasoning for this approach was that this would familiarise students with our intentions and clearly signpost to them that we were proposing a debate rather than a series of lectures. The workshop concluded with a plenary discussion that summed up the ideas and the theoretical and methodological approaches interrogated during the workshop, as well as looking forward to new possibilities for the future. Quotations from the feedback forms include the following:

- 'Everyone got the opportunity to talk and share ideas.'
- 'Very interesting to hear different views and interpretations of Greek tragedy'
- 'Informal discussion was enjoyable and extremely valuable in gaining insights into a range of receptions'
- 'It was very useful for my own research'
- The 'workshop helped me push my academic studies, getting confidence to participate at a higher level'

The success of the workshop and the very positive feedback we received from the participants suggests that this half-day format works well when the aim is to focus closely on a specialised theme in contrast to other CRSN workshops which offer a larger canvas of themes and approaches. I would argue that a balance of both types of workshops is needed in order for the CRSN to meet its mission to deliver exciting, innovative and interactive events that reflect the variety and vigour of classical reception studies. As the saying goes, watch this space...

CRSN Website: www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/crsn

Workshops are advertised on the Events page.

Classics Confidential interview on the theme of the workshop:
<http://classicsconfidential.co.uk/2013/10/07/greek-tragedy-women-and-war-with-nancy-rabinowitz/>

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