

July 2021

Old Meets New: Bringing Ancient Studies to Life in the Hybrid Classroom

Shane Thompson
sthompson@ncwc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://soar.stonehill.edu/jrca>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Classics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thompson, Shane (2021) "Old Meets New: Bringing Ancient Studies to Life in the Hybrid Classroom," *Journal of Religious Competition in Antiquity*. Vol. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://soar.stonehill.edu/jrca/vol2/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SkyhawksSOAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Religious Competition in Antiquity* by an authorized editor of SkyhawksSOAR. For more information, please contact skyhawksssoargroup@stonehill.edu.

Old Meets New: Bringing Ancient Studies to Life in the Hybrid Classroom

Shane M. Thompson

Brown University

The 2020-2021 academic year will forever be remembered as the “COVID-year,” which, in academia, forced instructors to rethink the ways we have taught for generations. Personally, the Fall 2020 semester presented an opportunity to teach fully in-person classes (in a Hyflex model as not all students were able to attend), fully online classes, and – the most foreign to us – hybrid classes. As the hybrid model is one with which almost no one had any experience, I will focus my reflection on one particular hybrid course, urging instructors to incorporate Active Learning strategies into their courses – both hybrid and in-person – going forward.¹

The course in focus is titled Archaeology of Religion, which I taught two sections of at a small liberal arts college in the American South. The hybrid model for this course meant that half of the students attended in-person meetings on Tuesdays, with the other half attending on Thursdays. In an effort to make this course run as smoothly as possible, my reconfigured course design prompted students to engage with the weeks’ thematic concept at home with individual case studies examined during our in-person meeting. The at-home portion of the course focused on thematic readings and videos from across time and space, culminating in weekly reflection posts with general comments on the overall topics (topics discussed below).

I quickly realized that the in-person component of the class needed to be vastly different from past semesters. In their courses this semester, students were spending huge quantities of time attending lectures over video chat, watching pre-recorded lecture videos, and reading materials to make up for the loss of in-class time. I determined that our in-person meetings, then, could not focus solely on lecture material, functioning identically to the videos and videocalls with which they were already spending huge amounts of time. Rather, the in-person classroom experience needed to truly warrant their physical presence.

The weekly in-person portion of the class began by discussing the thematic issues discussed in reflection posts and trying to come up with a working definition of the week’s topic as a group. Student posts were excellent as their reflections actually served a purpose for

¹ For Active Learning strategies, see, <https://cei.umn.edu/active-learning>; <https://teaching.cornell.edu/teaching-resources/engaging-students/active-learning>; <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/Active-Learning.pdf>.

in-class use. Following this, particular case-studies were then examined to elucidate the topic at hand. Each case-study was carefully chosen to coincide with an Active Learning task which we could perform in class. I attempted to create these activities so that they would include at least three of the following five components: public speaking, critical thinking, problem solving, hands-on experience, and teamwork. These are skills which are valuable outside of our particular field, and translatable as life skills outside of academia. Thus, the following topics, case-studies, and Active Learning activities function both for better understanding of particular subjects, as well as practice for skills more broadly conveyed through the liberal arts. I will also provide the full week-overview for The Archaeology of Burial and the Archaeology of Domestic Spaces modules. I also note that all course readings were provided online so students did not have to purchase any course materials.

The topics, case-studies, and Active Learning activities are as follows:

Topic: The Archaeology of Burial

Case Study: The Royal Tombs of Ur

Activity: Attempt to deduce the rules for the Royal Game of Ur with actual game boards²

Readings for Online Day with Short Online Video: Burial Customs and Objects

Reading: Alekshin, V.A. “Burial Customs as an Archaeological Source”

Tsaliki, Anastasia. “Unusual Burials and Necrophobia: An Insight into the Burial Archaeology of Fear”

Simon and Ravesloot. “Salado Ceramic Burial Offerings: A Consideration of Gender and Social Organization.”

Readings for In-Person Day: The Strange Burials at Ur and the Politics of Displaying the Deceased

Reading: Finkel, Irving. On the Rules for the Royal Game of Ur

Gansell and Winter, “Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur”

² Directions for this activity in Shane M. Thompson, “How and Why Was the Royal Game of Ur Played?,” in *An Educator’s Handbook for Teaching About the Ancient World*, ed. Pinar Durgun (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020), 173–74.

Weekly Discussion Prompt: What can burials and burial objects tell us about the culture and religion of the deceased (please cite at least one reading from the week)? How do you personally feel about excavating the burial of deceased individuals?

In-Class Plan: Discuss Weekly Responses

Short Lecture on the History and Religion of Mesopotamia

Short Lecture on the City of Ur, its Excavation, and Material Culture

Students Attempt to Reconstruct the Rules and Gameplay for the Royal Game of Ur with Gameboards and Game Pieces

Present the Scholarly Reconstruction of the Rules for the Royal Game of Ur

Students Play the Royal Game of Ur with the Scholarly Rules

Discussion of How a Game Can Relate to Death, Religion, and Broader Society

Conclude with a Discussion of the Ethics of Excavating Burials and the Museum Display of Dead Bodies

Topic: The Archaeology of Remembrance

Case Studies: Feasting with the Dead at Zinçirli and Egyptian Burial Customs

Activities: Examination of the Katamuwa Stela and Text; Play the Egyptian Game of Senet

Topic: The Archaeology of Human Sacrifice

Case Study: The Mesoamerican Ballgame

Activity: Attempt to Play the Mesoamerican Ballgame (Outdoor Activity)³

Topic: The Archaeology of Animals

Case Studies: Animals in Ancient Israel and Egyptian Scarabs

³ Directions for this activity in Shane M. Thompson and Carl Walsh, “How Were Mesoamerican Ballgames Played?,” in *An Educator’s Handbook for Teaching About the Ancient World*, ed. Pinar Durgun (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020), 181–83.

Activity: Make Egyptian Scarabs Out of Clay

Topic: The Archaeology of Texts

Case Studies: The Dead Sea Scrolls and Cuneiform Scribal Culture

Activity: Make Ugaritic Cuneiform Abecedaries⁴

Topic: The Archaeology of Images, Iconography, and Monuments

Case Studies: Hittite Rock Reliefs

Activity: Learn to Set Up an Archaeological Site (how to set up a square, etc.)⁵

Topic: The Archaeology of Domestic Spaces

Case Study: Household Religion in the Levant

Activity: Make Judean Pillar Figurines out of Clay

Readings for Online Day with Short Online Video – Personal and Private Religion in the Household

Bermann, Marc. “Household Archaeology” in *Lukarmata: Household Archaeology in Prehispanic Bolivia*.

Kindt, Julia. “Personal Religion: A Productive Category for the Study of Ancient Greek Religion?”

Stowers, Stanley. “Theorizing the Religion of Ancient Households and Families.”

Readings for In-Person Day – Household Religion in the Levant

Routledge, Bruce. “Household Archaeology in the Levant.” (JStor)

Lewis, Theodore. “Family, Household, and Local Religion at Late Bronze Age Ugarit.”

⁴ For directions on how to make cuneiform tablets in other styles, see, Sara Mohr and Willis Monroe, “How Were Clay Tablets Made and How Does Cuneiform Work?,” in *An Educator’s Handbook for Teaching About the Ancient World*, ed. Pinar Durgun (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020), 133–37; Klaus Wagensohnner, “Writing a Cuneiform Letter,” in *An Educator’s Handbook for Teaching About the Ancient World*, ed. Pinar Durgun (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020), 138–40.

⁵ This activity is not directly related to the week’s topic. This is the week their midterm was due. As I did not want them to engage with field reports for the midterm, I placed this activity on this day so they would be able to deal with field reports for their final projects.

Albertz, Rainer. "Family Religion in Ancient Israel and its Surroundings."

Weekly Discussion Prompt: Is "Household Religion" an appropriate term? Or do you prefer an alternative as presented in the readings and video? What can "household religion" (or whichever term you prefer) tell us about broader religious practices and concepts in a particular locale? Please cite at least one reading for the week in your response.

In-Class Plan: Discuss Weekly Responses

Short Lecture on "Household Religion" in Chinese Religion with Video of Modern Practice

Introduction to Asherah in the Textual and Archaeological Sources

Introduction to Judean Pillar Figurines

Students Make Judean Pillar Figurines from Clay

Discussion of Their Figurines: What Did They Focus On in the Construction? Is an Expert Needed to Create One?

Short Lecture on Fertility Rites in World Religions

Short Introduction and Video on Puja in Hinduism With Video of Modern Practice

Conclude with a Discussion of Terminology and Return to Judean Pillar Figurines and How They Could Be Used in Household Religion

Topic: The Archaeology of Public Spaces

Case Study: Babylon, Giza, and Other Recently Reconstructed Sites

Activity: Group Work Touring Ancient Cities Based on Digital Reconstructions

Topic: The Archaeology of Gender:

Case Study: Gender and Ancient Religion at Babylon, Giza, and Other Recently Reconstructed Sites

Activity: Using Digital Reconstructions, Look for the Presence of Gender Markers

Topic: The Archaeology of Ritual and Performance

Case Study: Music and Performance in Ugarit and Mesopotamia

Activity: Act Out Prescriptive Ritual Texts from Ugarit and Mesopotamia

Topic: Heritage Archaeology

Case Study: Israel

Activity: Examine the History of a Particular World Heritage Site

The above summary of topics, case studies, and activities exhibits one example of how a course can be structured in a hybrid model to maximize in-person class time and differentiate it from the online learning experience. This differentiation led to high levels of participation in class as there was an explicit reason for the students to attend.

This model also extended to my modes of assessment for the semester. While I typically give students the option of submitting papers or projects in other mediums, I received an increase in projects making use of Active Learning Methods. For example, I had a student attempt to recreate the playing of the Egyptian game, Mehen, using methods we used in class.

The student feedback on these assignments was so positive that I plan to incorporate them into all my courses, even once we return to a “normal” in-person modality. In particular, I suggest that they would be valuable in a flipped-classroom settings. In these settings, larger time-consuming projects could be attempted which make use of multiple in-person meetings during the week.

In conclusion, I encourage instructors teaching hybrid courses to consciously differentiate the in-person and virtual components of the course. I have briefly demonstrated how I used Active Learning practices to maximize student participation and engagement. Admittedly, the techniques used above are easier in a class with an archaeological subject matter. I contend, however, that Active Learning practices are appropriate for all subjects related to the ancient world. Finally, I acknowledge that, on top of the valuable learning outcomes which the above practices supported, in the strange times of COVID-19 they also allowed the students (and myself) to escape for a few hours every week and to just have fun! The importance of this final point should not be downplayed in the context of a global pandemic, and we would all do well to continue to consider it when traditional course modalities return.