

## Conference report - Past Pedagogies, Present Perspectives, and Future Directions: Reading Classics Online

Jamie Wood ([jwood@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:jwood@lincoln.ac.uk)) and Michael Wuk ([mwuk@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:mwuk@lincoln.ac.uk)), University of Lincoln, United Kingdom

Conference website, with the full programme and recordings of each presentation:  
<https://makingdigitalhistory.co.uk/read/reading-classics-online/>.

Reading in education is ubiquitous, is relevant to all disciplines, and has undergone a transformation over the past twenty years. However, student experiences of learning-through-reading are under-researched and -theorised. In particular, we know strikingly little about how students read online, how these practices relate to overall learning, and which reading-based pedagogic strategies are effective. Moreover, technological advances and the pandemic's pressures have dramatically changed how we all read: resources are increasingly digitised, mobile devices are frequently utilised, and virtual learning environments increasingly dominate elements of teaching practice. It is thus imperative that we understand how these changes can help or hinder the student experience.

Given the importance of reading complex texts in ancient and modern languages to the discipline of Classics, and the increasing digitisation of primary and secondary texts, these issues are especially pertinent for us as Classicists. Thanks to generous funding from CUCD's [Grants for HE Pedagogy](#) scheme, on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2023 a group of secondary school teachers, university lecturers, and undergraduate students met at the University of Lincoln to discuss Classics-related online reading practices and pedagogies. Rather fittingly, the event was hybrid, with some attendees tuning via Microsoft Teams, pre-circulated materials and slides made accessible online, and both recordings and transcripts subsequently uploaded to the [conference website](#). The day followed a simple structure. Presentations were grouped into three roundtables, with each paper lasting between ten and twenty minutes. Each session began with the prepared comments of the contributors and ended with an open discussion.

Following a brief introduction by **Jamie Wood** who outlined the questions we hoped to explore, **Roundtable One** kicked things off by sharing the perspectives of those based at the University of Lincoln. **Michele Vescovi**, Associate Professor of Medieval Art, discussed the findings of a project that he had led on Digital Literacy in the School of Humanities and Heritage at Lincoln. We were offered theoretical and practical suggestions to help embed digital literacy in all forms of teaching.

**Graham Barrett**, joint programme leader of the Classical Studies programme, picked up this theme by focusing on the benefits and pitfalls of using various online resources, such as *Loeb Classical Library's* online reader, in teaching. The issues of accessibility, copyright, usability, and fragmented student understanding were all flagged up as trade-offs for the

convenience of using online tools over physical texts. A crucial question Graham raised is how much we want our digital reading tools to emulate the experience of handling texts in print. While most of us tend to set online sources for reading in much the same way as lecturers in the pre-Covid period used to hand out photocopies, Graham noted that a more careful consideration of precisely what students are supposed to get out of online reading would help to navigate many of the issues which affect students' academic reading more generally.

**Joe Broderick**, currently a PhD student and an Associate Lecturer, examined online tools for reading, in particular [Perlego](#), an online library and reading platform. By drawing on his (largely positive) experience of teaching with Perlego, Joe developed the points of Michele and Graham that considerable thought needs to go into the choice of online reading tool. While there are some fantastic platforms available, there is currently no 'one-size-fits-all' option, with many of the most frequently used tools requiring careful deployment.

These suggestions were rounded out by the feedback of three students at different stages of their education: **Zoe Kelly**, a third-year Classical Studies student; **Melissa Rabbett**, a second-year Classical Studies student; and **Joshua Aslin**, a third-year History student who had taken several Classical Studies modules. Zoe, Melissa, and Joshua discussed their experiences of online reading during their studies, responded to the suggestions made by the speakers in Roundtable One, and made their own suggestions as to which tools they had found useful.

After lunch, **Roundtable Two**, on online reading in other disciplinary and institutional contexts (i.e. not at Lincoln and/or not in Classics), started with a bang as **Anna Rich-Abad**, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Nottingham, detailed her experiences of using [Talis Elevate](#), a tool for the collaborative annotation of documents. In a similar vein to Joe, Anna explored the positives and negatives of using the tool in History modules, but pointed towards a downtick in student engagement with the tool since the return to face-to-face teaching after the lockdowns. Anna noted that some students can feel self-conscious when posting online, just as they can be reticent to speak publicly in in-person classes. This issue may even be exacerbated with online tools, which preserve comments long beyond the set deadline. As emphasised by Graham, Anna suggested that tools such as Talis Elevate can be incredibly useful, but only when thought has gone into what we want the students to do (and learn), beyond simply reading and commenting on a text.

**Jon Chandler**, Associate Professor of History at UCL, broadened the discussion by reflecting on his own experiences in attempting to boost student engagement with reading. Jon highlighted a range of problems which could be exacerbated or ameliorated depending on how digital platforms were deployed. The issues of deciding the format and length of set texts (entire articles/books/chapters/sources in translation, or fragments arranged and highlighted in worksheets/packs), as well the seeming impenetrability of academic writing, especially in older scholarship, were emphasised as needing particular attention.

To some extent, the core concern of all discussion up until this point was that of accessibility, especially given the diversity of student backgrounds and skills present in each session, let alone across an entire year, programme, or institution. **Martina Astrid Rodda**, Leventis Research Fellow at Merton College, University of Oxford, took this concern in a different direction by examining content warnings in the online classroom. After outlining the ongoing debate around the use of trigger warnings, Martina Astrid highlighted that digital teaching, especially in asynchronous formats and when appropriately scaffolded, can help to students to engage with potentially problematic and uncomfortable ideas and materials.

Taking accessibility in yet another direction, **Cressida Ryan**, Lecturer in New Testament Greek Language at the University of Oxford, detailed her efforts to create an innovative set of multi-modal workbooks for studying the Koine Greek of the New Testament. By blending text recordings, videos, spreadsheets, and a range of other tools, Cressida has developed an impressively responsive method for providing students with the base skills needed to engage with Koine Greek as more than just words to be translated. In effect, the digital workbooks help students to read and (more importantly!) comprehend actively the material in its original form, with attention paid to both linguistic nuance and broader context.

Following a short break for coffee and a surprisingly large amount of cake, **Roundtable Three**, on perspectives from secondary school contexts, commenced. **Steven Hunt**, Associate Teaching Professor at the University of Cambridge, continued the theme of ancient language instruction by exploring how both teachers and pupils use parsing and dictionary tools for Classical Latin. Steven reaffirmed the need to use these tools as supplements, not as crutches, with students encouraged to approach the language as something to be read, rather than something to be constantly picked apart. While there is obviously a need to identify grammatical constructions and vocabulary in many cases—for which, Steven pointed out, the digital needs to be combined with the analogue, with instructors physically bracketing or pointing things out, and students actively highlighting—a focus on active reading can help students to develop a more positive, lasting relationship with ancient languages.

With a similar thought process although in relation to different media, **Sam Koon**, Head of Classics at Haileybury, explored various apps that can help students of Classical Latin and Attic or Koine Greek with intensive reading (of short passages in detail for a specific learning purpose) and extensive reading (of longer, often ‘easier’ passages for non-specific aims, including enjoyment). Sam emphasised that while both formats have their problems, there is a sort of multiplier effect when intensive and extensive reading are combined. Especially helpful for these purposes are various free yet relatively under-appreciated apps available on both Android and iOS devices, such as [Bellerophon](#), which enables parallel screening of various Latin, Greek, and English versions of texts.

Wrapping up the roundtable and the conference, **Tom Sims**, Head of Classics at Nottingham High School, explored the effects of social media on education in Ancient History and Classics, with particular concern for Key Stage Five. Tom adroitly noted that

while the prevalence of smartphones and social media have exacerbated several problems inherent in all levels of education—namely, attention, retention, short-sighted concerns for whether certain subjects will be immediately useful or tested in summative assessments, and social anxieties, all made worse by the stresses of Covid—these same factors also offer numerous opportunities. Shorter assessments, group work, and tasks resembling the activities demanded by social media (for instance, creating Instagram stories and Twitter/X threads reflecting themes in the *Aeneid*) all work within the constraints outlined above to help students engage with the set reading in a relatively simple yet creative manner.

We thoroughly enjoyed the chance to bring the presenters together and hope to continue the discussions elsewhere. To our minds, the conference was a runaway success: all attendees (us included!) indicated that they learned quite a lot by combining the perspectives of university students, lecturers, and secondary teachers. Despite a mutual acknowledgement from the attendees that the resources available to the different groups naturally prevented us all from approaching digital reading in exactly the same way, it is clear that there are large points of overlap in the problems faced by students and educators in both secondary and higher education in the United Kingdom, in Classics and related disciplines. Thankfully, many of the solutions proposed at the workshop can also be shared, with the potential result that the gap between school and university education can be narrowed to provide a more consistent experience for students.

By design, the workshop was intended to bring together parties interested in digital reading and establish a starting point on which further work can be based. Many of the speakers are in the process of developing their papers for further dissemination and/or publication. To name just one instance, Anna, Jamie, and Jon are currently putting together an edited volume on active online reading, touching on many of the themes raised by this workshop. Further work on this subject is required. We intend to organise similar events in the future, in particular to draw insights from non-Anglophone institutions where reading-as-translation of ancient texts is more regularly utilised in oral contexts. Nevertheless, we hope that others will take this report as an invitation to consider discussing online reading further, in print, at conferences or online.

To draw this overly long post to a close, we would like to extend our thanks to three groups. Firstly, we are grateful for financial support from the CUCD Education Committee and the Classical Association, both of which offered funds to defray the costs of food and travel for the in-person attendees. Secondly, thanks are owed to the University of Lincoln for hosting the workshop. Thirdly and finally, we are in the debt of the contributors, whose presentations were invariably thought-provoking and engaging. Particular credit is due to Zoe, Melissa, and Joshua, who took time out of their studies to contribute to the first roundtable, got actively involved in discussions, and helped to organise the transcripts and recordings afterwards.