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**Learning The World As Well As The Story:  
Applying ‘Worldmaking’ to the study of Greek Literature.  
A case study with an examination class  
in a boys’ grammar school**

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**Abstract**

*This study investigates how a teacher might purposefully use historical context to enhance GCSE Classical Greek or Latin students’ first reading experience with classical literature in the original language. I argue that students’ observed tendencies to use whatever pre-existing knowledge they have to comprehend a new text makes it expedient for a teacher to carefully plan what contextual knowledge students should bring to the text. When given the chance to apply a Meaningful Historical Context to their reading, students in this study showed an improved ability to respond to the text’s content and explain how it fitted into its genre.*

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# **Learning The World As Well As The Story: Applying ‘Worldmaking’ to the study of Greek Literature. A case study with an examination class in a boys’ grammar school**

**William Christofi**

## **Introduction**

During the first two years of my teaching career, first as a teaching assistant at an independent school, then as a trainee teacher at both selective and non-selective state schools, I have become greatly interested in approaches to the teaching of original Latin and Greek literature for external examinations at GCSE (usually taken aged sixteen) and A-level (usually taken aged eighteen).

At GCSE, students are prepared for a literature paper based around the study of 110-120 lines of original Latin or Greek literature (‘the prescription’), taken from either one or multiple wider classical works. In the exam, students answer comprehension questions, translate a passage of the prescription into English, write short commentaries on the author’s use of language in set passages, and write a mini-essay evaluating the whole prescription.

My observations, discussions with teachers, and my reading of professional literature have revealed broad consensus that students find two general aspects of studying classical literature particularly challenging:

1. The language is more complex than anything students have read before.
2. The context of the ancient world can appear very alien to students.

At the start of my second school placement when training to teach, I focused in on the second of these issues as I began to teach the GCSE prose prescription – an extract from Lucian’s *True History* – to the Year 10 Greek set at a boys’ grammar school.

The *True History* is a fantastical, proto-science-fiction work which parodies the writing of history. Its plotline is a series of adventures experienced by a first-person narrator, divided into two halves,

or 'books'. The GCSE prescription is taken from early in the second book, where Lucian's narrator sails to the Isle of the Blest, a place of legend in Greek mythology where heroes went for the afterlife. The prescription is 117 lines of Greek in the anthology endorsed by the exam board OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA), with two self-contained halves occupying lines 1-53 and lines 54–117 respectively. The former is a geographical and ethnographical description of the Isle of the Blest. The latter is a narrative concerning the Greek poet Homer, who now resides on the Isle.

In our first lesson of the prose literature course, I introduced the students to the genre of parody, using a discussion of the many humorous reworkings of the album cover of the Beatles' *Abbey Road* to build a class understanding of how the genre works. As a homework task, I then asked the students to research the 'story so far' before the start of their prescription; they were to create a story board and explain how episodes from book one of the *True History* were examples of parody.

The students clearly understood that Lucian's parody involved unrealistic and absurd elements in his story, such as a war being fought between the human communities living inside a whale which has swallowed them. What their work was missing, however (despite demonstrating a suitable oral understanding of it in class), was an appreciation that parody works by exaggerating things which are based in reality - i.e. absurdity is not random (see Cambridge University Press, 2021, para.1). There were few comments on how Lucian manipulates cultural ideas which were of interest both then and now: stories about human encounters with mythical creatures; ideas about just how big some creatures might be (i.e. we know whales are big, but not this big...); ideas about the universality of war (i.e. even people who live in whales wage war against one another...). This missing context for the absurdity is a crucial half of what makes parody work as humour.

Without this context, it seems to follow that students are less likely to enjoy reading what is supposed to be a funny text. This is also problematic given that exam commentary questions regularly ask students to comment on how an author uses language to make a passage 'enjoyable' / 'humorous' / 'entertaining' / 'exciting'. Apparently, it cannot be taken for granted that this actually was their response to the text, thus problematising the current form of assessment.

It seems to go without saying, when studying literature in any language, that learning about a text's context might be a good idea (see, for instance, Barlow, 2009). But 'context' is a slippery term, with unclear application to GCSE Latin and Greek literature, and with few published strategies for teaching the context of classical literature; GCSE students are not examined on contextual knowledge.

So I decided to base my research on the concept of ‘context’ when teaching classical literature, investigating how to apply the concept of ‘worldmaking’ – the creation of a united system of cultural symbols to understand the world – to classroom practice (see below p.11). An overview of existing ideas about context in the teaching of classical literature, and discussion of some of these ideas’ problems, will be the focus of my literature review.

## Literature Review

### Context: its Purpose and Problems

OCR’s Specification for Greek GCSE has the aspirations of its literature components that they will enable students to:

“**develop their knowledge** and understanding of ancient literature, **values and society through the study of original texts**, adapted and abridged, as appropriate” ... [and] “select, analyse and evaluate evidence to **draw informed conclusions** from the literature studied to... **demonstrate knowledge** and understanding of the **historical, literary and cultural context** of a text”

(OCR, 2020, p.2, my emphasis).

OCR envisage that students will spend lessons reading and analysing the prescription. Out of this microscopic view into the ancient world will come generalisations about the “context” and the “values and society” of the civilisation which produced the text. On one hand, this is uncontroversial – how else would we learn anything historical without looking at primary evidence and then making generalisations about it? But it is interesting that OCR’s angle is to say that context, which they seem to take as a wider historical, cultural, and societal knowledge of the Greeks, comes *as a result of* studying the literature. When I think of my Year 10s missing the nuance of Lucian’s humour through suspected lack of context, I wonder whether there is a problem with viewing context exclusively *as the result of* reading.

This quirk is exemplified by Munday (2004), whose article about the published editions of classical literature which school students use is underpinned with an assumption that students must have some form of published commentary (p.19). Overall, Munday’s vision of ‘context’ resembles what I will call **factual contexts** – further information about things explicitly mentioned by the text (names, places, events). This information helps make a text internally coherent and fit onto a broader timeline. But Munday relies on GCSE students’ skilled use of commentaries and an unrealistic amount of time

spent outside the classroom reading that commentary – it is the sort of resource most relevant at undergraduate level and above, where the expectation is increasingly that the student will be able to engage with classical literature independently.

Intriguingly, however, Munday’s ideal edition also has room for “a brief introduction, containing only what the student *needs* to know *before* reading” (p.19, original emphasis), suggesting that some kind of contextual knowledge *before* reading may be important. But the vagueness of Munday’s phrase reflects my current experiences of observing the teaching of classical literature: few have addressed the questions of whether students should have some context prior to reading classical literature and, if so, what information they *need* to know to have the highest impact on their reading experience.

I will use the rest of my literature review to set out arguments in response to three questions which arise from these existing ideas about context and teaching classical literature:

1. Why should we teach context prior to reading classical literature?
2. What context do students *need* to know before reading?
3. How can context *meaningfully* be taught in the classroom?

The conclusions I reach from discussion of these three questions will provide the basis for my Research Questions.

### **Why Should we Teach Context *Prior to* Reading Classical Literature?**

#### *Piaget’s Equilibration and the Benefits of Encountering Context Before Reading*

We can use Piaget’s theory of knowledge to make the case that students should benefit from encountering context *prior to* reading of classical literature, as well as *during* and *after* reading. Piaget’s theory centres around his concept of “equilibration” – a dynamic experienced by a “knower” in their relationships with the (philosophical) “objects” they observe in the world. By this theory, we construct new knowledge either by “assimilating” new objects into “schemata” and knowledge which we already have; or, if the object clashes with what we think we currently know about how the world works, by “accommodating” our existing schemata, developing new strands of understanding to incorporate the new stimulus, and accounting for its existence in our world view (as

cited in Furth, 1985, p.107-108). If we accept this, I would argue that we can understand our existing knowledge and schemata as a form of context, since it is knowledge which enhances the knower's experience with a new object. Furthermore, this contextual knowledge is, in a sense, *prior* to encountering the object; it is pre-existing in the knower, who brings it with them to their encounter with the new object.

It seems to follow that a student's reading encounter with classical literature can be enhanced, if they bring to the text a relevant context comprising features of the world which the text references, which they encountered prior to reading. The next section will test this Piagetian idea by looking at examples of classical literature being taught with methods which appear to utilise **factual contexts**.

### *Factual contexts in the teaching of classical literature*

Bragg (2016), when teaching Petronius' *Dinner with Trimalchio* for A-level Classical Civilisation (the prescriptions for Classical Civilisation are longer than those of Latin / Greek, and are studied in English translation), reports that students struggled to understand the content: why Trimalchio gives disguised foods to his dinner guests; or why freedmen like Trimalchio might have flaunted their wealth so willingly etc. (p.40). Bragg's strategy for overcoming these difficulties includes providing students with "a concise overview of the dinner aimed at the average layperson ... backgrounds on the key characters, a list of the twelve courses [of the dinner] as well as the key conversations and incidents" (p.41-42) at the beginning of the course, so that students build up their context by using a reference resource. By covering all this material in one lesson at the start of the course, students have encountered the whole narrative before reading it section-by-section. Bragg equips his students with a **factual context** prior to reading, one comparable to the information one might find in a published commentary (as per Munday, 2004). This context is concerned with particulars of the world which an author explicitly references during the course of a narrative and with the contents of the whole story. The shape of the whole text and specific facts are important in enabling students to access a text.

One drawback of this approach is that, though the teacher has a role in guiding students through this material and addressing misconceptions, students need to digest a lot of information quickly. Moran (2017) exemplifies this problem by proposing an alternative definition of 'context' for OCR's reformed A-levels. Since Moran's definition encompasses "the circumstances (literary, historical, social, cultural, political, geographical, as appropriate) that influenced the composition and character

of the text, and their bearing on the candidate’s understanding and appreciation of the text” (p.70), it theoretically spans a massive array of knowledge, and has potential for vagueness – what are the boundaries between ‘historical’, ‘cultural’ and ‘political’ circumstances?

To challenge the idea that students study context by simply digesting enormous amounts of scarcely relevant information, I will next discuss what context students *need* to know before reading a classical text.

### **What Context do Students *Need* to Know Before Reading?**

#### *Computer games and ‘thinking space’ contexts*

Jones (2016) highlights that a teacher of Classical Civilisation may encounter ideas about the ancient world which students have picked up from computer games. Her reflection on a student’s description of Achilles as a “demi-god” or Athena’s *aegis* as a “force-field” is “it’s a different view, but it’s inappropriate terminology” (p.24), which therefore treats these comments as student misconceptions; classicists would say Achilles is *semi-divine*. These misconceptions raise important questions about how players of historical-based strategy games build secure knowledge of the world of the game – knowledge which in these cases has misleadingly entered the classroom.

Squire (2012) has used the activities of an online community of players of *Civilization III (CivIII)* – a turn-based 4X game – strategy games where players need to “explore, expand, explore and exterminate” to gain control of the map (‘4X’, 2022) – to describe how gamers construct concepts and terminology to interpret the mechanics and scenarios of gameplay. In his study of *CivIII*’s, ‘Apolyton University’ online community, he compares their concepts of ‘culture flipping’ and ‘Eternal China Syndrome’ to note how even casual players will quickly accumulate knowledge of essential concepts of the game, whilst some concepts will only be learnt by the most expert players (p.19-20). Computer games require players to build up an overall understanding to make sense of the individual pieces of information which their game worlds present. This understanding, and its associated language, gives the player a framework to take into their next game, equipping them with tools to interpret and respond to the scenarios which a new game will put before them.

We can take this argument back to our discussion of Piaget, as it seems a better match to his thinking to say that Piaget’s *schemata* describe not merely discrete pieces of factual information, but also the

thinking and understanding which links different pieces of information together. The more that we characterise our schemata in terms of a framework of understanding between pieces of information, the more we are creating contexts which I shall call **thinking space contexts**. Unlike a **factual context**, a thinking space context is quite personal, as the schemata each person is building up to make sense of new information will differ depending on their prior experiences.

To be clear, this is not to say that students do not need to digest factual information in order to construct a thinking space context. Rather, they will build up factual knowledge through experiencing the game as a precursor to forging links between pieces of information. All factual contexts will also be, to an extent, thinking space contexts, and vice versa, as there is always an interplay between acquiring information and linking it together. The distinction I am drawing between **factual** and **thinking space** contexts describes the difference in *emphasis* and *aim* – be it either to acquire and digest information, or to create meaning which links information together.

In this vein, we might suppose that Piaget's response to Jones' students describing Achilles as a *demi-god* would be to challenge them to *accommodate* their existing schemata from the game world into a more historically justifiable form *vis-à-vis* the classical world (i.e. learning how to distinguish between a *demi-god* in modern popular culture and *semi-divine* in classical times). Used this way, the game is a legitimate step on the way to more justifiable knowledge claims about the classical world. The next section will argue that thinking space contexts are used in the classroom to pre-load students with contextual understanding to be used to make sense of the (factual) content of curricula.

### *Thinking space contexts applied to classroom learning*

Some teachers have used computer games as thinking space contexts to promote learning in the Social Studies classroom. For example, by capitalising on the in-game mechanics of *Age of Empires II* – an historical real-time strategy game – to inform students' understanding of concepts such as trade, the politics of war, cross-cultural differences, and international diplomacy, Maguth et al. (2015) sought to give students something concrete to apply and compare with the content of their curriculum (p.34-35). The point is **not** that a student learns about trade by doing it in *Age of Empires* – there are manifold problems with giving the mechanics of a computer game authority as a simulation of real-world dynamics, when its developers are balancing realism with playability. Rather, it is that the player's relationship with the game world is creating an understanding which they apply to their thinking about the physical world **by comparing** the two. Similarly, in the History classroom,



Wineburg (2012) argues that a thinking space context is actively constructed by the student, presumably facilitated by the teacher, but not “downloaded” in a pre-determined form and shape from the teacher’s own knowledge (p.21).

We have now established the concept of a **thinking space context** as an alternative to a **factual context** and seen an example of how a thinking space context built from a computer game has been used in the classroom. The next section will return to the teaching of classical literature, reviewing professional literature for strategies which I will argue illustrate use of thinking space contexts prior to reading to enhance students’ reading experience.

### *Thinking space contexts in the teaching of classical literature*

Cresswell, who was teaching a selection of Catullus’ poems for GCSE, sought to pull students away from an idea of studying poetry as a translation exercise, instead seeking enjoyment and personal response (Cresswell, 2012, p.12). She did so by asking students to produce a written piece, adopting a modern persona in communication with Catullus, such as his hypothetical psychiatrist. Her report that students felt able to “get a better ‘historical’ perspective on the poem” and “consider its contemporary reception” (p.12) invites an interpretation of these personae as contexts; the mind-set of a psychiatrist can be a thinking space to focus reading of Catullus. Although this particular persona is a modern character, the payoff is the chance students get of “engaging ... with authentic voices from the Roman world” (p.13) using methods which are relevant and meaningful to them. There is much similarity here with Rushton (2018), whose work on the Cupid and Psyche story with students, who interpreted it using the thinking space of modern popular music and drama, stresses her priority for students to develop their own personal response to literature for psychological and emotional benefit (p.123 ff.). In both these studies, the thinking space contexts already exist in the students’ minds and simply require activation with an appropriate prompt from the teacher prior to reading.

Thinking space contexts do not need to be modern to enable students to develop a personal response to classical literature. Forde (2019) used reading and discussion of classical reception texts to serve as thinking space contexts for A-level Classical Civilisation students studying the *Odyssey*. He observed that the reading and discussion of post-classical poetry such as Tennyson’s *Ulysses* interacted with students’ existing impressions of characters in such a way that they felt prompted to go back into the *Odyssey* to evaluate and measure Homer’s characters in light of the way they had

been presented by reception authors (p.18-20). Likewise Scott and Hunt (2013), when teaching Nero's attempts to kill Agrippina in Tacitus' *Annals*, used the Julio-Claudian family tree prior to reading, asking students "to explore the family relationships [of the Roman imperial family], drawing particular attention to the marriages of Claudius, his own children and stepson" (p.71). In both these studies, the authors helped students to construct thinking space contexts from scratch – the former a reception context, the latter an historical context.

These teachers all drew on Reader Response Theory (see Rosenblatt, 1978; Selden, 1989) as the key principle underlying their teaching. A reader-response is focused not only on identifying what the author's intention is with their craft, but also sees a text as incomplete without the reader bringing their understanding to it to "re-creat[e]" the text and thus create meaning (Hirvela, 1996, p.129). A thinking space context which students activate and construct for themselves is a key tool needed for them to be able to interpret and respond to a piece of literature for themselves. We should note that the categories which make up the thinking space in the Nero classroom (the strands of a family tree) are still *modern constructs*. So what do we do in texts where modern categories cannot obviously be evoked to help put a framework of understanding on the text?

#### *The case for a combining factual and thinking space contexts*

The arguments for studying literature with a view to enabling individual reader-response are compelling. That said, one response I have to the studies cited above would be to ask to what extent we should, when studying literature in the Latin or Greek classroom, maintain an end-goal of learning about the people and civilisations which originally consumed this literature. In particular, how might Greek or Roman audiences have responded to it, who had different experiences of the world to those that we have?

One important consideration here is the genre and type of text which is being studied. It is certainly justifiable to use abstract, psychological or reception texts as thinking space contexts when studying love poetry, epic and myth; the thoughts, feelings and psyche of the individuals are being put under close examination. In prose texts, particularly historiography and a satirical text like Lucian's *True History*, the physical world which surrounds the characters can be much more important in influencing the story. My instinct is that, in these genres, it might be more beneficial to equip students with a thinking space to approach the text which also has a basis in the historical reality of the world known by the author and their audience, thus also making their study of Greek literature part of an

education in the civilisation who used it. My question is whether this historical knowledge of the Greco-Roman world can be harnessed as a way to enhance reader response for GCSE students – the very kind of personal and meaningful outcomes which were advocating in their studies. The next section will argue how teaching might be designed to achieve this outcome.

### **How can Context Meaningfully be Taught in the Classroom?**

#### *Worldmaking – constructing thinking systems of out of historical symbols*

There is a sub-field in cognitive science known as ‘worldmaking’. The term was coined in the 1970s by American philosopher Nelson Goodman. Goodman’s worldmaking was a constructivist epistemology whereby the human mind “actively constructs patterns and versions rather than merely representing them” (Nünning & Nünning, 2010, p.8) in response to new stimuli of the experienced world, the result being a system of symbols to understand the world. Nothing, in other words, has an objective meaning in and of itself. How it is understood depends entirely on how it interacts with the world system of each person who experiences it.

Worldmaking has also been used in literary criticism to analyse fiction. Wolf (2012) has contested that “often when a world is noticed at all, it is only considered as a background for stories set in it, rather than a subject of study in itself” (p.2), which sets up his own argument that the ‘world’ of a work of fiction can exist as a separate object of study to the stories which take place in them (p.11). One central author in the development of this thinking is Tolkien, who spoke of his Middle Earth as being a ‘Secondary World’ which he had ‘subcreated’ beneath the ‘Primary World’ which we inhabit (for ‘subcreation’, see Tolkien, 2012). Primary Worlds provide source material and familiarity needed to relate to the author’s characters and their emotions; these default assumptions are carried between worlds. The Secondary World presents “new combinations of existing concepts [-] ... the inventions that replace or reset Primary World defaults (for example, new flora and fauna, new languages, new geography)” (Wolf, 2012, p.28), thus separating it from the Primary World. Worldmaking theory opens up the possibility of using a world, in the form of its assumptions, logic, and ‘cultural baggage’, as the thinking space context for students to construct prior to reading classical literature like Lucian’s *True History*. In addition, worldmaking’s focus on the specific symbols of the world gives the opportunity, in a classroom context, to use the explicit content of the text as the source of symbols.

Context learning would thus be tightly focused on enhancing understanding of the prescription, rather than on simply providing general background information.

### *Meaningful Historical Context*

From this review, I tentatively created three principles which I wanted to follow in my use of context when preparing my Year 10 Greek students for reading original Greek literature. First, students would construct a context because they would create a thinking space comprising a cognitive framework to bring to the text for themselves. Second, the context would be historical, because the thinking space would aim to reconstruct historically justifiable assumptions and knowledges of the text's ancient audience (though naturally limited, given the age and level of the students). Finally, the context would be meaningful because, aided by a worldmaking strategy, it would specifically target the cultural symbols explicitly evoked in the language of the text, rather than providing general historical background not relevant to the text's meaning. Put together, I wanted to create a study which would use worldmaking to help students construct a *Meaningful Historical Context* (MHC) for their prescription of Lucian's *True History*.

### **Research Questions**

From this discussion of context, which covers both how students might assimilate new information about the ancient world into their minds and how this might be influenced with targeted context building, I came up with two research questions (RQs) for my project to focus on:

RQ1. What kinds of responses do GCSE students have when encountering original Greek literature for the first time?

RQ2. Can students' ability to perceive how Greek authors use language to shape meaning be influenced by prior construction of a meaningful historical context for the literature they are studying?

I shall outline now how I designed my research to answer these questions.

### **Research Design**

I decided to adopt a mixed methodology, combining aspects of Case Study and Action Research.

### **Aspects of Case Study**

My approach drew on aspects of a Case Study firstly as I decided to make it a detailed study, within a particular context, of a general teaching and learning phenomenon (Denscombe, 2017, p.56) – namely, ongoing student thinking and developing response to original Greek literature during their first encounter with it. Secondly, I intended to look at the processes involved in the results in order to contribute to development of theory (Denscombe, 2017, p.61-63). By collecting a variety of different data, taken at different points in the study (Denscombe, 2017, p.58), which examined why students think about studying literature in the way they do, and how planned teaching of a Meaningful Historical Context might influence the way they think about and respond to literature, I hoped to develop theory concerning the teaching of classical literature at its introductory phases.

### **Aspects of Action Research**

On the other hand, this study was to be a critical and reflective focus on my own practice (Denscombe, 2017, p.128). I aimed to scrutinise my use of visual and written sources as a prompt for student discussion, as well as my questioning strategies to stage open and creative whole-class discussions.

I also wanted to explore how my own strengths in Classics could be suitably brought into my teaching; as a trainee with a postgraduate background in Roman social history, I wanted to see how the ‘context problem’ might be approached by developing an historical thinking space context for examining the author’s use of language to shape meaning. In this vein, I did not intend to discover universal truth about teaching; the way a teacher might go about introducing and contextualising classical literature can and should vary according to author and genre. Some strategies will resonate with different groups of students more. Some strategies will draw better on teachers’ own interests and skills.

Thirdly, I decided to trial a teaching approach (Denscombe, 2017, p.129). I planned to adopt worldmaking as a strategy to construct a Meaningful Historical Context, prior to literary analysis of two successive sections of the prescription. I hoped that evaluating my strategies to create an MHC would serve as a basis for further examination of my teaching.

### **Designing the Study**

I needed to give space and time to ontological considerations in the planning stage of my study to get control over the nature of the thing I was investigating and the kind of knowledge I was seeking to

create about it (Taber, 2013, p.72). A key part, therefore, of my research has been developing my understanding of the term ‘context’ and considering how this understanding might affect the teaching of classical literature: what context is most impactful in the classroom? What strategies could I adopt to help students construct this context? As a result, I developed the term ‘Meaningful Historical Context’ in the literature review as a focal point of my study and my lesson planning.

I chose the Year 10 Greek set for my study as this would be their very first encounter with an original classical text, thus potentially offering more informative data in response to my first research question. In addition, Lucian’s *True History*, with its bold and bizarre parody of expectations of reality – material, cultural, historiographical – seemed an opportune text with which to test my ideas about context as a thinking space. The Year 10 Greek set had 14 students, all high attaining and projected to go on to achieve grade 7, 8 or 9 at GCSE.

### **Scheduling and Ethics**

I adopted a conventional teaching strategy of first translating a chunk of the prescribed text into English, then switching to literary analysis to ‘catch up’ to the point the class has translated to. We would complete translation of lines 1-39 of the prescription before the start of my research lesson sequence. Lines 1-39 are split into three sections: 1) A description of the Isle of the Blest’s city – lines 1-11; 2) A description of the isle’s inhabitants – lines 12- 20; 3) A description of the isle’s climate and productivity – lines 21-39. The lesson sequence would cover the literary analysis of the first two sections. During the penultimate lesson of the translation sequence, I informed the students that I would be researching the ways that GCSE Greek literature is taught, and that this research would start with a questionnaire at the end of the final translation lesson and run through the first two weeks of work on literary analysis.

I took steps to conduct my research in line with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018)’s ethical guidelines for education research. Since all of my data collection took place in scheduled lesson and homework time, I sought permission from the regular class teacher, as the gatekeeper (p.10), to use this class for my data collection. I have removed student names when presenting data to protect participant’s privacy (p.21). I completed the Faculty Ethics Checklist with my lecturer to align my proposed research with BERA guidelines.

## Data Collection

A summary of the data I chose to collect to answer my research questions and how I chose to analyse my data is given in Table 1.

| Research Question   | Data                       | Data Analysis Questions   |
|---|----------------------------|---|
| RQ1. What kinds of responses do students have when encountering original Greek literature for the first time?   | Questionnaire (Appendix 1) | What knowledge did students use in order to explain how Lucian's humour works, prior to any worldmaking activities?   |
| RQ2. Can students' ability to perceive how Greek authors use language to shape meaning be influenced by prior construction of a MHC for the literature they are studying? | Lesson Observations        | What interpretations of the text could students come up with when prompted to apply the MHC to the details of the text?   |
|   | Homework task (Appendix 2) | What uses of the MHC did students make in supporting their comments about content and style?<br>Has use of the MHC enabled students to make authentic reader-responses to the text? |

**Table 1: Research questions and data collection**

As can be seen in the table, I decided what data I could manageably collect in the agreed timescale, and which question they would help to answer. In turn, I devised analysis questions with which to scrutinise my data, with the answers to these providing the information needed to answer my initial Research Questions. I report back on findings of the analysis questions in sequence in the 'Findings' section later.

## Lesson Sequence

My lesson sequence occupied four 55-minute lessons. This was long enough to do a worldmaking activity followed by literary analysis for each of the first two sections of the prescription.

### Lesson 1: Worldmaking 1 – Lucian's world; start literary analysis of Section 1

The worldmaking activity took the form of the students responding to some historical source materials and an ensuing discussion. I showed them two sources aimed at exploring Lucian's choice of materials for his fantastical city (Appendix 3). Source A was a map of the Roman empire in Lucian's day, created using the online resource ORBIS (<https://orbis.stanford.edu/>). It shows terrestrial and maritime trade routes, to which I added my own annotations indicating the origins of materials

mentioned by Lucian. Source B was a set of images depicting Roman imperial-period intaglio rings, inlaid with gemstones used by Lucian as building materials.

I asked students questions about where the materials came from, how they got to major cities in the Greco-Roman world, and how they would more normally have been experienced in the lives of Lucian's audience. The objective was for them to form knowledge of the international nature of Greco-Roman cities, of the connectivity between Greco-Roman cities, and of the functions of rare materials in ancient life.

### **Lesson 2: finish literary analysis of Section 1**

The literary analysis activities varied between students working through the text in pairs before discussing as a class, and working through the text as a class, with directed questions about the literary style from me.

### **Lesson 3: Worldmaking 2 – the body and the soul; start literary analysis of Section 2**

The class studied two sources to explore the ancient distinction between the 'body' and the 'soul' (Appendix 4), which is central to Lucian's presentation of the isle's inhabitants. Source A was an image of the 'Apollo Sauroctonos' (*Apollo the lizard-killer*) statue. Source B was an extract from Plato's *Phaedo*. In this dialogue, the eponymous narrator retells the final hours of Socrates' life before being forced by the Athenian state to take hemlock. The dialogue sets out Socrates and/or Plato's arguments that the body is perishable, the soul immortal, and that, on death, the soul escapes from imprisonment within the body.

I asked students about how the ancient Greeks thought about and represented the human body, what Lucian's audience thought the soul was, and what its relationship with its body might be like.

### **Lesson 4: finish literary analysis of Section 2; set writing task**

The writing task I set students for homework asked students to consider how Lucian drew on the knowledge and ideas of his day to craft his picture of the Isle of the Blest and provide entertainment. I gave the students a paragraph structure to follow (Appendix 2).



## **Design Decisions**

The design of my worldmaking ‘curriculum’ drew on Hill (2020), whose work describes his adoption of worldmaking as a strategy in the History classroom, and Taylor (2011), whose study showed many similarities in thought when outlining approaches to constructing and developing students’ understanding of life in a distant land in the Geography classroom. My decision to hold prior discussion of historical sources before commencing literary analysis drew on Hill’s idea that a teacher has the ability to influence the developing “mental representation” of the past world (Hill, 2020, p.11), as imagined by each individual student through exposure to and discussion of stimuli from that world.

My selection of the particular sources for the worldmaking discussions was led by the principle that worldmaking works by creating an interrelated system of symbols. I sought to implement this by focusing on the notable cultural symbols and images explicitly mentioned in the text (emerald, amethyst, body, soul etc.) and providing sources which enabled students to develop their thinking about these symbols and their ‘cultural baggage’. In this way, I tried to make sure that my stimuli were “selected with purposes and connected in meaningful ways” with the text (Hill, 2020, p.12) so that the context I wanted students to have was not extraneous to the text (i.e. Lucian’s life and general background, who was emperor at the time etc.). My use of both large-scale maps and small, single objects like rings and statues were aimed at taking both ‘inside-out’ and ‘outside-in’ approaches to worldmaking.

## **Findings**

### **RQ1: What kinds of responses do students have when encountering original Greek literature for the first time?**

The questionnaire, taken before the worldmaking lesson sequence, suggested that the students had struggled to come up with individual or personal ideas about the text. For the question asking students to explain to a friend how Lucian’s humour worked, one type of knowledge which students used to explain Lucian’s humour was general concepts which they had been taught in class, without giving indication of personal reflection on particular details of the text. One student said that Lucian was:

*“making fun of other so-called ‘Historians’ who report fantastical adventures and mythical creatures while claiming to be telling the truth.”*

The details of this comment closely replicate content of an earlier lesson where I introduced, in general terms, the genre of parody to the students, and how Lucian operates in his *True History*. The student declines the opportunity to explain how these ideas fit in with any details they have read in the text. The one personal and authentic detail in this comment is their use of “so-called”, which appears to indicate the student’s agreement with Lucian that Greek historians were incompetent liars. It is unlikely, even in a boys’ grammar school, that Year 10 students will have read any Greek historians, making it improbable that this an informed opinion about Greek historians. There is of course no expectation that they should have an informed opinion. The point is rather that the student was not only reliant on content explicitly taught in order to explain Lucian’s humour, but also expressed a degree of comfort and security in simply accepting the authority of teacher-led content.

When students encountered a bizarre text, a second source of knowledge to which they referred to explain Lucian’s humour was other modern concepts, even if they were misleading when applied to ancient literature. Students were sharp in picking up on content in the text which clearly clashed with their perception of reality. Numerous questionnaire responses stressed the role of implausibility in Lucian’s humour:

*“Ridiculous / unrealistic / absurd”;*

*“ridiculous materials used”;*

*“structures built out of ridiculous materials”;*

*“a very unrealistic place”.*

These comments are perfectly acceptable interpretations; with its emerald walls and amethyst altars, the city *is* both ridiculous and unrealistic. Given, however, the students’ ability to identify Lucian’s *True History* as a *parody*, and their understanding of how this genre works to create humour (see above p.3), it is nevertheless notable that they showed comfort with discussing one aspect of parody – exaggeration – but refrained from discussing the other, equally important aspect – manipulation of reality. They could see that city-walls made of emerald is a weird idea. But there was an absence of explanations which could apply an understanding of parody to this content and say how it is a manipulation of something *based in reality*. The answers to this question indicated the same pattern as the background homework task I had set on parody, with which I started this paper.

Overall, the questionnaire data suggested that, during their earliest encounters with classical literature, students' responses were defined and limited by whatever prior knowledge they had which they could most easily apply to the text in front of them. Whether it be content which was directly comparable to their sense of reality or content of which they had been given knowledge in lessons, students tried to apply what knowledge they had to build their understanding of the text, corresponding with Piaget's theory of knowledge (see above p.5-6). When their knowledge started to mislead them – such as their sense of the ridiculous obstructing their reading of the text as a parody – the students appeared to meet a dead end in any attempt to come to a more nuanced and personal interpretation of the text.

**RQ2: Can students' ability to perceive how Greek authors use language to shape meaning be influenced by prior construction of a Meaningful Historical Context for the literature they are studying?**

During the lesson sequence, opportunities arose for me to prompt students to interpret otherwise inconspicuous pieces of text in light of knowledge of the MHC constructed in discussions. For example, Lucian's description of the city's "seven gates" (πύλαι ... ἑπτὰ), on its own, looks difficult for students to comment on (OCR encourages candidates to analyse the choice, sound, and position of words) - I chose not to share with students that this an allusion to the tragic playwright Aeschylus' play *Seven Against Thebes*, as I felt this would prioritise the very kind of factual context I wished to avoid. But when related to our discussion about luxury materials travelling by road along trade routes from all over the world, one student was able to interpret the *symbol* of the gates using a narrative about the busyness and prosperity of the city, if it needed seven points of entry and exit for tradespeople. Likewise, following questions from me, one student used our prior discussion of the nude statue of Apollo Sauroctonos to comment on Lucian's description of the "souls" (ψυχαι) of the bodiless inhabitants wandering around "naked" (γυμνη); they made the point that Lucian is describing a *bodiless* soul using vocabulary which, to an ancient Greek, ironically evokes the *bodily* nudity of the statues they saw in public places. This helped them to argue that Lucian was mocking the Socratic idea that death released the soul from imprisonment in the body, since Lucian's souls were still, in the student's words, "hanging on" to their bodies.

The homework revealed varying levels of precision in students use of the MHC in supporting their discussion of Lucian's language. On one hand, some data suggested that students had a

strong tendency first to latch onto stylistic features which have a clear visual presence on the page, without contextualising this style point within the content of the Greek or mentioning the MHC. When commenting on the inhabitants of the isle, one student said that Lucian:

*“uses many linguistic devices, perhaps the most obvious of these would be the repetition of ‘καί’, which means ‘and’, whilst describing the actions they can perform he repeats this word three times in close succession.”*

As well as repeating themselves during this comment, this student also gave greater priority to the repeated conjunction “καί”, which has visual prominence on the page, than to the words which the conjunctions join together – the actual content of the text (which describes the inhabitants’ movements and sounds). Students’ understandable tendency to stay in their comfort zone appears to be an obstacle to producing convincing arguments.

Interestingly, the homework answers which showed the most coherence tended to use the MHC most effectively as a way to express their response to the *content*, rather than the *style*. One student wrote that Lucian:

*“shows the extreme and odd materials that the Isle of the Blest uses. Here, crystal and cinnamon are used because these would have been very rare, but commonly known about at this time period, because of traders frequently selling things which use these materials for high prices as they travelled through people's villages”.*

Here the student begins to go beyond talking about the materials simply as “absurd” by showing understanding that Lucian’s materials were not thought of as random, fantasy materials. The materials *were* used in the ancient world, but in different contexts to city-building (a continuity with Tolkien’s concept of Subcreation – see above p.11). By recognising the element of reality latent in the text, the student’s implicitly demonstrates understanding of how Lucian uses parody, providing them with a firmer basis for enjoying and interpreting the text. Following comments like this, students were then more able to write about how the language contributed to an interpretation which they already had in place, thanks in part to the MHC. Such understanding of choice of materials gives weight to stylistic comments like:

*“Lucian saves the unrealistic material description until the end of the sentence, creating a sense of **suspense** within the reader, not being able to anticipate the upcoming surprise” [my emphasis].*

By discussing the content first, with reference to the MHC, the student has a better sense of what there is ‘suspense’ *about* in the first place for a member of Lucian’s audience, thus making Lucian’s word-order in this section more meaningful, memorable and worth analysing.

One comment, from a very high-attaining student, showed application of the MHC to ask further questions for themselves about the text and their response to it. When discussing the isle’s inhabitants, the student wrote:

*“this description could be entertaining to a Greek reader because the bodiless nature of the inhabitants seems to contradict the multitude of actions which they can perform such as swimming, gathering and speaking, resulting in a reality impossible to comprehend; perhaps Lucian is in fact mocking the idea that our souls are immortal by showing in an entertaining way the ridiculous and impractical notion of what not having a body would be like.”*

Here, the student has applied the MHC knowledge (that the soul is released from the body on death) to the content of the text (the inhabitants’ souls are nominally bodiless but still have a form) to test whether Lucian himself agreed with a philosophical argument. Their final suggestion reads as a personal and nuanced interpretation of the text and its creation of humour.

Overall, and contrary to my expectations, my analysis of student responses in lessons and their written homework responses has given me the tentative conclusion that prior construction of an MHC can more usefully be applied to understanding the *content* of a text, rather than coupling it up with *style* points. Once students in this class were comfortable with what the ‘joke’ was in any part of the text – a knowledge claim about its content – they were more capable of making compelling style points. The role that the MHC most powerfully played was giving students a basis for figuring out how the features of Lucian’s *True History* were examples of parody.

## **Limitations**

Owing to the limited scope of my study, and the size and context of the class I taught, my findings and conclusions are necessarily tentative. In addition, there are a number of other factors to consider, which may have influenced the data I collected. Firstly, there are potential design issues with my questionnaire, which required students to find something ‘most’ and ‘least’ enjoyable about the text. This assumes that ‘enjoyable’ or ‘not enjoyable’ are the default basic categories which students might try to fit their reading of the text into.

Secondly, as a trainee teacher at the time, my first attempts at worldmaking were necessarily experimental. For instance, when questioning, I could have been clearer whether I wanted students to make particular points about the sources, or if my questions were inviting open, creative thinking from them. When designing my worldmaking activities, I also hoped to build into the discussions a process of activating students' existing categories of knowledge, into which relevant symbols fitted, then gradually encouraging them to engage with the new information and construct new, historical, categories into which to fit the symbols (as set out in Taylor, 2011, p.1045-1049). An opportunity to try this might have been the discussion about the body and the soul; it may have helped to ask students what their existing opinions were about the distinction (if any) between body and soul, as a springboard into constructing the distinction in Greek thinking.

I gave the students a paragraph structure for the writing task, showing them where they were required to talk about contextual knowledge. It is therefore possible that this task was more informative of how they write than how they think, testing if they were able to use the context to add coherence to other ideas they were already going to be writing about.

## Conclusions

After analysing my data, I was able to draw some tentative conclusions about student thinking when first encountering classical literature, and about the value of worldmaking as an approach to bring to teaching.

Firstly, in keeping with Piaget's theory of equilibration in the acquisition of knowledge, it looks like students will try to use existing knowledge (wherever it may come from) as a thinking space to understand and respond to ancient literature. Given the vast gap in everyday knowledges and assumptions between Lucian's contemporaries and students in the 21st century, the Piagetian knowledge to which students *assimilate* classical texts, or which they *accommodate* to the texts, has the potential to be misleading or unhelpful, which places a limit on the extent to which they are able to have an enjoyable reading experience. Early identification, on the teacher's part, of what knowledge will have the highest impact on students' ability to engage with the text (in the limited curriculum time available), therefore seems crucial. The context which will be most meaningful is likely to vary according to author and genre. A target for my two years as an ECT (Early Career

Teacher) would be to build on this work by challenging myself to seek and construct contexts which are tightly linked to the words and symbols evoked in the words of the texts themselves.

Secondly, my study seems to suggest that students find context most helpful to think with as a tool for dissecting the content of a text, rather than as a direct means to spotting style points better – the focus of my original research question. This is an interesting point to take into my ECT years as it raises the prospect for further thought and research into students’ thought-processes when studying and writing about ancient literature. Many students, possibly as a result of being bombarded with long lists of stylistic terminology, often end up homing in excessively on stylistic features in their writing, at the expense of writing about the content, which is actually what makes the author’s style worth analysing in the first place. My study into the use of context prior to reading has suggested that encouraging students to attack a text with contextual understanding could have some benefit in foregrounding interpretation of the *content* in students’ minds, before going for the alliteration or polysyndeton (use of multiple conjunctions) etc. This could be a steppingstone to improving their writing. To achieve this, I will need to refine my techniques for worldmaking activities by reflecting on how to structure contextual discussions, on precisely what kind of knowledge students need to know before reading, and on how to empower students to construct this knowledge for themselves.

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## Appendix 1

### Questionnaire given to students prior to Lesson Sequence

#### Lucian Questionnaire.

A) Which section of the text we have covered have you **most enjoyed** reading?

Underline 1 option:

1) The city and its materials      2) The bodiless inhabitants 3) The Isle's climate and crops

B) Please write **1 sentence** to explain your choice (what *in particular* have you enjoyed, and why?):

C) Which section of the text have you found **least enjoyable** OR **hardest to understand** OR **most confusing**? Underline 1 option.

1) The city and its materials      2) The bodiless inhabitants 3) The Isle's climate and crops

D) Please write **1 sentence** to explain your choice (what *in particular* have you not enjoyed as much / found harder / been confused by, and why?):

E) If a friend (who doesn't study Greek) asked you about your Lucian text, **how** would you **explain** to them **the humour** of Lucian's *True History*? (Write **no more than 3 sentences**).

(optional)

F) If you could ask Lucian 1 question about any aspect of what you have read thus far, what would it be?

## Appendix 2

**Homework question set to students following lesson sequence.**

**How does Lucian's craft in lines 1-20 draw on the ideas and knowledge of his day?  
You should refer to the style.**

**Paragraph structure:**

1. **Identify** a feature of the Isle of the Blessed / its inhabitants, **quote** it (in Greek), and **translate** the quote.
2. Explain how this feature **draws on contextual knowledge** to create entertainment.
3. Explain how the style of your quotation (choice / sound / position of words) emphasises this affect.

**You should write 3 paragraphs. You must have at least 1 paragraph for lines 1-11, and at least 1 paragraph for lines 12-20.**

**You may complete the task on your Class Notebook, in Word, or on paper.**

**Due date: Monday 19<sup>th</sup> April.**

## **Appendix 3**

### **Lesson materials for Worldmaking 1**

#### **Why did Lucian choose the materials he does for his city?**

**How might Lucian's audience have known about / had access to the materials he creates his city with?**

[Image removed to protect copyright]

**What might have been L's audience's experience of gemstones in everyday life?**

[Images removed to protect copyright]

## Appendix 4

### Lesson Materials for Worldmaking 2

#### **What can Sources A and B tell us about Greek ideas about the ‘body’ and ‘soul’?**

##### **SOURCE A.**

*A statue of the Greek god Apollo, leaning against a tree and watching a lizard.*

When studying this source, consider some of the following points:

- What looks real / unreal / familiar / odd?
- What does the appearance of the body tell us about Apollo?
- What movements might this statue be capturing?
- What thoughts might Apollo be having?

[Image removed to protect copyright]

##### **SOURCE B.**

*An extract from a dialogue written by the Athenian philosopher Plato. In it, Plato’s teacher Socrates argues that the soul (ψυχή) is immortal and continues to exist once separated from a dead body (σώμα) it previously possessed.*

[translation removed to protect copyright]