Adult Education at the Oriental Institute in the Twenty-First Century

Foy Scalf
Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, scalffd@uchicago.edu

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Abstract

For over fifty years, the Oriental Institute Adult Education program has taught outside of the traditional academic framework as exemplified by the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. The classes of this program were converted to hybrid availability in 2015. The primary motivation for these expansions was to increase access to, and expand the audience for, the offerings within the program. In doing so, we have found a very motivated audience of global learners hungry for serious engagement with historical, linguistic, and anthropological issues. Although our experience has been punctuated largely by success, several challenges will require continual attention as we develop a more inclusive online environment.

The Oriental Institute (OI) of the University of Chicago was founded in 1919 by visionary scholar James Henry Breasted as an interdisciplinary research laboratory for the study of the ancient Middle East (Abt 2011; Breasted 1933; van den Hout 2019), as broadly conceived within an ever-shifting set of geographical, temporal, and methodological boundaries that remain under academic scrutiny today (Colla 2007; Lockman 2004 and 2016; Reid 2002 and 2015; Said 1978; Schneider 2018). Although the institute had a public museum component from the beginning, first in Haskell Hall and then in its current building constructed in 1930, there was relatively little focus on public education during the first half century of its existence. Breasted wrote popular books (Breasted 1905 and 1916) and participated in a rather relentless public lecturing schedule to supplement his meager university salary, while the institute held lectures and programs. A formalized education program looking beyond the academic tower was first created in 1966 when a volunteer and docent program was established to encourage and increase access to information about the ancient Middle East (Friedman et al. 2019). For over fifty years, the Oriental Institute Adult Education program has taught outside of the "traditional" academic framework as exemplified by the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago (for details, see yearly entries in the *Oriental Institute Annual Report*). The following discussion represents a personal view from a single instructor of the history, goals, and methodology of teaching within this program over the last ten years, focusing on a collaborative effort to expand it into the domain of online teaching. As a perspective of one, it is by no means intended to represent institutional views or to diminish the significant and ongoing contributions of others who have founded it, administered the curricula, and taught its classes. In this regard, student evaluation data was only available for my own classes and therefore will not be used as assessment criteria here to avoid presenting results that are not properly reflective of the program as a whole.

Currently, the OI adult education program is a non-degree, non-certification granting program offering continuing education for the general public, as contrasted with the degree granting Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago whose faculty hold joint appointments as professors in the department and researchers in the OI. The possibility for offering a future certificate program within the OI is currently under discussion, but such a program would need to maintain a clear distinction from the course credit and degree programs of the University of Chicago and the adult education program of the OI. Such a distinction is important for students, so that they are not misled into believing that they would be acquiring university credit for this course work, but it is also important for employers who could potentially confuse a certificate from the OI with a degree from the university. From 1966 until 2015, the program was conducted almost entirely onsite at the institute itself or at the Gleacher Center in downtown Chicago. Classes were taught as a collaboration between the OI and the University of Chicago Graham School of Continuing Liberal and Professional Studies. Two very popular courses that were developed to engage audiences beyond the physical classroom during that time were "Hieroglyphs by Mail" and "Cuneiform by Mail." Each was taught as a correspondence course, employing a textbook with exercises that students completed by hand and mailed to an instructor employed by the institute. Instructors graded and commented on the students' work and mailed it back to them. In the 2000s, these courses were converted over to email, making them, technically speaking, some of the first "online" classes offered by the OI or within the larger University of Chicago community. Several experimental online courses were developed in the 2010s, with mixed success. Profits from the adult education program were often moderate at best, with programs often running deficits just to cover the instructor's salary.

With a severely limited budget and a minimum of technological investment, the classes of the program were converted to hybrid (onsite/online) availability in 2015. The primary motivation for this expansion was to increase access to, and expand the audience for, the offerings within the program. In doing so, we have found a very motivated audience of global learners hungry for serious engagement with historical, linguistic, and anthropological issues (Kennan 2018). After some initial experimentation, the online portion of the courses are run through several media. A Canvas site organizes, structures, and hosts the course materials. In traditional classes in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, there is generally an online component through Canvas; but in those cases, the online components serve to supplement the primary onsite class. Very few are directed at remote students taking a class solely online—a niche the OI adult education program is working to fill. Weekly class sessions are live-streamed via private YouTube links to online students who have access to audio and video of both the presentation of the instructor as well as the onsite classroom. Online students can interact with the class through YouTube's live chat

feature (online students could not participate live via audio-visual means through this YouTube platform, but the implementation of Zoom has now resolved this limitation). Length of courses vary from program to program, but a standard course runs eight weeks, a length of time tied to the origin of the education program in the eight-week docent training program that continues to be organized on a biannual basis.

The online expansion of the program over the last three years has been an important source of community engagement and revenue for the institute's programming (Hanna 1998). Earlier onsite classes averaged less than ten students per class and often barely broke even financially. In the past three fiscal years classes have averaged nearly thirty students and generate over $30,000 of annual revenue. An example of recent courses include:

- Intensive Advanced Middle Egyptian (16 weeks, 29 students)
- History of Egyptology (8 weeks, 24 students)
- Intensive Sahidic Coptic Grammar (16 weeks, 27 students)
- Readings in Sahidic Coptic Texts (8 weeks, 14 students)
- Introduction to Egyptian Hieroglyphs (8 weeks, 33 students)
- Introduction to Ancient Egyptian Religion (8 weeks, 52 students)
- East Meets West: Arts of the Silk road in Central Asia (4 weeks, 51 students)
- Introduction to Sumerian Cuneiform (8 weeks, 43 students)
- The World of the Hebrew Bible (10 weeks, 25 students)
- Before the Alphabet: Writing Systems in the Ancient World (8 weeks, 28 students)
- Art in Antiquity: An Introduction to Near Eastern Art and Archaeology (6 weeks, 17 students)

Despite this financial success, we realize the pricing structure remains a class-based limiting factor for many potential students. As we look toward the future, we are seeking ways to increase the availability of free material (such as MOOCs), partner with additional content providers, and promote strategies to subsidize costs for underserved populations to reduce barriers for admission to these educational opportunities. We are operating under the assumption that it would be more beneficial to everyone involved to have forty students pay $200 each for a course, rather than have twenty students pay $400 each. Over the past three years, several courses topped fifty students each.

Two such courses are "Introduction to Ancient Egyptian Religion" and "East Meets West: Arts of the Silk Road in Central Asia." These courses are instructed by faculty, graduate students, and/or staff of the institute and university. Classes regularly employ object-based learning in the OI museum galleries and registration holdings. Students thereby have access to high quality teaching that is largely unavailable outside of an academic program. Dr. Tasha Vorderstrasse, university and continuing education program coordinator for the OI, solicits and organizes the courses, often teaching or co-teaching courses herself. Each course typically meets one day per week for two hours,

with additional contact time online through Canvas. Although degrees or certifications are not granted, and thus classes have no formal methods of evaluation, students are provided with mixed-media assignments including readings, listenings, and viewings. Course content regularly benefits from synergy with guest lecturers, institutional talks and symposia, travel programs, and events. What we have found is that continuing adult education students are interested in serious engagement with issues and themes addressed by the instructors. Students from the program have gone on to participate in ongoing research projects, graduate school, and even professional careers.

Students are extremely diverse in age, profession, background, and economic class, bringing to the classroom a wealth of perspectives that fuel classroom discussion (cf. Clover 2018). Exempted from evaluative grading structures and restrictive credit requirements, such students have freedom to explore education with reduced judgment and stress, thereby producing an enlightening classroom environment. The lack of focus on course credits and grades provides an opportunity for the instructor to employ more diverse teaching methodologies to enhance student engagement and encourage independence. Although certainly not "democratized" (courses are offered at a cost of roughly $400-$600 dependent upon length), these classes help to expose the public to scholars, content, ideas, questions, research, and methods in fields of study active at the institute.

Although our experience has been punctuated largely by success, several challenges will require continual attention as we develop a more inclusive online environment. Hybrid and online classes often require significant technological investment and these technologies can serve as distractions from course content and objectives. Technological skills are often assumed, but some students will find the online and digital environments difficult to navigate with a steep learning curve. When skillfully implemented and properly functioning, technology may enhance access, skill development, and content, but it is imperative to limit the technological learning curve and reduce related interruptions in course activity. For example, a remote student learning Egyptian hieroglyphs may find distraction and frustration with downloading, installing, and learning to use a software platform for producing digital glyphs. If the goal of the course is for students to learn the language, we often recommend the tried-and-true methods of pen and paper over complicated software programs that necessitate a significant time investment. Exercises completed on paper can easily be captured by the camera on a smart phone and sent to the instructor via email, avoiding the potential complications of adding yet another piece of technological software to an already complicated mix. We have found that the online environment provides a paradox between increased overall "engagement" as demonstrated by the boost in student enrollment and decreased direct interaction with individual students. It has been challenging to create a sense of community among online students beyond relatively limited "cliques" of extremely dedicated students.

Finally, there can be consequences to a program structured around fee-based courses without credit, certification, or degrees. One such consequence, which affects all higher education (exacerbated by the required and continually ballooning financial investments), is a potential consumer mentality by which students maintain product-related expectations and the instructor has customer service responsibilities. In such an environment, students may "shop" for their educational opportunities while seeking out the best deal for their financial investment. Whether such interrelated cultural phenomena come packaged with negative side-effects is fundamentally influenced by the systemic structuring of the program and its goals. The skills and investment of the instructors play an additional role (certainly teaching requires handling human interactions with similarities in specific cases to customer service representatives and certainly there are benefits of choice in educational opportunities). In this regard, the OI adult education program will need to balance its social and cultural goals against the very real budgetary concerns of the larger institution. While primary motivations continue to be a focus on expanding learning opportunities to a wider audience, dispelling common stereotypes and misperceptions, and fostering new empathies and sympathies for the peoples of the ancient world, few institutions can afford to completely subsidize such endeavors. How we respond to these challenges will be shaped in large measure by what goals are fostered for online teaching and how administrative profit motives can be balanced against people-centric learning initiatives (Knowlton 2000).

Addendum

The landscape of online teaching at the OI has undergone a radical revision following the conference session that inspired these papers. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States and the closing of the Oriental Institute to the public in March 2020, the Oriental Institute adult education program was forced to make a dramatic shift to synchronous online classes using Zoom as an interactive platform to supplement online content served through Canvas. Initial results have been an increase in student enrollment and more engagement with online students. Conclusions about further impacts will be reassessed as the program continues to develop in the coming years.

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