

Blömer, M., Brouns, F., Duploux, A., Feuser, S., Malmberg, S., Merten, S., Videbech, C., Zarmakoupi, M. (2020) *Ancient Cities. Teaching and learning in the digital age*. Teaching Classics in the Digital Age. International Conference 15/16 June 2020. Kiel, Germany: Ancient Cities project

[CC-BY-NC-SA](#)

## **Ancient Cities**

### **Teaching and learning in the digital age**

The humanities in general and Classics or Classical Archaeology in particular are in need for testing, promoting and implementing high quality digital learning material in their respective fields both for teaching at university and school level as well as for reaching out to a broader audience.

Our Strategic Partnership "Ancient Cities", funded by the ERASMUS+ program since 2017, aimed at creating digital learning materials for different audiences. In our project we have created the freely available Massive Open Online Course "Discovering Greek & Roman Cities" for a broad audience and developed learning materials for a pan-European digital learning module on ancient cities for use at universities. The guiding question was: How can digital teaching be implemented in the historical humanities and how can digitization appeal to different target groups?

In this paper we first want to give an overview on the MOOC's structure and learning material, on participants' demographics and their feedback, and second, we will show how we implemented the learning material in our teaching at university level.

The **Massive Open Online Course** (or MOOC) "Discovering Greek & Roman Cities" was aimed at a broad audience: people interested in archaeology, art and cultural history, architecture and history. The participation did not require any previous knowledge. The course was accessible online free of charge and had two runs: in fall 2019 and in spring 2020 during the COVID lockdown. Course materials were multilingual and available in German, English and French. For the videos, recently we added subtitles in Greek and Turkish, with Italian subtitles following soon, to give as many people as possible access.

The course started with a welcome section to familiarise the learners with the platform so that they can make better use of this form of online learning they might not be accustomed to. The course was divided into eight modules, each of which centres on a key aspect of ancient urbanism. The modules were released consecutively every week. After an introduction, life,

religion, politics, death, infrastructure and the economy of ancient cities were discussed. The final module focused on the legacy of ancient cities and the role of ancient heritage in our cities today. The topics were chosen so as to provide an overview of the multivalent character of ancient Greek and Roman cities and the ways in which we study them today. As we wanted students to get exposure to first-hand knowledge of the subject matter, the expertise of the MOOC's partners was a defining factor in planning the modules. However, important topics - such as race and gender - were not addressed in depth. Such topics were tackled in synchronous meetings and online discussions when the modules were implemented in University courses.

We want to illustrate the general structure of the modules based on Module 8 “Legacy of the Ancient City”. Each module consists of three to six videos of up to 10-minutes length that were produced by experts from five different countries. The videos were either shot on-site or in modern cities depending on the video’s topic, learning goals as well as general financial and administrative possibilities and restrictions. On the one side we wanted to give viewers first-hand information on archaeological sites and interview specialists. On the other side we aimed at connecting ancient and modern cities by recording the videos in a contemporary environment.

These clips were accompanied by small stories as an introduction, learning goals and key images and maps. The participants could work on further assignments, answer quiz questions and go deeper into the subject matter on the basis of selected literature references. In the MOOC, an online forum facilitated virtual discussions and exchange among the learners and with the teachers. Once a week, we held an online Office Hour where at least one of the teachers was available to lead discussions. Eventually, the participants who had watched all the videos and correctly answered 80 % of the quiz questions received an official certificate confirming their successful participation in the course.

The aim of the MOOC "Discovering Greek & Roman Cities" was not only to communicate knowledge about the layout and function of ancient cities and their historical development, but also to spark interest in and to stimulate the discussion of the (ancient) cultural heritage in one's own city.

Who were the people taking our course? What were their expectations and experiences? To learn more about these questions, participants were invited to answer a questionnaire regarding their expectations of the MOOC before starting the course and another one regarding their

experiences at the end. More than half of the respondents did not have previous experience with e-learning or MOOCs and preferred the more traditional modes of learning by doing assignments and quizzes, watching videos, reading texts, and interacting with the teacher. On demographics: In the two runs we had a combined number of 4.800 enrolled learners.

Regarding age, the age group 20-30 years was most strongly represented, which is probably mainly due to the fact that many students participated. Almost 60% of the participants were female. Around two-thirds had a bachelor (red) or master (green) degree. For the first run participants indicated 63 different countries from all continents, with the majority coming from France, Germany, Greece, Norway and the United States.) In the second run participants from 74 countries joined the course, with the majority coming from Germany, France and the Netherlands.

What were the learner's expectations and experiences? Right now we only have the results of the first run: The main reason to enrol was to gain knowledge about the topic; some enrolled out of curiosity. Only 6 % indicated that they enrolled to obtain a certificate. They were less fond of reading comments or discussing with other learners. Although the whole MOOC structure was multilingual, English seemed to be the preferred language, even if there was no outspoken preference for language of content, video or user interface.

Do we consider the MOOC being a success? Even if it is difficult to measure success of a MOOC, with regard to both qualitative and quantitative parameters, we see the MOOC as a success. Regarding a qualitative assessment, in the questionnaires we received positive to very positive feedback on the course (even though there were also some negative ratings that need to be taken into account). Learners appreciated the multilingual character of the MOOC. Furthermore, during online Office Hours and in the MOOC's forum, learners gave very positive responses on the videos and the learning material. On a quantitative level, we are satisfied with the number of approximately 2,400 enrolled learners per run, especially since the course was not hosted by any of the large platforms with the possibilities for dissemination. For the first run the total number of 307 issued certificates means that at least 13% of enrolled participants watched all the videos and submitted all eight quizzes with a score of at least 80%. This ratio is at the upper level of completion rates of other MOOCs. However, one has to keep in mind that learners also acquire knowledge without formally finishing a MOOC.

After the two rounds of the MOOC, we will make the teaching material we produced - texts, maps, videos - freely available on the internet via open licenses. All 34 videos of the MOOC are available on a YouTube channel since the beginning of April. To date, the videos have been viewed more than 50,000 times with a viewing time of over 3,700 hours. We will also measure the success of the MOOC in the future use of the material for teaching at universities, schools and in adult education.

The production of high quality learning material brings us to the **project's second main objective**: the implementation and usage of the material for pan-European multilingual teaching on university level. So far, the learning material was implemented at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and at the University of Pennsylvania. At Paris, the MOOC was implemented in the 2019 Fall semester of dual Bachelor programs in Art History and Archaeology with—respectively—Law and History. Based on blended learning the course applied the methods of the flipped classroom. As additional learning material a series of ten video lectures was shot in French. In the feedback phase, 93 % of the students considered the online material fitting and well-designed for the acquisition of the content of the course, with a majority considering the videos as very profitable, although too long. 80 % of the students watched all or some of the videos produced for the MOOC that were shot in English or German, with the majority considering the subtitles as a (necessary) incentive to watch them. On the method of flipped classroom, the (responding) students insisted on its rewarding, but also time-consuming, aspect; and, indeed, a small part of them strongly rejected it, having no previous experience of learning in full autonomy. In a university education now marked by COVID and measures of social distancing, this is an experiment that will have to be taken into account in pedagogy for the new academic year.

At the University of Pennsylvania the learning material was implemented in an online course entitled *Ancient Cities* offered in the 2020 Spring 2 term for the Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences Degree of the Penn's liberal arts and professional studies online program. Contrarily to Paris, students were ready to enroll in distance learning. The course was offered in the Classics course block, whose aim is the discovery of the classical world and development of an understanding of ancient cultures through historical and contemporary lenses. The structure followed the MOOC structure (Modules 1-8) and a few additional videos were created to complement the existing video lectures. In addition, for each module a weekly 1-hour synchronous lecture complemented and summarized the aim and scope of each module.

Students found the course well-structured and appreciated the thematic interweaving of Greek and Roman cities. They also enjoyed the MOOC's weekly assignments, which enabled them to engage with the material in a creative fashion.

**To conclude:**

A major challenge for archaeology, being a tangible and object-oriented discipline, is to transfer those experiences to the internet. The solution we tried was to relate videos, assignments and quizzes to specific locations and artefacts, which we also encouraged students to experience by themselves. Another aim was to make participants aware of the legacy of ancient cities, and to engage with that heritage on a global, national and local level. This then became related to our goal of making students interact with that heritage in all its forms, especially in their own home town. These aims were dependent upon activating the students. This is why we early on decided to adapt a dialogue-based teaching pedagogy, where assignments, discussion forum and office hour live discussions were used to encourage students to interact with the study materials and find their own answers.

We have learnt a lot about how to develop, produce and run a MOOC (for many of us it was the first time) and about the rewards and pitfalls of online distance learning. Very rewarding was the collaborative and interdisciplinary approach (archaeology/classics and didactics of distance learning) and the diverse international perspectives. In general, we consider MOOCs a good tool for public outreach and to engage with the broader public - even though the production consumes much time and requires considerable resources. Furthermore, especially during the Corona crisis, university students have successfully participated in our MOOC, too. The learning material we created can be utilised for blended learning scenarios on university level. Unfortunately, we are still far away from a pan-European higher education system. Thus, the incompatibility of university calendars across Europe and the diversity of curricula and levels in which each of the partners were teaching made it impossible to create an international learning module beyond local and national curricula. We hope that this will be remedied in the near future and we strongly encourage stakeholders to facilitate international teaching and learning opportunities.