

THIS IS SPARTA...? AN EXPERIMENTAL TEACHING PROJECT ON SPARTA AT WAR

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Abstract

This article describes a teaching proposal developed for bachelor-level students enrolled in a course on ancient Sparta totalling 30 hours. An introduction to the teaching of ancient Sparta and the difficulties it poses in terms of didactics (section 2) is followed by a section illustrating the chosen teaching method, i.e. co-teaching with specialists on the subject, in the form of a series of three webinars lasting two hours each, forming part of the larger course (section 3). This is followed by a section (4) describing the specific teaching strategies adopted during supporting workshops, namely peer-to-peer activities, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), and flipped classroom, then a further section (5) focussing on the consolidation strategies. The article concludes with a focus on student feedback and a provisional assessment (6).

Key-words

Teaching Spartan history; teaching strategies; student feedback.

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Resumo

Este artigo descreve uma proposta de ensino desenvolvida para alunos de bacharelado matriculados em um curso sobre a antiga Esparta totalizando 30 horas. Uma introdução ao ensino da antiga Esparta e as dificuldades que ela apresenta em termos de didática (seção 2) é seguido por uma seção que ilustra o método de ensino escolhido, ou seja, co-ensino com especialistas no assunto, na forma de uma série de três webinars com duração de duas horas cada, fazendo parte do curso maior (seção 3). Segue-se uma seção (4) que descreve as estratégias de ensino específicas adotadas durante os workshops de apoio, nomeadamente atividades entre pares, CLIL (Conteúdo e Aprendizagem Integrada de Línguas) e sala de aula invertida, depois uma seção adicional (5) focada nas estratégias de consolidação. O artigo conclui com foco no feedback dos alunos e uma avaliação provisória (6).

Palavras-chave

Ensino de história espartana; estratégias didáticas; retorno estudantil.

Introduction

The teaching project described in this article is the result of many years of reflection on a problem: how can the history of ancient Sparta be taught well to first-year bachelor students?

The target group for the project comprised students in their first year of bachelor studies of a three-year degree course in Philosophy and Cultural Heritage (Department of Humanities, University of Trento, Italy). In many cases, students did not know ancient Greek or Greek literature and therefore did not read ancient sources; in some cases they had done very little ancient history in high school; and in some cases they had a passion for the modern image of ancient Sparta as reproduced in films, comics, sports events or video games. All this had to be taken into account in the 30-hour Ancient Greek History course.

In the case of this specific project, carried out in the academic year 2020-2021, it was decided to propose a combination of several means and strategies: 24h of traditional lessons as well as 6 h of webinars held by specialists in ancient Sparta (out of the total 30h of the course), preceded and followed by optional preparation/consolidation workshops, in which peer-tutoring strategies, flipped classroom, and CLIL activities were proposed. This paper focuses on the webinars and the supporting activities.

1. Teaching on Ancient Sparta: Not an Easy Challenge

"This is Sparta? The history behind the movie '300'" is the title of a famous interview given by Paul Cartledge to the US newspaper *USA Today* a few days before the release of the well-known movie "300" (6 April 2007).² The title of the article took the words spoken by Butler-Leonidas and converted them, through the addition of a question mark and the consequent effect of surprise mixed with irony, into a rhetorical question/exclamation that hinted at the contents of the interview. An internationally renowned expert on ancient Sparta, Cartledge - who had seen a preview of the film - was asked to comment on the historical reliability of certain details. The

² The article is by Dan Vergano:

https://web.archive.org/web/20070323114134/http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/columnist/vergano/2007-03-05-300-history_N.htm 300 is an American historical action movie co-written and directed by Zack Snyder and based on the 1998 comic series of the same name by Frank Miller and Lynn Varley. The film sets the scene for the Battle of Thermopylae and the sacrifice of the 300 led by Leonidas.

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interview and the film triggered a debate among the general public. The problem of the Spartan mirage (the tendency to idealise certain aspects of Spartan society)³ had once again extended beyond the boundaries of academic research and erudition. A hyper-militaristic Sparta devoted to extreme sacrifice ("Win or die!") - this was the picture painted by media such as '300' - induced students of Greek history to ask question after question at the end of their lessons on Sparta. Teaching ancient Sparta became more difficult.

It was never easy. In his *Le Mirage Spartiate. Étude sur l'idéalisation de Sparte dans l'antiquité grecque de l'origine jusqu'aux Cyniques* (Paris, E. de Boccard, 1933-1943) François Ollier drew attention to the multiple levels of idealisation that ancient Sparta had undergone. Some processes of 'stereotyping' had their roots in antiquity and played a precise function in certain Athenian (and not only) intellectual circles. From Ollier onwards, research began to return with a renewed look at documentation. Numerous scholars undertook analytical work that clarified many aspects of Spartan history and society.⁴ In the context of this moderately revisionist process, scholars such as Chrysanthi Gallou, Stephen Hodkinson and Annalisa Paradiso played a fundamental role: it is for this reason that they were invited to give a webinar in the context of the bachelor-level course "Greek History II".

The three webinars, each lasting two hours, were co-taught with the professor of the course. The advantages of co-teaching were manifold from a didactic point of view. On the one hand, students had the opportunity to listen to specialists on the subject matter. On the other hand, they were able to benefit from the liaison and mediation provided by the course professor, who indicated a number of links with the content of the rest of the course and introduced supporting resources, as will be detailed in the next section.

2. Co-teaching on Ancient Sparta. Leading Experts and Mediating Strategies

The three webinars formed a series entitled "This is Sparta? Webinar series on Sparta at war". In their lectures, Gallou, Hodkinson and Paradiso

³ The expression was introduced by Ollier 1933-1943; see also Tigerstedt 1965-1977.

⁴ On the Spartan mirage see esp. Hodkinson 1997: 83-97; Flower 2002; Hodkinson-Morris 2012; Powell 2017. The need not to fall into a hypercriticism legitimised by the mirage is signalled by Figueira 2016, who refers to the trap of dismissing everything as a product of the mirage.

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proposed a deconstruction of ancient and modern stereotypes of Spartans at war. From burial of warriors to the militarism of Spartan society and the role of women in war, participants were invited to reflect on the complexity of ancient documentation and the deceptiveness of certain categories, both ancient and modern.

The first webinar took place on 28.10.2020 and was given by Chrysanthi Gallou (Univ. of Nottingham), who spoke on “The Death of the 'Warrior Burial’? New Approaches to the Study of Burials with Weapons in Bronze Age Laconia’. Associate Professor at the University of Nottingham and director of the Centre for Spartan and Peloponnesian Studies, Gallou proposed an analysis of burials in Mycenaean Laconia, paying particular attention to the so-called 'warrior burials', in which weapons were often placed next to the deceased. On the basis of recent investigations that have highlighted the appropriateness of combining the analysis of objects buried with the deceased with an osteological analysis of the remains, Gallou introduced a critical approach to the perhaps overused category of 'warrior burial' and drew attention to the link between weapons and the mechanisms of prestige display of the elites. The webinar was conducted in English.

On 19 November 2020, it was the turn of Stephen Hodkinson, Professor Emeritus at the University of Nottingham and world-renowned Sparta expert. In his talk (“Professionalism, Training and Organisation in the Classical Spartan Army?”), Hodkinson drew attention to the questionability of the widespread belief among moderns that the Spartans were professional soldiers who devoted all their time to war or to training for war. It cannot be argued that the superiority of the Spartan army depended on the intensity of their hypothetically all-encompassing training. After all, the Spartiates were also engaged in activities other than war training and, in any case, the focus of the latter was not so much on military skill as on general fitness acquired through the characteristic recreational activities also practised by other Greek elites. The webinar was conducted in English.

The last webinar was held on 10 December 2020 by Professor Annalisa Paradiso (University of Basilicata), an expert on the role of women in Spartan society (“Lampito, la guerra, la pace”). Starting from the observation that the protagonists of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411 BCE) all have 'speaking' names, Annalisa Paradiso investigated the origin of the Spartan Lampito's name. An analysis of the sources revealed, on the one hand, that the name Lampito is rare and, on the other hand, that the name was given to an Eurypontid daughter, wife and mother of three kings of

Sparta (Leotychidas II, Archidamos II and Agis II). It does not seem to be a coincidence that Aristophanes entrusts the peace process in Sparta to a woman with the same name as Agides' mother, at the time of the Peloponnesian War and at the time of the Spartan occupation of Dekeleia by the same king. The webinar was conducted in Italian.

The webinar series was organised by the Ancient Civilisation Lab of the CeASHum (Centre for Advanced Studies) and the PhD programme "Forms of cultural Exchange" of the Department of Humanities of Trento and, as such, was open also to specialists and doctoral students who did not need support activities for preparation and consolidation. Indeed, co-teaching and support activities were only open to bachelor-level students and specifically built around their educational needs.

The aim of co-teaching, understood in a broader sense,⁵ was to make specialised lectures accessible to first-year bachelor students. In order to achieve this, the course teacher implemented various strategies of mediation and content facilitation:

- agreed with the specialists on topics that would fit well into the programme and at the same time tried to adapt the course programme to their interventions by including common or preparatory content
- provided students with useful preparatory materials, such as articles, podcasts and videos
- preceded each webinar with an introduction reiterating the links with the course content
- followed each webinar with a commentary reiterating the links with the course content
- was available to talk to students both by email and on a dedicated forum about their doubts and curiosities, both before and after each webinar.

In addition, the lecturer collaborated with tutors, i.e. more advanced students responsible for supporting less advanced ones, to organise further support activities. These are described in the next section.

⁵ On co-teaching, see Roth-Tobin 2005 with further literature.
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3. Preparing Learning Contents. Ancient Sparta Mediated through Peer-to-peer activities, CLIL and Flipped Classroom

4.1 Peer Tutoring. Students Help Students

Each webinar was preceded by a preparation workshop run with the support of tutors, i.e. 'older' students selected for peer-tutoring activities.

Peer-tutoring has important advantages.⁶ Usually the tutors are a few years older and more experienced. They have taken the exams for which they now provide support, and have got good results in them. In addition, they have been interviewed to show that they have good social skills and an aptitude for tutoring, as a result of which they have been deemed suitable for the role.

The support of tutors is effective in many cases. For example, a student may find it difficult to talk freely about his or her shortcomings with the teacher, but be less awkward with the tutor. The tutor can act as a kind of intermediary between the student and the teacher because (s)he occupies a sort of median space from the point of view of age, culture, experience and science. The tutor also has a background which is much more similar to that of the student, whereas the teacher remembers the background (s)he had when (s)he was a student in a more distant and sometimes very different context.

Then there are specific cases directly related to the learning content that we have chosen for this teaching proposal, namely Ancient Sparta. Those who attend the Greek History II course are a mixed group. Some know ancient Greek, others do not. Some have taken ancient history in high school with a certain depth, others less so. Some have read Cartledge's *Sparta and Lakonia*, others barely the interview evoked in the opening of this article. Some have read a few pages of Xenophon on Sparta, others have the image of Sparta conveyed by filmography or video games. The tutors, who are of the same generation, are more likely to know (at least a part of) this background and therefore more likely to guide the students to develop a critical approach than the teacher, who can intervene later, when it is time to read the ancient sources (even if only in translation) and study ancient Sparta at a university level.

⁶ See esp. Munley- Garvey- McConnel 2010, with previous literature.
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4.2 Flipped Classroom

The tutors proposed the analysis of a scientific article written by the speaker of each webinar: the speaker was asked to select an accessible article in the language and on the topic of the webinar. Students were asked to read the article before the preparation workshop run by the tutors.

This is a well-known teaching practice that, in more recent years, didactics has refined and given a precise nomenclature, the “flipped classroom”.

In a conventional lesson, learners have to try to understand what is being said and to develop the stimuli they receive as the teacher is talking. They may not have time to think about what is being said and may miss important points because they are taking notes. But above all, they may not have time to develop their own reflections and absorb the teacher's words. Afterwards, learners do homework and study material on their own. As for the weaker students, they read their class notes and try to remember what they heard but did not have time to write down, deducing points they may have missed. Even the best students may not be able to take in and process all the stimuli received in class.

The problem first emerged in mathematics, and it is therefore no coincidence that mathematics teachers were the first to introduce the flipped classroom methodology. They literally reversed the common steps: students first try to understand a theory on their own at home, outside the teacher's control but with the support of materials provided by the teacher; then they practise what they have learned in class with the support of the teacher (Strayer, 2012; Behringer, 2014; Lehmann et al., 2015; Brame, 2012; Fischer-Spannagel, 2012) Class time is thus devoted to the application and discussion of concepts. This also gives teachers a better opportunity to detect errors in thinking (Zanin, 2006; Garrison and Kanuka, 2004; Klippel, 2003; Johnson et al., 2014).

As far as I know, the flipped classroom methodology has spread more in maths teaching than in other subjects, such as history (at least not in the form defined by science of education). Yet in certain situations and contexts it offers a viable alternative. Students study content at home and lessons can thus be devoted to storytelling, debates, peer-to-peer strategies, history labs, and so forth. The teacher chooses a topic, the study skills that (s)he wishes to improve, and the media that are most appropriate for independent learning about the chosen topic. (S)he prepares the appropriate media to bridge learning gaps by giving students a simplified version of a lesson and then gradually increasing its complexity, difficulty, and sophistication over time (scaffolding).

This was the aim of the workshops run by the history tutors. In this case the methodology of the flipped classroom was used to prepare the students to follow the specialists' webinars. Students were asked to read the following articles/sources before the preparation workshop run by the tutors:

Before the webinar held by Gallou:

GALLOU, Chrysanthi. *Death in Mycenaean Laconia. A Silent Place*. Oxford: Oxbow Books. 2020, 127-129 ("Funerary offerings and their relation to age, gender and status: from warlords to little perishers")

GEORGANAS, Iannis. 'Warrior graves' vs. warrior graves in the Bronze Age Aegean. In: HORN, Christian. KRISTIANSSEN, Kristian (eds.). *Warfare in Bronze Age Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 209-218.

Before the webinar held by Hodkinson:

HODKINSON, Stephen. Sparta and War: Myths and Realities, In *The Historian. The Magazine of the Historical Association*, London: Historical Association, 144, 2020, 16-21

Before the webinar held by Annalisa Paradiso:

PARADISO, Annalisa. L'exercice du pouvoir royal: Agésilas, Cynisca et les exploits olympiques, In *Ktèma : civilisations de l'Orient, de la Grèce et de Rome antiques*, Strasbourg : PUS, 15, 2015, 199-207

Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*

Those who wanted to learn more were invited to watch the following videos and podcasts by Hodkinson:

The Military in Ancient Sparta (2021): Ithaca Bound podcast, 2021

Greek Warfare and the Spartan Mirage (2020): A webinar given on 15 July 2020 as part of the Wolfson (Ancient) Warfare Wednesdays series.

Classical Sparta (2019: Part 1): The first of two podcast interviews made for the History Teachers Association of New South Wales, August 2019. Interviewer: Jonathon Dallimore

Classical Sparta (2019: Part 2): The second of two podcast interviews made for the History Teachers Association of New South Wales, August 2019. Interviewer: Jonathon Dallimore

New Approaches to Classical Sparta (2019): A lecture given at the Lakeside Arts Centre, University of Nottingham in February 2019.

Meet the Spartans (2011). A video interview made for the Classics Confidential website, April 2011. Interviewer: Elton Barker

In the home reading/listening/watching phase, students were given the opportunity to explain what they had read during the workshop led by the tutors. Thus, the workshop alternated between different phases: phases in which students summarised what they had read; phases in which the tutors set up a guided analysis of the same articles; phases in which the tutors proposed an in-depth analysis through the reading of sources quoted from the articles; phases in which the students asked questions or proposed topics for discussion.

The teacher, who oversaw the choice of the home readings and the planning of the workshop held by the tutors, did not participate in the workshop itself, precisely so that the latter would maintain an atmosphere of peer-to-peer exchange. At the end of the workshop, the teacher held a debriefing session with the tutors. The continuous collaboration and exchange between teacher and tutors was also necessary for another reason: the preparatory workshop included activities in languages other than the students' mother tongue, for which a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology was partly applied.

4.3 Ancient Sparta and the CLIL-Approach. Understanding a Different World in a Different Language

Very often the language of the article (and of the podcasts or video) and the language of the webinar itself was not the students' mother tongue. The Greek History courses discussed here are taught in Italian, but most of the webinars and scientific literature is in English. Therefore, before and during the preparation workshop, activities were devised to enable even

those students less fluent in English to understand the contents of the webinar and interact in the subsequent debate as far as possible. The programming of these activities was inspired by the CLIL method.

The CLIL methodology represents an appropriate way to set up teaching packages for history lessons. In a CLIL approach, students gain knowledge and understanding of the teaching object while simultaneously learning and using the target language, which is not the students' native language. In other words, content leads language learning.⁷ CLIL permits the incorporation of critical skills and learning strategies, and leads at the same time to rich language development (information gathering skills, organising skills, analysing skills).

In the specific case of the learning project analysed in this article, thanks to CLIL activities, students addressed the themes of the webinar on war in Sparta through activities conducted in English. These were task-based and therefore simultaneously involved their English skills.

Some activities were carried out individually at home before the preparation workshop; others were prepared in advance but then also presented, shared and discussed at the preparation workshop; others were prepared by the tutors and presented to the students during the preparation workshop:

- extrapolation (from the articles) of the micro-language (before the preparation workshop)
- drafting of a glossary (before the preparation workshop)
- rewriting with reuse of the extrapolated micro-language (e.g. summarising) (before the preparation workshop)
- creation and discussion of visual aids as slides, flashcards, pictures, charts, mind-maps on the webinar topic (before and during the preparation workshop)
- creation and discussion of blogs on the webinar topic (before and during the preparation workshop)
- creation and discussion of short YouTube videos on the webinar topic (before and during the preparation workshop)
- orally summarising content of articles/videos/podcasts using technical terms (during the preparation workshop)

⁷ According to Mehisto (2012: 52-53) CLIL describes “a dual-focused teaching and learning approach in which the L1 and an additional language [...] are used for promoting both content mastery and language acquisition to pre-defined levels”. See also Meyer 2010; Ricci Garotti 2012 a; 2012b; 2014; Zanin 2012.

By understanding aspects of ancient Spartan society and re-explaining them, students were encouraged to stimulate and practice structures in a language other than their mother tongue. This prepared them to better understand the webinars and interact with the experts.

4. Consolidating learning contents

After each webinar, a further consolidation workshop run by the tutors was offered, dedicated to reflecting on the main points of the report and to re-reading and analysing the sources proposed by the speaker.

The tutors collected all the sources quoted by the webinar speaker and offered a detailed reading of them during the workshop. They then went through the arguments mentioned by the webinar speaker and discussed these with the students.

Both the preparation workshop and the consolidation workshop were optional, but were well attended.

5. Student feedback and provisional assessment

As mentioned above, the preparation and consolidation activities for the webinar were optional, but were attended by almost all students. In the examination, the students demonstrated a good understanding of the content of the webinars and offered original thoughts on the topics covered. The students involved were also interviewed after the awarding of their grade. During these oral interviews, the students expressed appreciation for the proposed activities; in particular, they stated that they felt very stimulated by the idea of hearing lectures given by world-renowned experts on the subject and that they did not feel intimidated thanks to the support activities offered. Evidence of the latter had already been supplied: for over an hour following each webinar, students asked questions in English on a live YouTube feed watched by over 150 participants. There was also some negative feedback: a small number of students (ca. 3%) complained about difficulties in following the webinars.

The project also had an effect on the talented students and the tutors themselves. Among the former many decided to delve deeper into Greek history, read further essays on the proposed topic and in some cases develop certain themes for dissertation; the latter developed a vocation as

a teacher and often consulted me on teaching issues; in one case they developed an ambition for a university career and then started a PhD.

Tab. 1

Learning unit	Date	Context	Activities	Participants	Means and Strategies
The Death of the 'Warrior Burial'? New Approaches to the Study of Burials with Weapons in Bronze Age Laconia	14-21.10.2020	Homework (flipped classroom)	Reading of articles Listening to podcasts Watching of videos CLIL-activities	Students	Flipped classroom, CLIL
The Death of the 'Warrior Burial'? New Approaches to the Study of Burials with Weapons in Bronze Age Laconia	21.10.2020	Preparation workshop	Summarising and debating on homework	Students, tutors	Peer tutoring, CLIL
The Death of the 'Warrior Burial'? New Approaches to the Study of Burials with Weapons in Bronze Age Laconia	28.10.2020	Webinar	Lecture by Ch. Gallou	Students, tutor, teacher, expert	Webinar held by leading expert, coteaching, mediating strategies

The Death of the 'Warrior Burial'? New Approaches to the Study of Burials with Weapons in Bronze Age Laconia	30.10.2020	Consolidation workshop	Analysing ancient sources, debating on salient arguments mentioned by the speaker	Students, tutors	Peer tutoring, CLIL
Professionalism, Training and Organisation in the Classical Spartan Army?	05.-12.11.2020	Homework (flipped classroom)	Reading of articles Listening to podcasts Watching of videos CLIL-activities	Students	Flipped classroom, CLIL
Professionalism, Training and Organisation in the Classical Spartan Army?	12.11.2020	Preparation workshop	Summarising and debating on homework	Students, tutors	Peer tutoring, CLIL
Professionalism, Training and Organisation in the Classical Spartan Army?	19.11.2020	Webinar	Lecture by St. Hodgkinson	Students, tutor, teacher, expert	Webinar held by leading expert, coteaching, mediating strategies

Professionalism, Training and Organisation in the Classical Spartan Army?	23.11.2020	Consolidation workshop	Analysing ancient sources, debating on salient arguments mentioned by the speaker	Students, tutors	Peer tutoring, CLIL
Lampito, la guerra, la pace	01-03.12.2020	Homework (flipped classroom)	Reading of articles Listening to podcasts Watching of videos CLIL-activities	Students	Flipped classroom, CLIL
Lampito, la guerra, la pace	03.12.2020	Preparation workshop	Summarising and debating on homework	Students, tutors	Peer tutoring, CLIL
Lampito, la guerra, la pace	10.12.2010	Webinar	Lecture by A. Paradiso	Students, tutor, teacher, expert	Webinar held by leading expert, coteaching, mediating strategies

Lampito, la guerra, la pace	11.12.2020	Consolidation workshop	Analysing ancient sources, debating on salient arguments mentioned by the speaker	Students, tutors	Peer tutoring, CLIL
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