

Educating the Educators

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WE LATIN TEACHERS are an odd lot, having chosen to teach a niche language, with a focus on literature written two thousand years ago. When asked what we teach, we often get the response: ‘Oh, do they still teach that?’ At the schools level, we are frequently the only teachers of the subject in our schools, wedged into a World Languages Department and surrounded by modern language teachers, who have at their disposal movie posters, magazines, children’s books, CDs, DVDs, a language laboratory and native speakers. State licensing requirements and the need to be with other Latin teachers drive many of us to seek professional development opportunities; the pressure to make Latin ‘relevant’ and a ‘real’ language prompts some of us to explore the possibility of speaking Latin.

The Classics Department at UMass Boston decided some years ago that it needed to become more involved with the many Latin teachers in eastern Massachusetts, which undoubtedly has the greatest concentration of Latin programs in its middle and secondary schools in all of the United States.

The department began to offer workshops for teachers and then expanded its outreach to include a Masters program, aimed primarily at teachers of Latin, with courses in the evenings and summer. The program began as a

collaboration between the Classics and Applied Linguistics Departments, and the MA has a track that requires four courses in Applied Linguistics, all aimed at providing teachers with the knowledge needed to tailor their pedagogy to the process by which second language is acquired.

After my colleague Emily McDermott attended a *conventiculum*, we decided that we needed to include in our curriculum a course that would expose our teacher/students to spoken Latin, and so we created the *Conventiculum Bostoniense*, a week-long, Latin immersion program that is also a graduate level course entitled *Active Learning Methodologies for Teachers of Latin*. During the week, teachers are not only thrown into speaking Latin – in small groups, in their apartments, on outings – but they are also introduced (in English), most for the first time, to second language acquisition (SLA) theory. Sessions that follow provide pedagogical models for incorporating oral Latin into the classroom and for applying SLA theory to Latin instruction. After returning to their classrooms, participants design a unit to put into effect some of the techniques they have learned, writing an analysis of the pedagogy they employ as their final class project.

SLA is a relatively new discipline that has, thus far, been limited to modern languages, but many of whose theories are readily applicable to the teaching of Latin. Because our aim as Latin teachers is to teach reading, most of the methods we discuss are aimed at that skill. Among these is a focus on providing context for reading, with activities that give students historical and linguistic background that enables them to read the text rather than decode it; the aim is comprehension, not necessarily translation. Our teachers learn specific approaches to providing students with the skills they need to read fluently, many of which incorporate spoken Latin, including the discovery of vocabulary through discussion around suitable images, consideration (in Latin) of what is happening in

illustrations that accompany reading selections, and the use of exercises such as dictogloss that compel students to listen carefully to a text and reconstruct it in groups. Their exposure to SLA theory (during the *Conventiculum* and through a number of readings assigned prior to the immersion week) prompts our teachers to reconsider the efficacy of their methodologies – do their students really need to know what is happening in a story to answer the questions asked about it or can they do so by pulling words from the text that seem to be likely responses; do drills require understanding or merely the manipulation of forms; are the students receiving comprehensible input from the teacher or the textbook, or are they retaining information only for the test, then soon forgotten. Our goal is mindfulness, getting our teachers to think about what they are doing in the classroom and its efficacy and opening their minds to new approaches.

Participants at the *Conventiculum* are required to keep journals during the week and through the first two months of the school year.

What we learn from those accounts is, of course, anecdotal, and the formal research that is necessary to confirm our conclusions must wait for the future, but our teacher/students from the first four years of the program consistently report that their experience is transformative in a number

of ways. First and foremost, despite the fact that their initial reaction to Latin immersion is often reticence and even terror, they are amazed at the speed by which they begin to think and dream in Latin; most experience enormous growth in their speaking abilities. The intensity of the experience makes them more empathetic with their students, whose struggles in class now seem more understandable. Many remark that their Latin reading ability drastically changes over the course of the week – with increased speed and fluidity and with less need to ‘decode’ the text. Virtually all are strongly motivated to incorporate the new methodologies they have learned into their own classrooms, particularly to use more spoken Latin, but also to get their advanced students doing more writing – paraphrasing or responding to a text. But these same teachers also express significant frustration.

Our participants come from across the world and represent all levels of Latin instruction, from elementary school through the graduate level. When they return to the classroom after a week of contemplating new approaches to teaching, they face a series of roadblocks to instituting what they have learned. In the schools, the biggest obstacle is the Latin textbook, whether it is based upon a reading-centered curriculum or the even more traditional grammar/translation approach. Teachers are faced with having to create activities and design lessons that often seem tacked on or even irrelevant to the regular course materials. At the university level, time is the great enemy. How can we teach all that our students need to know in two semesters, so that they can begin extended reading in the third? Change is both time-consuming and threatening. Some of our participants have colleagues who are staunchly opposed to any new ideas; others have had administrators who resist, and there are Classicists everywhere who question, quite reasonably I believe, whether in altering our approach to Latin instruction we do not risk losing the uniqueness of its study. Will we have to change drastically

‘Beside,’tis known he could speak Greek
As naturally as pigs squeak;
That Latin was no more difficile
Than to a blackbird ’tis to whistle.’
– Samuel Butler

the goals of Latin instruction? In what other language curriculum are students expected to read sophisticated literature in the fourth or even the third year of study? If we focus more on guiding our students to an implicit understanding of Latin, developing a deep and innate sense of how Latin works, will we do so to the detriment of the 'mental gymnastics' for which Latin has been so valued? Why are we teaching Latin? How can we move away from translation when the AP Latin exam¹ requires students to render Latin passages word for word into English?

These are all important questions that will require careful consideration by our discipline as a whole, but I believe that we have no choice but to change. The reality is that the teacher must teach the student who comes in through the classroom door, and that student is not the same one who entered twenty or even ten years ago. Despite its lingering reputation, Latin is not just for elite students, but for all students, whose learning styles demand that we find new ways to present the language. They are plugged in, multi-sensory learners, for whom aural input is crucial. Read the chapter and memorise the vocabulary is no longer an efficacious approach, if ever it was. If the study of Latin is to survive, we must overhaul our

curricula to make the language live for our students. Most of our *Conventiculum* participants have started with small changes, using spoken Latin regularly for certain activities, designing engaging and meaningful exercises to reinforce new grammatical information, but they have found that when they bring active techniques to their classrooms, their students respond with excitement, enthusiasm and, best of all, greater understanding and retention of the material. What better reward for change could there be?

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Notes

¹ The AP (Advanced Placement) Latin exam is offered by the College Board to students who are generally in their final year of study at the high school level and is based on a set curriculum, now exclusively Vergil's *Aeneid*, but in 2012-13 also to include Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum*. A student scoring sufficiently well on the exam may receive credit toward a bachelor's degree upon matriculating at the college level, depending upon college policy.