

## “TEACHING LATIN, TEACHING KIDS”

Before giving a presentation during a recent National Latin Teacher Recruitment Week about teaching at the secondary school level, I asked a seventh-grade student I knew quite well (a bright “A” Latin student in an affluent suburban public school with an excellent, demanding middle school program) what he thought were the three most important characteristics of a good middle school teacher. He replied: (1) Be funny, (2) be funny and (3) be funny. After I cracked up laughing, I thanked him and shared his assessment with my audience of prospective secondary school teachers.

What Rob Hardy fails to realize in “Missing the Heart-Shaped Piece: How I Failed as a Middle School Latin Teacher,”<sup>1</sup> is that a simple opposition between the rewards and games he disdains and the intrinsic pleasure of learning he prizes *does not exist*. The seventh-grader quoted above (whose school district seems demographically similar to the one in which Hardy taught) is not atypical. What his answer shows—and perhaps this is the single most important lesson teacher-preparation programs can give their students—is that teaching at the secondary school level is about the subject (Latin) *and about kids*. Unless you are interested in both, teaching at this level is not for you.

That Hardy, after only a brief experiment with teaching, is prepared to tell secondary school Latin teachers how to teach (“Every educator ought to recognize...” [p. 405], “My plea to Latin teachers is...” and “Your job should be...” [p. 408]) strikes me as misguided, and the way he implicitly characterizes teaching at the secondary school level—giving candy *or* giving love of Latin—does a disservice to the many Latin teachers who in countless ways over the years have *transformed* their own love of the language into something students, like the seventh-grader quoted above, can appreciate. For all the sources cited showing the danger of using rewards to motivate learning, one could find others that show its value. There are great teachers who use rewards, and great ones who do not. What any teacher-training student quickly finds out, however, through course-work and classroom observation, is that students

<sup>1</sup> *CJ* 100 (2005) 403–9.

learn in different ways, and that recognizing developmental issues is critical to reaching them effectively. If things like extra credit, candy, games, mnemonic devices, songs and skits can be effective with seventh-graders (who have large amounts of energy and are quite social), these become part of the repertoire of the good middle school teacher.

Moreover, most of us teaching at any level have had the experience, which Hardy bemoans, of dealing with a previous teacher's students. Had Hardy received more effective mentoring, he might have come to the realization that for the first year of regular teaching simply trying one's hardest, learning the culture of the school and doing an adequate job may be perfectly adequate goals. If you inherit students who know less than you would like, you realize it takes time to gradually enhance a program. If you inherit students who know an amazing amount, you realize that as a new teacher you cannot do all the things right away that a good, experienced teacher may have been doing for years. You hope that your enthusiasm as a new teacher can balance your lack of experience.

While I have not taught Latin at the secondary school level since 1978 (I did so for five years), I remember vividly a tiny class of seven seventh-graders who made me realize in my first year of Latin teaching that "love of Latin" was not enough. With excellent guidance from my school, I started learning about teaching kids.<sup>2</sup>

I do not think it comes as a surprise to middle school teachers that "candy" and "love of Latin" can co-exist. Perhaps if Hardy had stuck with his middle school teaching longer, he would have found that you cannot necessarily "offer" (p. 406) your love of Latin unmediated; you have to demonstrate it in ways that connect with your audience. I propose that the "heart-shaped piece" missing from Hardy's description of his experience is a *commitment to finding a way to transform a teacher's "love of Latin" into something appropriate for students at the middle-school level*. And might that transformation include games, candy, projects, etc.? Why not?

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<sup>2</sup> I later got a Ph.D. and realized I wanted to do research as much as I wanted to teach, and thus switched to college teaching. My interest in secondary school teaching continues, though, as director of an MA program in the teaching of Latin at the secondary level.