

PLAY AND LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM:
CONFESSIONS OF A PEZ DISPENSER

Most of the students clearly expected me to be a Pez dispenser, not a Latin teacher. That is the striking image Rob Hardy, a first-year middle school Latin teacher, uses in a recent Forum piece in this journal.¹ Hardy laments that he failed as a teacher—which, personally, I doubt he did—largely because the longtime teacher he replaced had used games and the reward of candy to induce her students to learn the language. This created a classroom situation in which students constantly wanted rewards for learning; their motivation for studying was external reinforcement, not the intrinsic beauty or value of Latin, which Hardy appreciates and hoped to impart. Hardy suggests that play and learning in the classroom are antithetical, and at the end of the piece he urges teachers, “Resist the temptation to distribute rewards and make everything fun. Your job should be to create enthusiastic amateurs who are devoted to the uselessness of Latin.”

I recently completed my first year as a volunteer Latin I teacher at the local high school, following my retirement as an attorney, and I must confess that I was a Pez dispenser. Literally. I popped Pezes out of my little dispenser (and after *Star Wars 3* out of my large Darth Vader dispenser) in response to correct answers, top scores on tests and the like. The teacher Hardy criticizes and I are kindred spirits. We see eye-to-eye pedagogically.

The two of us, she and I, have *auctores* on our side for doing what we do. Roman *magistri* were Pez dispensers. The stereotype of the *magister*, of course, is of a stern, unsmiling teacher sitting in his high-backed chair, quick with the cane. Such individuals did exist; one of Horace’s teachers, Orbilius, earned his nickname Plagosus (“the flogger”) for good reason.² It is Horace, however, who also tells us that teachers sometimes handed out food to young students as positive reinforcement for learning (*Sat.* 1.1.24–6):

...quamquam ridentem dicere verum
quid vetat? ut pueris olim dant crustula blandi
doctores, elementa velint ut discere prima:

¹ *CJ* 100 (2005) 403–9.

² *Ep.* 2.1.69–71.

...but what forbids one from speaking the truth
while laughing? As kind teachers sometimes give sweets
to students to nudge them into wanting to learn their ABC's?³

Older students too received rewards, which went well beyond cake and candy. From Suetonius, for instance, we know that the teacher Marcus Verrius Flaccus gave out old but rare or beautiful books to students writing the best essay on a theme.⁴ In short, there is clear evidence that *magistri* recognized the utility of external rewards in promoting learning and dispensed rewards from time to time. To borrow another colorful image from Hardy (although he uses it negatively), Latin class occasionally could be “a pedagogical piñata” (404), from which *crustula* (the Pez of the day) or books, a more durable form of Pez, rained down upon students.

Play and learning in the classroom are not antithetical, but natural partners. This definitely is or should be the case in middle school, junior high school and even high school, as students learn *elementa prima*. Romans arguably felt the same way, given the frequently observed fact that the word *ludus*, normally translated “game” or “play,” also means “elementary school.” A venerable authority no less august than Horace and Suetonius further makes the point; I refer to Captain Kangaroo. Bob Keeshan, who portrayed this lovable character, was often quoted as saying, “The best teacher is an entertainer.” I believe that this *dictum*, a *sententia* really—*magister optimus est ludicer*—should be inked for all time upon vellum, with liberal gold leaf. Perhaps it was, in some lost manuscript.

Therefore I say: Let us be more ludicrous as teachers. We can have fun, students can have fun, and in the process, students *will learn* a lot of Latin. I know that this is true, because of my students’ experience in the 2005 National Latin Exam (NLE). Fifty days before the NLE, in an attempt to be *ludicer*, I showed up in class wearing a military drill instructor’s outfit, from the Smokey the Bear hat on my head down to the spit-polished black boots on my feet.⁵ Some students were shocked; others laughed hysterically. Ignoring them all, I blew a shrill whistle and announced that we were commencing “Operation Latin Thunder,” seven weeks of intensive preparation for the NLE. Our express mission objective was “All Will Win Awards.” That is, I told the class that each and every one of them was going to score in the top half of the NLE.

I did not wear DI togs to class every day. But we did drill. Much of the drill was oral—and very loud. We declined, conjugated and

³ The translation is my own.

⁴ *gramm.* 17.1.

⁵ If used clothing is worn, all insignia and identifying markings should be removed in accord with federal law.

learned vocabulary. Now and then we went down to the gym and marched around inside it while shouting out declensions and conjugations. I adapted a number of real military cadences (marching songs) for us to sing while drilling. One goes:

teacher: "One, two, three, four"	students: "One, two, three, four"
teacher: "Run, we gonna run, we gonna run some more"	students: "Run, we gonna run, we gonna run some more"
teacher: "One mile"	students: "One mile"
teacher: "No sweat"	students: "No sweat"
teacher: "Two miles"	students: "Two miles"
teacher: "Better yet"	students: "Better yet"
teacher: "Three miles"	students: "Three miles"
teacher: "Feeling fine"	students: "Feeling fine"
teacher: "Four miles"	students: "Four miles"
teacher: "Double time"	students: "Double time"
teacher: "Now let's"	students: "Now let's"
teacher: "Do some verbs"	students: "Do some verbs"
teacher: "A-mo"	students: "A-mo"
teacher: "A-mas"	students: "A-mas," etc.

To my delight, students enjoyed oral drilling while marching. They often were disappointed when we stayed in the classroom and did board work rather than march.

I would like to say that we "made mission," as the military puts it, by having had all my students win awards on the NLE. All did not win awards; but 82% did. (More—91%—would have, with just one more correct answer by several students.) Exactly half won gold and silver medals, and one student scored a perfect 40. I am biased, needless to say, but I think that this was a good first effort by a high school that had not had a Latin program for a considerable period of time. I ascribe the success we had to the fact that my students played and learned at the same time. I had fun. They had fun. And along the way, as Horace, Suetonius and Captain Kangaroo promised, learning actually did take place.

I will be back again at this next year, teaching Latin II as well as Latin I. I am curious about how much Latin last year's Latin I students will remember, or can relearn quickly, and how well both groups of students will do on the 2006 NLE. My mission objective remains "All Will Win Awards." [Editor's Note: On the 2006 NLE, 85% of the author's students received awards and 60% won gold and silver medals.] I am also happy to report that a majority of graduating seniors headed to college say that they intend to take at least one Latin class. Who knows? It may well be in college (a more realistic place than high school, I believe) that those students will come to love Latin and continue on with it for its own sake, without *any* need for Pez.

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