

RESPONSE FROM ROB HARDY

The one thing that troubles me about the response to my essay in *Classical Journal* is the impression that I meant to be condescending toward middle school Latin teachers. My essay was about how I failed as a middle school Latin teacher, not about how I was too good for it. Teaching—perhaps especially when your students are 11- to 14-year olds—requires intelligence, creativity, humor, patience and stamina. It is the most physically, mentally and emotionally challenging work I have ever attempted, and I am happy there are dedicated Latin teachers out there—like Ginny Lindzey, Wes Baden, Marianthe Colakis and Matthew Lind—who are prepared for the challenge. I wish that I could have learned from these teachers, and from professional mentors like Ronnie Ancona, before I attempted to teach middle school Latin.

I would like to respond to two points raised in the responses to my essay. First, I would like to address the reaction to my attitude toward extrinsic motivation; then I would like to clarify what I meant when I asserted that Latin is “useless.”

In calling into question my wholehearted approval of Alfie Kohn’s book *Punished by Rewards*, Colakis and Lind write: “[O]ur world is full of competition, incentives and disincentives. These are the basis of our economy, and until the revolution comes, Kohn’s worldview is naïve.” My question is: when will the revolution come, unless we as parents and teachers prepare our children to make it happen? For the past two years, I have been teaching home-schoolers. My experience as a writing teacher at a home-school cooperative has reinforced my conviction that small class sizes and positive parental involvement are more effective means of raising educational standards than annual testing mandated by the federal government. Home-schoolers have shown me that Alfie Kohn is not entirely naïve when he envisions a world in which intrinsic interest is the basis of learning, the desire to connect is stronger than the will to compete and the demands of the market count for less than the aspirations of the human heart.

My youngest home-school Latin student is a seven-year-old girl who likes to act out the stories in the *Oxford Latin Course*. She combines her precocious interest in Latin with a seven-year-old girl’s

love of dress-up. I think this is wonderful. Thomas Jefferson called his knowledge of Latin “a rich source of delight,” and it should be. I would be truly misguided if I insisted that seven-year-old Julia put away her dress-up clothes and memorize conjugations. Her play is not a distraction or an artificial sweetener; it is how a seven-year-old becomes engaged with her subject. Perhaps my biggest failure as a middle school Latin teacher was allowing myself to become so harried that I temporarily lost the sense of fun that drew me to teaching in the first place.

Finally, I am puzzled by what seems to me a misunderstanding of what I mean when I claim that Latin is “useless.” When Ginny Lindzey writes that “the mind and soul need to be fed constantly,” she and I are on the same page. One of my classics students at Carleton College, a senior chemistry major headed for a career in medicine, told me that the natural sciences were the only “useful” majors, but that his four years of college had taught him the value of “useless” subjects like classics and art. I understood what he meant. In *The Rhinoceros*, Eugene Ionesco wrote: “If one does not understand the usefulness of the useless and the uselessness of the useful, one cannot understand art. And a country where art is not understood is a country of slaves and robots.” We may disagree over my use of the word “useless,” but I think we can agree that Latin is one of the humane disciplines that keeps us from becoming slaves and robots.

After my essay was published in *Classical Journal*, I gave an off-print to the parents of one of my home-school writing students. When my student read the essay, she asked if I would teach her Latin. As a result, I have found someone with whom I can share the heart-shaped piece. Not all of us can do that as middle school Latin teachers, but most of us can find ways to do it as parents, as mentors and as friends. When my student and I sit in a coffee shop and read Latin together, I can feel the revolution coming, word by word, two people at a time.

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