

FORUM

A RESPONSE TO ROB HARDY¹

We are colleagues who teach in the same middle school. Like Rob Hardy, both of us, for different reasons, found ourselves doing this for the first time under challenging circumstances. But we are both still middle school teachers, and we would like to address some of Hardy's points both on pedagogy and on the reasons to study Latin.

Hardy seems to have many qualities of a model teacher. He is passionate about his subject and knows how to convey that passion to others; anyone who can make a student want to be a philologist after one talk on the history of Indo-European languages is desperately needed in the classroom. We would urge him not to give up on secondary school teaching because of one negative experience. Regarding that experience, he has two reasonable complaints:

- (1) He was paid for "part time" work but was definitely working full time, if he had 165 students. Those are unfair working conditions.
- (2) Although the teacher who preceded him may not have been challenging the students to learn as much as they could, that does not mean that all the things the teacher was doing were misguided.

Now to our more philosophical points. Practicality is not necessarily wrong; it is merely not the whole world. As humans we are both spirit (or mind) and flesh, and these are not immediately distinguishable from one other. Therefore, it is just as imperative that we seek immediately pragmatic action as less immediately pragmatic action—such as listening to Bach, reading Catullus, etc. We would argue that there are many practical benefits to studying Latin.

Latin has been proven to improve SAT scores—surely Hardy is not claiming that this is not true, or that getting into college is not a worthy goal. It is unfortunate that the study of Latin is sometimes seen as a glorified SAT prep course. But the benefits of vocabulary-building extend far beyond one standardized test; words are tools for a lifetime. In addition, studying a foreign language is useful because it helps one think about the world from a different perspective. The perspective Latin gives us is unique, because it is a historical, and thus a four-dimensional perspective. It allows us to understand ourselves more fully as people with a long, rich history.

¹ Hardy, Rob. "Missing the Heart-Shaped Piece: How I Failed as a Middle School Latin Teacher." *CJ* 100 (2005) 403–9.

It is also a perspective many have shared over the past 2,000 years, which leads to our next point.

It is impossible to truly understand our world without knowledge of the classical world; its stories, ideals, architecture, philosophy, government and science defined many of the presuppositions we live with today. Today's economy is an information economy based on the ability to decode, manipulate and recode information. What better practice in that than Latin? There are many types of information Latin can help one use. Latin opens doors to other Romance languages, which dominate much of the globe. It also opens doors to English—not only literature, but simple competence as well. And studying Latin is tremendous preparation for further work in the academy in any field, because it helps one deal with the culture that built the knowledge.

Alfie Kohn has made a reputation as a harsh critic of standardized tests, rewards and punishments, competitions and other such tools we use as teachers. His *Punished by Rewards*, which Hardy cites approvingly, is only one of his many books, including *No Contest* (1986), *Beyond Discipline* (1996), *The Case Against Standardized Testing* (2000) and *What Does It Mean to Be Well-Educated?* (2004), which express these views. But our 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. There is nonetheless a difference between bribing and rewarding students. When students expect candy as a right, it ceases to be a meaningful reward. If they can understand, however, that a gift of candy needs to be earned, it can be used effectively. If Hardy did not like to reward students for decontextualizing grammar, he might have done better to invent an activity that contextualized it, and to reward students who succeeded at that activity. The American Classical League has generated many materials that can help in this regard and many opportunities for teachers to learn from one another.

Like Hardy, I (Marianthe Colakis) inherited a middle school Latin program that had been taught by an “easy, fun” teacher. It was difficult to pick up the telephone in the evening during those first few months, wondering if the caller was a parent wanting to know why his or her son or daughter, who had made straight A's the previous year, was suddenly failing tests and quizzes. Fortunately the dropouts were few, and I went on to help build an academically stronger middle school program. This has been a long process of learning how to balance academic rigor with games and “goodies.” My classes play games, but not every day; and I give out candy, but not for every correct answer. I do not claim to have achieved a perfect balance, or that all my students fall in love with Latin—only that it is possible to adapt students' desires for rewards to work in

the teacher's favor. Most students take classes in middle or high school for the "wrong" reasons. One of our jobs as educators is to give them an opportunity to participate joyfully in a subject. That does not mean that we are playing games every day and passing out candy like it is ... well, candy; but it does mean that we need to find ways for students to participate in our subject that take into account who and what they are. Perhaps this means treating Latin like a secret, mystical code, or putting on plays or creating papier-mâché volcanoes. Students have the responsibility for their own education, but teachers also have a responsibility to present their subject in the best possible light.

I (Matt Lind) have taught required Latin IA and IB courses for middle school students for the past five years. Therefore, all my students are in my class for the "wrong" reason—which is the same reason they are in math, English, science, history, etc. Most of these students transfer to a modern language at the earliest opportunity (9th grade). A small number stick with it every year. But while this is gratifying, I see my goal as a middle school teacher to be making kids excited about language study, and not necessarily seeing everyone take AP Vergil. When I began teaching mid-year, I replaced a gentleman whose relationship with his students was strained. I believe that one of his problems was a failure to communicate to his charges the presence of Latin everywhere in our culture. My students are required to search for "Latin Links" (an idea I borrowed from other, more capable teachers than myself) as both an assignment and a small extra-credit opportunity. They constantly come into class telling me that Mr. or Mrs. So-and-So gave them a Latin link in this or that class. I hear about how the morning drive disk jockey mentioned Latin, or (for the umpteenth time) about how they heard "*carpe diem*" on the Disney Channel.

We both ask students to translate Latin every day and to memorize declensions, conjugations and vocabulary. But giving kids stickers, candies, bathroom or homework passes, a seat on the coveted couch, a day outside doing "chariot races" or the like is a reasonable way to ask for their attention. In fact, we find that keeping things positive and encouraging maximizes the time our classes can be "on-task" and engaged in learning. Hearing students call each other by their Latin names in the hallway, greeting each other with a warm "*Salve*" or us with "*Salve, Magister/Magistra,*" or calling "*Veni huc*" to each other reminds us that they will either make things relevant to their lives or forget about them.

Finally, suggesting that reading Catullus is *supra usum* seems to us to be dereliction of duty for any true Latinist. Reading Catullus as a teenager helped me (Matt Lind) to understand and recognize what it means to be young, stupid and in love. It gave me a healthy

perspective on myself, something preciously difficult for a teenager to come by. As Freud said, "Wherever I go, I find that a poet has gone there before me." One of the most important uses of art is to give us a guide to that murky realm of psychology that has yet to be truly spelled out for us by scientists. Literature and art are also useful in that we are naturally drawn to them as human beings. We seek out the experiences, fictional or not, of others in a format that challenges us to understand them intellectually and metaphysically. To say that this is not useful for one's psyche is to miss important aspects of the human experience.

One could suggest that all academia should be an ivory tower with no connection to the real world, in the way that Hardy might idealize art and literature. On the other hand, one could demand that all intellectual pursuits be tied to a rational, pragmatic goal, an argument used by those who attempted to eliminate the teaching of Latin from the 20th-century academic curriculum. The truth lies somewhere in between. Not every student will see the inherent beauty of a hendecasyllable or score 800 on the SAT Verbal. One need not be a partisan of a particular pedagogical school of thought to be an effective teacher. One merely needs to recognize what is effective and what is not in one's own real-world classroom environment.

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