

PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING
IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LATIN CLASSROOM

The initial reaction of many secondary teachers to “Missing the Heart-Shaped Piece” by Rob Hardy was not favorable.¹ It hit very close to the unspoken but often assumed hierarchy in education in classics: if you truly have talent, you become a professor; if you do not quite have what it takes to be a professor, you become a high school teacher; and if you do not have what it takes to teach even high school, but you still love Latin, you can at least manage middle school without doing much harm. This prejudice is not necessarily malicious or intentional, but it is ubiquitous. When I was acting as a consultant at a teacher in-service in Virginia in fall 2004, it was clear that some teachers doubted whether a middle school teacher could offer much to people who regularly taught AP Latin courses. Fortunately, I changed that view as the day progressed.

The Distractors

Hardy’s article raises several questions, among them whether there is too much testing in education. Let us throw in whether parents are too permissive, and whether students play too many computer games or read too little. And what of the claim that too many games are played in the secondary Latin classroom and that there is a lack of intrinsic motivation for study and accomplishment? Yes, there are classrooms where fun and games dominate and serious learning is all but absent in order to appease the students who are, by law, *required* to be in school; we can all name at least one program like that. Likewise, there are plenty of beginning Latin classes at the university level that are poorly attended even if fully enrolled—an equal demonstration of an inability to instill enthusiasm and foster intrinsic motivation. It just looks different at the university level.

But after we have exhausted ourselves pointing fingers at all the ills in education, the bureaucracies, the legislators and the rest, we need to stop and ask ourselves just three questions: (1) What is out of my control? (2) What is within my control? (3) And if it is within my control, what can I do about it?

¹ *CJ* 100 (2005) 403–9.

Out of my control would be issues involving testing, parental involvement, hormones, pregnancy, drug use, gang involvement and what a few less able teachers do in their classrooms. Therefore these issues are not worth discussing; they are *distractors* that prevent us from seeing where the true problems are. Almost everything else that goes on in my classroom *is* within my control, even the majority of behavioral issues that scare too many instructors away from the secondary classroom, especially the middle school classroom.

Classroom Management and Structure

Classroom management often receives little attention in teacher training but can be the critical issue that makes or breaks a new teacher, especially in a middle school environment. Many new teachers are fooled into thinking that they are so dynamic and have so many creative ideas that the students will be enthralled and thus present no behavioral problems at all. This is perhaps only naiveté, perhaps arrogance.

These are some of the problems encountered in middle school:

- students coming to class unprepared (no book, no folder, no pen, no paper)
- students being tardy
- students not being quiet when class needs to begin
- students talking out of turn
- students not in their seats
- students not participating
- students generally being disruptive

These time-wasting activities can easily eat up 10–15 minutes of the 50-minute hour, a significant amount of instructional time if this is repeated on a daily basis. I want to add that many of these behaviors are age-related and tied to normal physical and neurological development, and are not necessarily a sign of disrespect or lack of interest. Careful structuring of the class can combat these disruptions, minimizing wasted time and maximizing instructional time. Students, especially young students, function better in a well-structured classroom. I encourage all teachers to study Harry Wong's excellent *The First Days of School* and consider, as I did, how to customize his suggestions to fit the needs of your classroom. Here is how my class is currently structured:

1. Students enter and check the bulletin board for jobs. Each row has a rotating job (*centurio*) of getting student folders and warm-up spirals from the file drawer. No more than five students (one each from five rows) will be at the file cabinet at any given time. Students may take folders home, but in general they are left in the room. Besides five *centuriones*, there is a *legatus*, who is in charge of the Time-Wasting Spiral for the day, and the *tribunus*, who is in charge of the bell.

2. At the bell all students begin to work on a warm-up (*praeparatio*) on the overhead. They are all able to begin at the same time because they all have their spirals, and pens are in a library pocket taped to the top of the desk. No one, therefore, can claim that he or she has nothing to write with; I have effectively removed all excuses for off-task behavior from the very beginning of class. While students are silently working on the warm-up, which might consist of conjugating a verb, identifying cases in the context of a sentence or paraphrasing a sentence, I take roll on the computer. The warm-ups are always tied to the lesson and we always review it together. I give a check grade on the students' warm-up spirals, which I review while they are taking tests. Thus grading them does not take up my time outside of the classroom.
3. After warm-ups we usually review current vocabulary using a large set of flashcards. (A variety of effective study techniques, such as drilling with flashcards, should be taught in the beginning Latin classroom.) This activity, combined with whatever was the focus of the warm-up, prepares students for the day's reading in the text.
4. Typically, we then proceed to the story in the textbooks. The books, like the folders and spirals, are kept in the room (under the desks) but can also be taken home. We practice prereading techniques such as looking at illustrations, discussing the title, reading/repeating the glossed vocabulary and making educated guesses about the content of the story. I then read it to them completely and expressively. This is followed by our reading the story together while I walk around the room and between rows, listening to make certain that each student is reading. From there we might read it slowly, carefully noting morphology and paraphrasing if I wish to focus on certain constructions. We might translate it together, or I might question them in Latin as we read through it again. Students might do a reading comprehension worksheet on the story in English. Or they might do a cloze worksheet with key words left out to focus on a new grammatical structure. If students are doing written work, they will work as a cooperative group consisting of the students in their row. (More on this below.)
5. At any point during the class when there has been an off-task behavior, the *legatus* has been told to write the perpetrator's name down in the Time-Wasting Spiral. Thus I have a written account of behavioral problems but have not stopped what I am doing for more than a moment. Consequences include time after class, lunch detention, calling home and ultimately a referral. Because students know I have a written, dated record, they are more inclined to follow class rules. Everyone gets a clean slate after three weeks and we begin again.
6. When there are five minutes left in class, the *tribunus* rings the bell. The *centuriones* pick up folders and spirals (if the students do not wish to take them home) and put them in the appropriate file drawer. Pens are returned to the library pockets on desks and books, if not going home, are placed beneath desks. I review the Time-Wasting Spiral and note the names of students who need to stay after class, sign any grade sheets that need signing (for permission to take part in athletics) and check to see that the rows are in order. With any time remaining, I review the day's objectives or drill vocabulary.

7. When the bell rings I “send off” the students with a Latin phrase. I say it; they repeat it; I say the English meaning; they repeat that; and then I dismiss them with “*valete omnes.*”

There are several important ideas here. First, I have effectively removed many of the excuses for young students being off task: not having spirals, folders, books and especially something to write with. Few students leave my classroom to go to their lockers. If a student does, in fact, take his/her folder or book home and fails to bring it back, his/her name is added to the Time-Wasting Spiral. Am I babying them by keeping their folders and books in my room and supplying pens on their desks? Perhaps; but the amount of time spent on-task this past year increased easily by 10 minutes or more per class, and I rarely left school frustrated by student behavior or my inability to cover what was in my lesson plan. Students were engaged throughout the class, had *clear expectations* of what was expected of them from the moment they entered, and had little down time for fooling around because I structured the things I am required to do by law (take attendance, sign grade slips, etc.) during times when they were engaged in other activities (doing warm-ups, putting away folders and spirals, etc.).

Many of the students’ written assignments are done in cooperative groups, as I noted earlier. I find that this reduces blatant copying and can dramatically increase the quality of the work turned in, from proper formatting and mechanics, to closer attention paid to correct tense, case or number. Grades are individual and never group grades, although admittedly groups which finish first are often given chocolate. There are typically four jobs within each group.

- *licitor*: in charge of insuring that everyone in their group has a complete heading on his/her paper and has followed the specified formatting.
- *lector*: in charge of reading the Latin and the related questions
- *vocabularius/a*: in charge of looking up unknown vocabulary
- *grammaticus/a*: in charge of focusing on aspects of grammar/morphology

Along with these jobs students are taught how to ask appropriate questions. “What’s the answer to number two?” is not appropriate. But “Why is ‘to the slaves’ the correct answer?” is. This leads students to peer-teaching, explaining morphological endings to each other in their own words. If the less able student does not ask the question, the more able student (i.e. the student that hates to be copied from) must ask “Do you know why ‘to the slaves’ is correct?” The ensuing discussion should include some information about the morphology of the word and perhaps even syntax.

Principles of Learning

At our school, understanding how to question and discuss the subject matter as described above is called *accountable talk*. Learning

is as much about knowing how to ask the questions as it is about having the right answers. *Accountable talk* is part of the *Principles of Learning*,² an educational philosophy my school district has adopted. This is an effort-oriented educational system as opposed to an aptitude-oriented system; that is, it embodies the idea that with sustained, systematic effort, all students are capable of high achievement and high-level thinking, regardless of their backgrounds, and that effort can *create* ability. Other key ideas include the notion of *clear expectations*—insuring that all students understand what the high expectations are and how to achieve those expectations. Most important is the notion of *academic rigor in a thinking curriculum*—a rejection of teaching in which the level of assessment never rises above the knowledge category in Bloom’s Taxonomy.

Latin, of course, meets everyone’s idea of academic rigor because of the complexity of an inflectional language. In the past this meant that only students already equipped to deal with high level cognitive thinking succeeded. I have found, however, that I can teach my non-A students the steps the “A”-students naturally take when dealing with, for example, taking a test. As a result, I provide extra credit for any demonstration of “effort” on tests in the form of notes in the margins and such, much like showing work on a math problem. This rewards the student in a small way for mastering knowledge level material (personal endings on verbs, tense markers, etc.) and allows me to see where the disconnect is happening with the higher level thinking processes. The result is a substantial improvement in overall test-taking ability and greater confidence in approaching sight passages. Most of all, every student in the class knows that I am truly there to *teach* them every step of the way so that they *all* can meet the high expectations which have been set.

Uselessness versus Utility

“I had a difficult time justifying Latin to my affluent students, who were under so much pressure to succeed.... I wanted desperately to spark in each of my students an interest in Latin for Latin’s sake. I wanted them to appreciate it for its rose-like beauty, not for its cabbage-like utility. I wanted my students to appreciate Latin’s uselessness.... Latin, I am convinced, is entirely unprofitable, as prairies and old-growth forests are unprofitable.” (Hardy)

I can understand Hardy’s point of view to an extent. Improved verbal SAT scores are the cabbage-like utility we too often parade about in our defense of Latin. These are, however, the statistics that will immediately appease the shortsighted student under pressure to succeed while you develop that interest in Latin for Latin’s sake.

² More information on the Principles of Learning can be found at <http://www.instituteforlearning.org/>.

But *uselessness*? Latin and the world that belonged to those Latin-speaking Romans provide the invisible web that supports so many aspects of western culture—law, philosophy, history, the sciences, political science, art, architecture and more. Knowing Latin means that I can explain to my son why an *oviraptor* is so aptly named. Knowing Latin means that I fully understand that someone pleading *nolo contendere* is not necessarily admitting guilt. Knowing Latin means that I recognize that when a journalist writes that gorilla populations are being *decimated*, that the journalist does not truly understand the meaning of *decimate*. Knowing Latin means I can read a menu in Spanish at a Mexican restaurant without someone to translate for me. Knowing Latin means that I understand all the Latin references, political and otherwise, in “The West Wing.”

But this is not the sort of utility Hardy is after. This is still cabbage-like utility even if it is not Latin for boosting SAT scores or looking good on a transcript. The real reason to study Latin is to read what people who lived before us wrote, in their own words and expressing their own thoughts and emotions in their own distinctive way. The real reason to study Latin is to read

odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.
nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

and empathize with the torturous pain Catullus was feeling. The real reason to study Latin is to read

non amo te, Sabidi, nec possum dicere quare.
hoc tantum possum dicere: non amo te.

and be able to laugh at Martial explaining that he just does not like Sapidus. The real reason to study Latin is to read

Ecce autem gemini a Tenedo tranquilla per alta
—horresco referens—immensis orbibus angues
incumbunt pelago pariterque ad litora tendunt;
pectora quorum inter fluctus arrecta iubaeque
sanguineae superant undas;

and appreciate that Vergil not only knew how to build suspense and terror but used words to construct vivid pictures in the mind. And yes, I have taught all of these passages—authentic Latin texts—in the middle school classroom. I have demonstrated to students that Latin is full of passion, beauty, humor and horror.

If Latin is useless, so is Terry Pratchett or Stephen King. And so are our dashboard poets, the pop bands many of us could not live without. The mind and soul need to be fed constantly; authors need to speak to us whether from 2,000 miles or 2,000 years away. I want to read the power and terror of the sea serpents’ attack in Vergil’s *Aeneid* as much as I want to read the haunting of Sara Laughs in

King's *Bag of Bones*. I want to "hear" Catullus as much as I want to hear Aerosmith, Martial as much as Jimmy Buffett. I want and need to feed my heart and mind and soul. Who does not? And is that not enough to justify learning to read Latin?

Further Reading for the True Teacher

There are two books that every teacher of Latin should own and that should be at the core of any methods course for Latin teachers. The first is Rick LaFleur's *Latin for the 21st Century*, which provides an excellent overview of a wide variety of topics, including:

- National Standards for Latin instructions
- Instructional approaches
- Latin in the elementary, middle and high schools
- Advanced Placement instruction
- High school/college articulation
- Historical overview of Latin instruction, methods and texts
- Resources for the Latin classroom

But for an excellent, in-depth look at Latin pedagogy independent of any textbook series, you need Paul Distler's extraordinary *Teach the Latin, I Pray You*. Chapters include the teaching of morphology and vocabulary, teaching the reading of Latin, the art of questioning, review and spiral teaching and more. In the preface, Distler says:

Teaching is an art and possibly the greatest. It deals not with inanimate things such as clay or marble, color or sound, but is bent upon molding and shaping that which is alive and pulsating in the realm of the spirit. Hence its excellence as a vocation and its responsibilities.... The exercise of any art is not achieved without a mastery of skills—skills that are generally acquired by hard work and study coupled with abundant practice. The art of teaching is no exception. Teachers too must work hard to acquire the skills that are consonant with their high calling.

When I read these words I am reminded that true teaching is a calling, not a fall back position. It is a *calling*, the kind you can hardly explain to anyone who does not have the same calling. It is a calling that possesses you, obsesses you and challenges you in ways no other profession can.

And even though the level of Latin is fairly simple in the middle school classroom, being a truly good teacher at this level is quite complex and certainly not simply for those who cannot teach at higher levels. We are in charge of laying a solid foundation, and nothing is more critical than that. If you come across a teacher who is playing too many games and giving out too much candy (or a TA or professor whose classes are poorly attended though fully enrolled), ask yourself who educated that teacher and why that teacher was not grounded thoroughly in Latin pedagogy and cognitive develop-

ment—why the universities graduated yet another facilitator instead of a teacher.

Rethinking Teacher Preparation

It is time that we as a profession recognize that there are great lapses in teacher preparation and begin to discuss frankly changes that can be incorporated and should be incorporated—and not at some indefinite point in the future but *as soon as possible*. NOW, in fact. We are losing teachers to retirement and do not have enough new teachers to replace them. We cannot afford to lose even one new teacher due to failures in the classroom from lack of adequate preparation, and, my friends, we have not been adequately preparing and training our teachers. And yes, many of these openings are at the middle school level.

The difficulty, admittedly, lies in how to train only one or two people per year adequately, how to cover all the authors that should be read before teaching AP Latin or IB Latin, and how to provide these future teachers with the skills needed to teach effectively and efficiently from reading-based textbooks as well as more traditional grammar-oriented textbooks.

Begin by printing and distributing the brochure entitled “So You Want to be a Latin Teacher?”, which can be found at <http://www.promotelatin.org/futureteacher.pdf>. It addresses issues such as reading and oral proficiency, as well as Latin pedagogy, and is designed to be put in the hands of students as early as their freshman year. The books and articles listed in the brochure should become the core materials for any method course taught. Then consider suggestions made in “Teacher Prep: New Ideas, New Approach,” *CAMWS Newsletter* Volume 14.3, Spring 2005, pp. 9–12 (<http://www.camws.org/News/newsletter/nwsltr14.3.pdf>), for possible ways to meet the needs of future teachers without stifling the variety and range of courses taught at the university level. Finally, consider offering financial assistance to send those future teachers to an ACL Institute, a Cambridge teachers workshop or even a Rassias seminar—anything that focuses specifically and intensively on classroom teaching or foreign language acquisition—*before* they graduate.³

GINNY LINDZEY

Dripping Springs High School, Dripping Springs TX

(At the time of writing, Ginny was teaching at Porter Middle School, Austin TX⁴, which is now in the process of closing.)

³ A fuller version of this article can be found at <http://www.txclassics.org/PrinciplesOfLearningInTheMSLatinClassroom.pdf>

⁴ Porter Middle School is a Title 1 public school where over 80% of the student body are on the free and reduced lunch program.