

FACILITATING CONTEXTUALIZATION
THROUGH ACTIVE LEARNING: A MODEL FOR THE
BEGINNING LATIN CLASSROOM

My first-year Latin classes seemed to be progressing well enough. My students had mastered basic grammatical concepts—verb conjugation, noun declension, case function—and acquired a fundamental vocabulary. In addition, they had learned to focus on the meaning of a text rather than its form, and consequently approached lengthy passages of Latin with confidence. Finally, my classes had even gained some appreciation for Roman society, as our text presented a rich narrative situated in ancient Pompeii. My beginning classes were firing on all cylinders... or so I thought.

One day I introduced a unit on Pompeian elections. After previewing the first reading, a student asked whether one of the narrative's main characters was a Republican or a Democrat. After I explained that the character belonged to neither modern American political party, I paused in anticipation of a follow-up question. But the student simply accepted my answer and began reading the first passage in the new unit. I was surprised that her curiosity did not extend past her anachronistic query. Did she not care to know more about the Roman political system?

As I reflected on this incident, I recalled other similar situations, and realized that my student's approach was not unique. Because their knowledge of American life is experiential and repetitious, and therefore far more internalized, beginning Latin students naturally project modern cultural assumptions on the Roman world. Thus these students frequently attempt to understand Roman culture through reactive comparison rather than positive definition. This tendency often persists even within classes that utilize a reading-based Latin program, because merely reading Latin narratives provides no substitute for experiencing their settings first-hand.¹ No matter how many culturally contextualized Latin narratives we present to beginning students, they still live and breathe in modern

¹ The term "reading-based" refers to textbooks that (1) employ a continuous, episodic narrative and (2) introduce grammatical constructions within the storyline before treating them formally. Examples include *Cambridge Latin Course* (hereafter CLC), *Ecce Romani* (hereafter ER) and *Oxford Latin Course* (hereafter OLC).

America. Fortunately, this discrepancy can be minimized through active learning.

Although it is no longer possible to physically experience the everyday life of ancient Romans, their customs and practices can be simulated through active learning. Active learning goes beyond traditional methods such as lecture and reading comprehension questions. According to Bonwell and Eison, active learning can be defined as “anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing.”² L. Dee Fink, director of the Instructional Development Program at the University of Oklahoma, has expanded this definition and constructed a helpful model for active learning. Fink maintains that active learning involves some form of experience or reflective dialogue. Furthermore, experience involves either doing or observing, while reflective dialogue occurs alone or in a group.³ Thus a paradigm for active learning in the Latin classroom must include these four components, but their use will be determined by the contexts of the passages in the class text.

Reading-based texts typically include passages with three general contexts—communal, individual or historical:

- Communal passages describe the periodic events and traditions in which the society at large participates. Cultural rituals such as festivals (*CLC* stage five, *In Theātrō*), dinner parties (*ER* chapter 33, *At Dinner*) and political elections (*OLC* chapter 17, *Comitia*) are examples of communal contexts for Latin. Communal contexts are best simulated through doing and dialoguing with others, as they enable the class to mirror, at least in part, the actions of persons in the textbook narrative.
- Individual passages detail regular or everyday habits practiced by most persons within the society. Personal routines surrounding education (*OLC* chapter six, *The School of Flavius*), employment (*CLC* stage three, *Negotium*) and recreation (*ER* chapter 27, *A Visit to the Races*) form individual contexts for Latin. Individual readings vary from communal readings in that, while the subject matter may involve group participation, it does not require it. Consequently, observing and dialoguing with self enable each student to simulate the actions found in individual contexts.⁴

² Bonwell and Eison (1991) 2.

³ For further discussion of these components, see Fink (2003) 103–10.

⁴ Observation of individual contexts can be either direct (through theatrical recreations) or vicarious (through personal visualization).

- Historical passages deal with specific events that occurred at a single point in time, such as the eruption of Vesuvius (*CLC* stage 12) or the rule of Cincinnatus (*OLC* chapter 15). Historical readings vary from communal and individual readings in that they necessarily contain unique events with determined outcomes. When employed together, all four components of active learning successfully simulate historical contexts—students observe what happened, reflect on the course of action they would have chosen, present their imagined experience to their peers and debate the wisdom or folly of their choices as a group.

Personal experience confirms the pedagogical value of incorporating active learning components into the beginning Latin classroom. For example, I created a jigsaw exercise (Appendix A) to accompany *CLC* stage 11, *Candidati*.⁵ This task required my students to participate in the two communal components of active learning: doing and dialoguing with others.⁶ I first divided the class into numerically equal home-groups, and allocated representatives from each home-group into separate expert-groups. I then instructed the expert-groups to read the English article at the end of the stage, which detailed the roles of various individuals in Pompeian elections, and distributed discussion questions designed to focus each expert-group on one specific role. Next, my students returned to their home-groups, where they designed a campaign based on the knowledge gained in their expert-groups. Finally, each home-group presented its campaign, and the class as a whole voted on the candidates.

My students approached this activity with enthusiasm, remaining remarkably on task throughout the entire class period. They seemed genuinely interested in the task—so much so that they forgot to complain when required to compose slogans and speeches in Latin. I received feedback afterward, with the students' consensus forming around two sentiments: (1) working in groups was more enjoyable than working alone, and (2) re-enacting the actual process of a local election was better than merely reading about it.

On another occasion, I presented a journal activity (Appendix B) that required the two components of active learning particular to individual contexts: observing and dialoguing with self.⁷ First, I

⁵ For an overview of the history and application of the jigsaw method, see Kagan (1994) 18:3.

⁶ Other activities that require doing and dialoguing with others are (1) Information Gap, described in Shrum and Glisan (2000) 182, and (2) Card Sort, described in Silberman (1996) 103.

⁷ Silberman (1996) details two other activities, Imagine (pp. 122–3) and Mind Maps (p. 126), that require observing and dialoguing with self.

asked my students to read the English article at the end of *CLC* stage nine (*Thermae*), which details the structure, activities and atmosphere of the baths. Next, I asked them to imagine that they lived in ancient Rome and to pretend that they had spent a day at the baths. Then I instructed each student to write a journal entry describing what he or she saw, heard, smelled, felt and did.⁸ To say that my students took a keen interest in this activity would be an understatement; most filled an entire page with vivid details of their trip, and a few volunteered to share their compositions with the class. Again I solicited feedback, and the class agreed that the journal activity enabled them to visualize the different rooms of the baths and to feel as if they had actually experienced the atmosphere and activities that occurred there.

A final personal example comes from *CLC* stage 12, *Vesuvius*. Because of the historical context of the narrative, I wanted my students to grapple with the circumstances surrounding its characters, so that they might better appreciate the characters' choices. To that end, I designed an anticipation guide (see Appendix C) that forced each student to take part in all four components of active learning: doing, observing, dialoguing with self and dialoguing with others.⁹ First, I gave my students a set of opinion statements relating to natural disasters and asked them to take a position on each. I then asked them to read the English article at the end of the stage, which detailed the eruption of Vesuvius. I offered them an opportunity to reconsider their positions, and asked them to present and defend their positions in front of the class. After every student had expressed an opinion, I rephrased the statements so that the whole class could be in agreement.¹⁰

At first, my students approached this activity with some reserve, but their reticence gave way to enthusiasm as soon as they began expressing and defending their personal opinions. Afterward, they voiced appreciation for the anticipation guide because it heightened their awareness of the narrative's context by requiring them to play the role of an individual confronted with similar circumstances.

In conclusion, positively defining the communal, individual and historical contexts of Latin passages through active learning offers a number of benefits. First, defining Roman culture in a positive rather than a reactive sense empowers beginning students to compare the

⁸ This type of journaling facilitates vicarious observation through visualization, a strategy detailed in Harvey and Goudvis (2000) 22–3.

⁹ Silberman (1996) offers additional activities that can be modified to require doing, observing, dialoguing with self and dialoguing with others: Active Debate (pp. 84–5), Town Meeting (p. 86), Three-Stage Fishbowl Decision (pp. 87–8) and Group to Group Exchange (p. 109).

¹⁰ For more on the purposes, guidelines and function of anticipation guides, see Vacca and Vacca (2005) 307–11.

Roman world to American modernity in a more balanced manner. Second, a better understanding of the cultural context of a narrative enables students to identify more closely with its characters and sympathize with its situations, which in turn can improve their interest in and retention of the storyline. Finally, encouraging active participation in Roman culture increases our students' motivation to read authentic Latin texts—an endeavor we all hope they will undertake.

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Figure 1: A Model for Active Learning in the Beginning Latin Classroom

<i>Reading Contexts</i>	Communal	Individual	Historical
<i>Frequency of Occurrence</i>	Periodic	Regular	Once
<i>Examples</i>	Festivals & Political Elections	Employment & Recreation	Eruption of Vesuvius
<i>Student Actions</i>	Doing & Dialoguing with Others	Observing & Dialoguing with Self	Doing, Observing, Dialoguing with Self & Others

APPENDIX A

*Pompeian Election Jigsaw Exercise:**Home-Groups*

Home-Group 1	Home-Group 2	Home-Group 3
Student 1A	Student 2A	Student 3A
Student 1B	Student 2B	Student 3B
Student 1C	Student 2C	Student 3C

Expert-Groups

<i>Candidati</i>	<i>Fautōrēs</i>	<i>Scriptōrēs</i>
Student 1A	Student 1B	Student 1C
Student 2A	Student 2B	Student 2C
Student 3A	Student 3B	Student 3C

*Expert-Group Instructions:**Candidati Expert-Group*

After reading the article at the end of Stage 11, brainstorm as a group on the following questions. Make a list of your answers in Latin.

- (1) What types of people might run for public office in Pompeii?
- (2) What were the duties of an aedile?
- (3) What professions would serve as good experience for a future aedile?

Fautōrēs Expert-Group

After reading the article at the end of Stage 11, brainstorm as a group on the following questions. Make a list of your answers in Latin.

- (1) What kind of qualities would you look for in a potential aedile?
- (2) What types of professional experience would qualify someone to be an aedile?

Scriptōrēs Expert-Group

After reading the article at the end of Stage 11, brainstorm as a group on the following questions. Make a list of your answers in Latin.

- (1) What skills or character traits would you look for in a potential aedile?
- (2) What adjectives would you use to promote someone running for aedile?

Home-Group Instructions:

Your task is to develop a campaign for aedile. Your campaign will need a *candidatus*, a *fautor* and a *scriptor*. Keep the following in mind as you develop your campaign:

- (1) Each *candidatus* will deliver a speech in Latin. The speech must include the name and profession of the *candidatus*, as well as his or her reason for seeking the office of aedile.
- (2) Each *fautor* will deliver a speech in support of his or her *candidatus*. The speech should include the character traits and qualifications of the *candidatus*, and it must be given in Latin.
- (3) Each *scriptor* will be responsible for making two signs that promote his or her *candidatus*. Signs must be written in Latin.

APPENDIX B

My Day at the Baths Journal Entry

Instructions: Imagine that you live in Ancient Rome and just returned from an afternoon at the baths. Write a journal entry detailing what you saw, heard, smelled, felt and did. Refer to the article at the end of Stage 9 as needed. Use all of the lines provided.

APPENDIX C

Vesuvius Anticipation Guide

Instructions: Place a “Y” next to the statements with which you agree and an “N” next to the statements with which you disagree in the “pre-reading” column. Then, read the article at the end of Stage 12. After you have finished, re-examine the statements in light of what you have just read. Again, place a “Y” next to the statements with which you agree and an “N” next to the statements with which you disagree, but this time use the “post-reading” column. Be prepared to present and defend your positions before the class.

Pre-reading	Post-reading	
_____	_____	(1) It is best to flee at the first indication of a natural disaster.
_____	_____	(2) Saving others is more important than saving yourself.
_____	_____	(3) A servant should always help his or her master.