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FORUM

NEXT YEAR?: EVALUATING A MODEL FOR SECOND-YEAR COLLEGE LATIN

I had just finished teaching the last regular class and had already put my notes for that quarter in order. The prospect of a walk home in the dismal rain—in combination with a sense of relief and a small but honest grief for the end of this course—had put me in a somewhat maudlin mood. The usual process of self-evaluation was well underway. In spite of initial difficulties, in some small way, I convinced myself, this 4th quarter Latin course (equivalent to a 3rd semester course) had been a success on several fronts, although a great many improvements might be made for next time. I felt that I, teaching 2nd year language for the first time in my new position (I had elsewhere taught first or upper years), had faced down a difficult challenge ... or at least could call it a draw.

The Situation

My students had completed a standard textbook and had begun, at the end of the first year, a series of graded readings from another book. I had planned to continue using the familiar reader for the first few weeks to effect a smooth transition for the students with a new instructor. Although the students were translating well, few could describe the function of any word or clause in a sentence they had just translated (flawlessly!). My suspicions were confirmed by the results of a diagnostic test I administered at the beginning of the second week. Their goal was what it had been through first year: a translation. Worse still, they were sometimes working from corrected translations obtained elsewhere.

The widely disparate knowledge and ability of the students (revealed in the diagnostic test and the work to-date) made the course as I had planned it more or less impossible. Some students were ready for reading, others needed intensive and very basic review. So, I faced the danger of numbing the better students with what was to them trivial detail and equally of eroding the confidence (no small part of the process of learning) and interest of the others by presenting them only with opportunities to fail.

A Solution

The system¹ that I implemented (in spite of first appearances) was quite straightforward. In simplest terms, the class of 26 was split into eight groups of three (or four) based on the results of the diagnostic exam. Each group had a student from the upper third, the middle third, and the lower third. These students would work together four days a week for the rest of the ten-week quarter. I set up separate discussion boards for each of these eight groups using the university's online learning tool. As the "fourth" member of each group I could monitor discussions and answer questions with questions. At the end of each week, I posted online a reading of unaltered Latin to the entire class, and posted on the discussion board for each group a portion of the reading.

The readings were generally not difficult to divide (indeed, divisibility was often a governing factor in selection): each group ended up with a grammatically contained, two or three sentence chunk of Latin. Each group was charged with producing a *grammatical* commentary for their peers, with hints and food for thought from me (also posted on each group's discussion board) to guide their commentaries. For the purposes of the grammatical commentary broader content context was unnecessary. For example, the head for a pronoun is grammatically an unnecessary piece of information, since that pronoun is grammatically functional on its own (I did provide with each reading a brief summary of the passage, such as one would find in collections of unseen passages). In addition to the discussion-board, we devoted two half classes at the beginning of the week for the groups to work together on the commentaries using my *OLD* for dictionary work and myself for other questions. Remember, these texts were blank texts. The other half of these classes was given over to the formal grammar review. During the last two classes of the week we would take up the reading, discussing points of grammar, semantics, style, and historical context, and work towards a passable translation. I deliberately focused attention away from producing "the translation", even to the point of recommending students not translate certain important words or difficult phrases, but give instead a longer paraphrase and/or grammatical analysis. Much more emphasis was laid on understanding what was going on in the Latin.

The meeting schedule for the class (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday) facilitated a number of logistical details; but the system

¹ Acknowledgment is due Dr. H.C. Gotoff at the University of Cincinnati who, at least on one occasion, required his graduate students to produce individually full commentaries on extended passages of Cicero.

could be implemented on many schedules with careful planning. Each group was required to present me an electronic version of their section of the commentary by Tuesday at midnight. I would put the commentary together, and vet the entries, posting the commentary online by mid-morning Wednesday. The students would then use the commentaries to do the first half of the reading for Thursday's meeting and the second half for Friday's. My preparation time, therefore, was concentrated on Wednesday mornings, but minimal at other times. For me, at least, the effort was well worth the return.

Sample Weekly Schedule (for Reading C:
Seneca *Epistulae Morales* 41.1-5(end)):

Day	Out-of-class task/ goal	In-class task/ goal
(Friday)	Instructor: post Reading C online; post chunks in group discussion areas with hints. Students: retrieve Reading C and group chunk with hints; begin work on commentary and discussion online.	Take up second half of Reading B.
Monday	I: monitor discussions online and respond to questions; prepare grammar review. S: do grammar reading and assignments.	Grammar review for half of the class time; monitor group discussions/commentary -work for second half.
Tuesday	I: monitor discussions online and respond to questions; prepare grammar review. S: do grammar reading and assignments; submit group chunk-commentary by midnight online (one student from each group chosen to compile group's commentary).	Grammar review for half of the class time; monitor group discussions/commentary -work for second half.
Wednesday	I: compile and vet group commentaries on reading, making additions as necessary; post Reading C commentary online by noon. S: retrieve Reading C commentary; begin to prepare first half of Reading C using commentary.	No Class
Thursday	I: Prepare Reading D chunks and hints. S: Prepare second half of Reading C.	Take up first half of reading C.
Friday	I: post Reading D online; post chunks in group discussion areas with hints. S: retrieve Reading D and group chunk with hints; begin work on commentary and discussion online.	Take up second half of Reading C.

Benefits

There were a number of immediate pedagogical benefits arising from this method of running the class. On the theoretical side this system met my goals for the course by maintaining an equal balance between acquisition and maturation of syntax knowledge and reading of unedited texts. And I was able to introduce technology into the process of learning Latin in an efficient and sensible way. On a more practical note, I was also able to control which passages each group received, giving more difficult passages to the groups which had "got it together", without obviously privileging any single group (since each group had an equivalent portion of the text). The amount and kinds of hints given to each group, too, were carefully managed to help the students identify the important problems and look for solutions in the grammar on their own first. By using a grammar as a textbook, I was also able to require that groups cite specific entries in the grammar relating to each point discussed in the commentaries. As the quarter went on, I found that I was giving much fewer and less detailed hints, and that students began to know certain grammar entries by heart, or could refer back to good comments on similar problems in earlier readings. As a result, although taking up the readings took about the same amount of time no matter how difficult, the students began producing the commentaries much more rapidly; we eventually spent less time on the mechanics of a sentence and more on style and meaning. And although the students read nearly the whole syntax portion of the grammar, they were able, I think, to see the importance of certain key concepts by the frequency with which they popped up (e.g. subject accusative, relative clauses with subjunctive, sequence of tenses, etc.).

Most important, the students were actively engaged in identifying problems, in finding and assessing possible solutions, and in presenting their solutions to their classmates. Each group, obviously, had a certain advantage for one sentence out of each reading. But the entire class did the whole reading and any individual might be called on to discuss and/or translate. Members from the commenting group for each sentence were retained as helpers for "their" sentence. These helpers also became less necessary as the quarter progressed.

Obviously, this was not a picture perfect system: there were many errors in the early commentaries which I had to vet before passing on to the class (and some of which I missed from time to time), and the quality and precision of commentaries varied from

group to group and reading to reading. The frequency with which one group in particular ignored my hints was astounding. But on the whole the system worked at least as well as anything else I might have tried, and probably better. An anticipated by-product of the group divisions was that superior students were put in the position of being tutors to the weaker students in their groups, a position which forced them to re-evaluate their own knowledge simply in the process of trying to explain something to someone else. This, I hope, kept the challenge up for them, and occasionally (don't tell them!) filled me with a secret glee.

Evaluation of Students

The common student complaint that evaluation of individuals within each group could not be fair (since slackers could get by on the work of others) was voiced by some. My assurances that one gets out what one puts in, and my exhortations on the value of learning as an intellectual act without reward notwithstanding, this problem was rectified in several ways on a practical level. Since a significant portion of class work was done in groups, I felt I had to give a proportionate percentage of the final grade to group work. Group work was assessed on the basis of completeness, accuracy, neatness, and content. Each member of the group did receive the same grade regardless of their contribution to the group effort. But the other assessment strategies were a check on this imbalance. A portion of the final grade equal to the group work was devoted to active participation. Half of this participation portion was objectively assessed: each student was responsible for speaking (translating or asking a relevant question) at least once per week (this worked out to at least six students speaking per class). The other half of the grade was my more subjective assessment of the student's participation in the goals of the course. The ability to monitor group discussions both online and in class played a significant part in that assessment, as well as attendance and general attitude. Another portion of the final grade was devoted to a small number of individual, hand-in assignments. The majority (45%) of the final grade was devoted to formal testing on passages (seen and unseen) both for translation and on points of grammar. Students who did not put any effort into the group work invariably suffered in the other assessments.

Next time...

I passed these students and the method on to a colleague who had similar success (he claims to have actually enjoyed teaching second-year Latin!). It is clear that, given the electronic resources, this method would work for any number of instructors, perhaps even as a distance learning model. And it offers instructors an opportunity to use almost any intermediate level text, whether or not an English intermediate commentary exists. My colleague, for example, chose to weave together several different text sources around a central theme, a move the students were ready for after the stricter review. In any case, I feel that this is a highly adaptable and transferable model for teaching second-year Latin (perhaps even beyond), useful for a range of student abilities and interests.

Cui bono? For myself, I have garnered a resource of tested second year blank texts, and a confidence in a method that can set students attainable goals and challenges while still getting the job done. Certainly, there are things I shall do better next time. For the students, all improved both in their ability to read the texts and in their ability to observe the grammar, many dramatically. More than a few noted their own improvement, and a few have told me they benefited from the whole thing despite initial misgivings. There were grumblings, of course, about the amount of work and the level of precision demanded. But there were few grumblings about the method, and attendance was near perfect, even on Fridays (we met from 4-5pm every weekday except Wednesdays). In the end this is the best issue from a course, the signal to me that the course was effective even where I, perhaps, was not.

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