FORUM

REASSESSING THE GOAL OF LATIN PEDAGOGY

The contemporary discussion of Latin Pedagogy has been marked by two characteristics: disagreement about methods but general agreement about the primary goal. The debate stems from *The Classical Investigation: General Report* of 1924, which set as the central objective of secondary and university Latin study "the progressive development of ability to read and understand Latin."[1] Classicists adopted this goal and the findings of the report with great relief. At last, Latin pedagogy had a succinct and achievable objective. Unfortunately, the modern societal perception of higher education as a training ground for future workers has necessitated changes in Latin curricula which make this goal unachievable today: the "primary objective" of the Classical Investigation Report no longer meets the needs of our students and teachers.

Although the relevance of the report's findings in the modern university may be questionable, the report was useful in the 1920s because it codified the goals of Latin instruction and learning in a fashion never before attempted, using statistical data and the survey of Latin teachers.[2] The "primary objective" laid out by this study, however, has become the dogma of Latin instruction. To my knowledge, this dogma has only been affirmed over the years and never once seriously challenged. Richard Hamilton exemplifies this trend: "...classicists must first insist that the value of the study of Latin is in learning to read Latin."[3] Even Ball and Ellsworth, who challenge traditional Latin instruction in every other respect, assume this goal, defining their central aim as the ability "to read and understand classical literary texts in the original language."[4]

[1] The Advisory Committee of American Classical League, *The Classical Investigation (Part I): General Report* (Princeton University Press, 1924), 32. Although this report dealt primarily with secondary school Latin, its suggestions have shaped both secondary and univerisity curricula. This paper will address primarily the effect of the report on university curricula.

[2] Mason DeWitt Gray, *The Teaching of Latin*, (D. Appleton-Century Company, 1929), 7. For a survey of the various pedagogical methods used throughout history see Kitchell, Kenneth, "The Great Latin Debate: The Futility of Utility?" in *Latin for the 21st Century*, ed. Richard A. LaFleur, Glenview, Ill.: Scotts-Foresman, 1998: 1-14.

[3] Richard Hamilton, "Reading Latin", *CJ* 87 (1992), 165-74; 174.

[4] Robert J. Ball and J.D. Ellsworth, "Teaching Classical Languages," *CW* 83.1 (1989), 1-12; 3.

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However, curricula have changed since the 1920s. No longer can Latin instructors expect their students to enter the first year of college with three or four years of rigorous Latin training. Likewise, secondary school teachers can no longer expect that their college-bound students will be pursuing Latin at an advanced level in university courses. Most college Latin students are now fulfilling a 1-3 semester language requirement in which they will never read any literature or, at best, only isolated, short passages from a few major authors. Today's undergraduates, with no background in Latin, little training in basic grammar and terminology, and small motivation to master language beyond the language requirement, are unlikely to learn enough of the language to read literature with any benefit.

One must ask, therefore, why we still hold "the reading of Latin" as our primary objective when the majority of our students will never read any classical literature in Latin. This seems to be a case of egregious false advertising. We cannot fulfill this objective except for the few students who opt to major in Classics. We certainly have a responsibility to help these students achieve reading ability in Latin. To strive for that goal for *all* Latin students, however, opens Latin programs up to charges of squandering the limited time of our students and even more limited resources.

If the primary objective of the Classical Investigation Report is no longer achievable, perhaps the report may provide another avenue. Let us consider the "ultimate objectives" also enumerated there:

1. Increased understanding of those elements in English which are related to Latin.
2. Increased ability to read, speak, and write English.
3. Development of an historical and cultural background.
4. Development of correct mental habits.
5. Development of right attitudes toward social situations.
6. Development of literary appreciation (the last two years of study).
7. Increased ability to learn other foreign languages.
8. Elementary knowledge of the simpler general principles of language structure.[5]

These eight objectives have never been as widely accepted as the "primary objective," and most of them are of limited value to classicists today. If nothing else, the quaintness of the fourth and fifth objectives certainly calls into question the other six: Latin

[5] *The Classical Investigation (Part I): General Report* (Princeton University Press, 1924), 79-80.

teachers today would be hard put to reach a consensus about "correct mental habits," and Latin class seems a strange place to inculcate "right attitudes toward social situations," at least in any greater degree than other classes.

There is wider agreement about the abilities of Latin in the "development of an historical and cultural background" and "development of literary appreciation." Roman history and culture certainly are worthy studies and are clearly important as a foundation for Western Civilization. Similarly, familiarity with Latin literature is arguably central to cultural education. But there are more efficient ways to achieve an understanding of the roots of our culture than through study of the Latin language. Ancient civilization and literature in translation courses are two examples, although translation is a poor trade for the original. But little historical perspective or literary appreciation can be developed through brief passages from a small number of authors after years of study.

The remaining four goals are widely agreed upon as secondary benefits of Latin study. Vocabulary derivation (objective one), increased ability in foreign languages, increased ability to read, speak and write English, and elementary knowledge of language structure are frequently advanced as benefits of Latin study. Even these goals, however, have come under fire on the basis of the transferability of the skills. *The Classical Investigation Report* itself addressed this issue: "Automatic transfer is a function of the intelligence of the pupil and comparatively few young pupils possess capacity for independent generalization in a sufficient degree to justify the adoption of methods of teaching Latin which assume the occurrence of automatic transfer to a large extent."[6] Ball and Ellsworth's rather strident argument against transferability of ability from Latin prose composition to the reading of Latin also strikes at the same issue.[7] If benefits will not transfer from one skill to another *within* a language, how much less will transfer more widely?

"General principles of language structure" are also called into question today. The "general principles" here referred to are the traditional grammatical and syntactical categories dating from 19th century linguistics. Knudsvig and Ross argue persuasively that in this era, "when scholars were absorbed with the phonological and morphological systems of language, "[8] little if any attention was paid

[6] *Ibid.*, 184.

[7] Robert J. Ball and J. D. Ellsworth, "Against Teaching Composition in Classical Languages," *CJ* 85 (1989) 54-62.

[8] Glenn M. Knudsvig and Deborah Pennell Ross, "The Linguistic Perspective" in *Latin for the 21st Century*, ed. Richard A. LaFleur, Glenview, Ill.: Scotts-Foresman, 1998: 34.

to syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. "The result," they argue, "of having such a limited model available to us is that there are weaknesses or holes in our knowledge and understanding of language in general, the Latin language in particular, and the nature of the reading process."[9]

Buried in the text of the *Classical Investigation Report* can be found a possible new avenue of approach. The writers found that the study of Latin helped develop one other important faculty, the "ability to make formal logical analyses," but they dismissed it as an objective, believing it "not a suitable conscious objective of the school course in Latin."[10] Concentration on logical analysis contradicted the method which they espoused for teaching the reading of Latin, namely the "Latin word order method." They believed over-emphasis on grammatical and syntactical analysis reduced the Latin sentence to a "vexing puzzle,"[11] and, therefore, undermined the "primary objective," the reading of Latin. However, if the "primary objective" of Latin pedagogy is no longer achievable and the "ultimate objectives" are inadequate, it behooves us to find a new one. The ability to solve "vexing puzzles" is, after all, a useful skill and is indeed often a general education requirement called "analytical thinking" or something similar.

Analytical thinking is currently left to mathematics, science and philosophy departments. It is also a reasonable direction for us to go with Latin pedagogy. Undergraduate majors in the humanities often do not have a thorough grounding in basic analytical problem solving. Indeed, frequently these students have entered the humanities because of bad experiences in required math and science courses. Nevertheless, all students should expect and should be given the opportunity to develop these invaluable skills. What is more, though difficulty in mathematics or scientific approaches to analysis may be the case for many students, this fact relieves neither the student nor the educator from the responsibility of developing analytical thinking. These skills are too fundamental to be shunned or ignored by students or educators.

Study of Latin is an excellent means of training our students to think analytically. The precise, fixed, and logical nature of the language will do much to hone students' analytical skills, if a method emphasizing grammar and syntax is used. Such a method would start with the eight parts of speech, progress through basic grammatical concepts such as subject and object, and build to complex syntax such as conditional clauses. Students may never be

[9] *Ibid.*, 35.

[10] *The Classical Investigation (Part I): General Report* (Princeton University Press, 1924,) 62.

[11] *Ibid.*, 198.

able to speak or write in the language, or even easily read the literature. They should, however, have developed analytical thinking skills which will in turn be applicable to other pursuits.

An analytical approach using modern reading texts, such as *Ecce Romani* or *The Oxford Latin Course* achieves the goal of developing analytical thinking skills. In these texts, carefully graded passages in a regular story line introduce culture and historical information in an engaging manner. By analyzing these readings, students gain the benefit of the analytical approach, and also begin to learn the skills of contextual reading fundamental to the long-range goal of reading comprehension. Additionally, students have the immediate opportunity to apply newly learned morphological information to texts, thus avoiding the traditional problem of Latin pedagogy: large swathes of rote-memorized, poorly understood, and seldom used paradigmatic information.

A four-semester university Latin program designed around such a method might begin with the following introductory course: Latin 101, a course designed to introduce students to the grammar, syntax, and literature of Classical Latin. This course is a prerequisite for further study of the language, but its utility is not limited to pursuit of a major in Classics. The primary goal of this course is to help students hone analytical skills which will be applicable not only in Latin but in other foreign languages and most other intellectual pursuits. Students should expect to see marked improvement in their ability to speak, read, and write effectively in English.

Lest this proposal seem to be a betrayal of our time-honored tradition, I would close by emphasizing that adoption of the development of analytical skills as our main goal in Latin instruction is nothing more than explicit recognition of our long held implicit assumptions. We have always expected our students to develop the ability to analyze complex syntax and grammar, but often we have confused them by vaguely urging them to develop reading ability. Although the connection between syntactical analysis and reading ability may be clear to us as professionals and experts, it is the very source of our students' greatest vexations. When we make this connection clear, we will help our less motivated students to develop invaluable intellectual skills, and we may retain more of our most talented students as majors. A redefinition of the goal of Latin pedagogy along these lines simultaneously allows us to maintain our intellectual ideals and to address the practical concerns inherent in the modern American university system.

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