

TEACHING LATIN I TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH MODERATE COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT AND AUTISM

DEBORAH STAKENAS

East Kentwood High School and Freshman Campus
Kentwood Public Schools
Kentwood, Michigan

“Wah-way,” says Titus,* holding out his arm for me to shake as he runs into the classroom. “Salve!” I return the greeting with a shake and a smile. This is my favorite class of the day. The students have learned to shake hands with a grip on the lower arm as a Roman did. They love it and practice with me and with each other every day. “Sah-way!” Decimus is on the heels of Titus, out of breath after running upstairs from the special education room into Latin class. Special education room? These 23 Latin students are coming from the Cognitive Impaired and the Autistic Spectrum Disorders self-contained classrooms. Wait! They are taking Latin?

My second hour Latin I students at East Kentwood Freshman Campus in Kentwood Public Schools, Kentwood, Michigan, have a mild or moderate form of Cognitive Impairment or Autistic Spectrum Disorders. “Cognitive impairment, also referred to as intellectual disability, describes the condition of a child whose intellectual functioning level and adaptive skills are significantly below the average for a child of his chronological age. It is the most common developmental disorder, occurring in approximately 12 out of every 1000 children. Varying levels of developmental delays may be identified in a child’s social skills, emotional development, communication capabilities, physical function, and academic skill sets” (www.siskin.org). “Average” IQ is set at 100 with most people falling between 90–110. Cognitive Impaired students have an IQ of 70 or below. My students are in the mild (IQ 50–70) and moderate (IQ 35–55) of the four ranges of impairment. Autism is not based solely on intelligence. “The main signs and symptoms of autism involve problems in the following areas: communication, social, and routines, or repetitive behaviors” (www.nichd.nih.gov). These students might not communicate with each other. They might perform the same behavior over and over. They might blurt out a specific point to correct what someone said or did. They may turn quickly from silent to loudly argumentative if they feel they are right, and the other person is wrong. They have a few, very focused interests that they concentrate on without regard to anything else. Autistic students usually have an average IQ, but some have above or below average IQ similar to the general population.

My second hour is not a class of students with learning disabilities. My students in this class are labeled neither Attention Deficit Disorder nor Asperger Syndrome, sometimes called high-level autism. Students with those disabilities are in my regular Latin classes. They might have difficulty with reading such as Dyslexia, or writing such as Dysgraphia. They might need different strategies or more time to learn, but they are within the normal range of IQ or higher. Recently, one of my Latin II students, diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, struggled in Latin I with autistic behaviors but was successful in Latin II because of maturity and additional behavioral assistance. As a result, he could focus in a regular class with 30 students and achieved 100% on the National Latin Exam.

In contrast, my second hour class is a group of very disabled 14-to-20-year-olds in a public high school. They are taking Latin, a subject usually designated for the college bound and gifted students. How can a student learn Latin with a low IQ, due to Down Syndrome, Shaken Baby Syndrome, or Fetal Alcohol Syndrome? How can a student whose autism causes him or her to rock back and forth, fidget with pencils, write on paper repetitively, or have temper outbursts ever achieve proficiency in Latin?

A year ago, I was walking past the principal’s office, and I heard her call out to me. “You said you could teach Latin to anyone,” she shouted. “Can you teach Brandy’s students?” She was teasing me for saying I could teach Latin to anyone and baiting me to concede that I could not do it. I did not want to commit, but I knew it was a challenge. I surprised her by saying I would think about it. About two hours later, I sent her an email. I knew I could do it! My principal not only scheduled me to teach 14 students with Moderate Cognitive Impairment, but she also added five students with Mild CI from another program across the parking lot, and four students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, all in one class. I would be teaching 23 very disabled students along with the help of two adult paraprofessionals. I am not a special education teacher. I have no specialized training in working with such students! However, I have confidence. “Yes, I can teach these students, and they will learn Latin.”

I needed to create a curriculum. Every week would have a different theme. I would teach a little spoken Latin. I would read aloud as much mythology as was appropriate for these students. We would talk about Hercules since I heard they loved the Disney movie. We would delve into sports, from horse racing in the Circus Maximus to Olympic Games since they did Special Olympics during May. We would study Roman holidays. We would explore vocabulary about Medical Latin (bones, muscles, body parts), Botanical Latin (plants, flowers, and trees), Biological Latin (animals), and Astronomical Latin (constellations and the myths related to them). We would dress up in tunics and togas in a Roman clothing unit. We would recognize and understand the three Latin quotes on our Michigan state flag along with Latin on coins and the one-dollar bill. We would refer to each other using Latin names, but only one name and always in the nominative case. We would count to ten using cardinal numbers and relate the ordinal number to the names. We would recognize some Roman numerals. It was a very basic plan, not much different than my curriculum for the first trimester of Latin I with my other students.

What about grammar? Of course, my students would be learning some grammar! I decided that we could learn nouns in the nominative and accusative cases so we could learn the concepts of subject, predicate noun, and direct object. We could learn the difference between an action verb and a linking verb. My students would be exposed to these terms: transitive kernel, intransitive kernel, and linking kernel. My students would learn: *Equus est. Equum habet*. It would be simple and repetitive. These students could flap their arms when I pointed to an action verb and fold their arms to their chests when I pointed to a linking

verb. I decided this was a start for learning some English and Latin grammar terminology. Students could remember what we learned to some extent, according to their disabilities.

What about vocabulary? My students would learn some simple words, but most of their words would come from songs. These would be simple nursery rhymes, like *Mica, Mica, Parva Stella* ("Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"). Other songs would be ones I found from other sources or created myself. Over the last twelve years, I have created my own translations for some songs, so we had my own version of *Horatius Villam Habet* ("Old McDonald"), *Araneola* ("Eensy, Weensy Spider"), and "12 Labors of Hercules." The students would learn the noun *puer* by using a Winnie-the-Pooh stuffed animal: PU-bear. They would recognize the difference between *puer* and *puella* and know a few words around the classroom, such as *janua* and *fenestra*.

Developing the curriculum was easy. I needed to learn more about students with Cognitive Impairment and Autistic Spectrum Disorders. I received permission from special education teachers to spend some time talking with them about their students and to sit in the back of the room observing on my conference hour. I also watched the students interacting with each other at lunch in the cafeteria. I made a chart and memorized the names of my new students. Brandy gave me some information about each of her 14 students. I learned their routines and terminology. They refer to each other as "friends." Since they are friends, they must treat each other well. I learned that the skill level for most of the students was about the first to third grade, but some were at the fourth or fifth grade level. The students had a much wider range of abilities than in a regular Latin I class.

I also learned more about each student. Some students had physical disabilities. One student had only a modified thumb and pointer finger on one hand, and another had webbed fingers. This made it difficult to turn pages, pick things up, and do some of the gestures with the songs. Four CI students could sound out letters and read some simple words. The other CI and ASD students could not read but might sound out some letters and spell words, forming letters with their fingers in the air. Some could copy words, and others could not. I also had students who were mute or semi-mute. One student with Down Syndrome just smiled at me and hugged me once a day, saying few words. She would try to tell me some things, but I could not understand the words as they were mostly vowel sounds. She would point at things, like the rings on her hands, the barrette in her hair, or new shoes to tell me what she was saying. How was I going to teach students if I could not communicate with them?

Our district uses a trimester scheduling system so that high school students take 15 semester courses a year, divided into three blocks. A semester class is taught in a 10–12 week trimester. This was a third trimester class. As we approached the beginning of the spring, I realized that the principal and the two special education teachers believed I would change my mind about teaching this class. The principal kept asking me if I would be ready to teach these students. The special education teachers did not think it would work. I listened to their concerns but remained confident.

On March 19, 2012, students with Cognitive Impairment and Autistic Spectrum Disorders began taking Latin I. More students arrived on the first day than were on my class list and seating chart, but I was organized and flexible. I have to admit I looked at the 23 students and was afraid when that first class began.

Thankfully, by the end of that hour, I was smiling and confident once again. These students were going to study Latin for the first time! I learned all of the students' names and some more things about each one of them before the end of that first week. I added more details to the lesson plans as I worked with the students each day, and I learned from my mistakes.

Some things did not work according to my plan. First of all, I had not considered the impact of the students' inability to read English. If students cannot read at all, how could they read Latin? Would they become frustrated or angry? We were not using a textbook so I thought it did not matter. Reading Latin was not my goal. Any written word in Latin was an incredible experience, but a brief one. One day, I put up a transparency of a page from *Ecce Romani* I, Lesson 1 (Pearson) and read to them in Latin so they could hear the story in the language. Then I told them the story about Cornelia and Flavia. With only limited success using that method, I wrote sentences on the board and discussed the nouns and verbs in a very elementary context. I used transitive and intransitive kernels, such as: *Araneola aquam ascendit* or *Puer currit*. I wrote on the whiteboard and large sheets of white paper. Students recited and tried to copy simple words onto paper. They could color pictures. It was like teaching elementary school children.

I had greater success when we learned Latin vocabulary and grammar through a book of twelve songs. I made copies of songs, added a cover page, and asked the students to write their names on their cover page. Paraprofessionals assisted some students in printing their first names, and other students could easily write their own first and last name. We kept these in the classroom. Page numbers made it easier for some students to find a song, and students could help their friends find the correct page before we started. We sang *Horatius Villam Habet*. Students came to the front of the room and picked out large plastic animals from two boxes. One would hold up a dog as we said, *Est canis. Canem habet*. I could put a copy of the song on the projector and go through the words in Latin slowly. They were curious and wanted to know what the words on the pages meant. I called on certain students to come to the front of the room and lead the song. The students memorized the songs and began to act them out with creative gestures. Even though they could not read English, they "read" their song books and sang almost every day. Those song books were the most prized possession taken home on the last day of school!

Another aspect I had not considered was the emotional level of the students. The students in this class did not deal well with violence so we would not be studying soldiers, gladiators, war, or abuse in mythology, such as Pluto and Persephone or Theseus at Knossos. I altered the stories when I read them aloud. I had to re-read every story and analyze how appropriate it was. I chose some stories and mapped out when during the three months I would read, discuss, and act out each one. I owned an old mythology book purchased for my own children over thirty years ago, but the renditions were dated. I also purchased two more mythology books for very young children, discovering that the newer children's books needed less adapting than my original mythology book. I also found new children's books by Jacqueline Mitton and Christina Balit on constellations and planets (National Geographic). All DVD materials to supplement my other Latin classes were woefully inadequate and inappropriate. We could

learn about the Colosseum as a building, but I needed to stop the DVD after 20 minutes before the section about gladiator fighting. Things that worked for my regular Latin I classes would not always work well with this group, which has been insulated from violence and sexuality.

I found a catalog for Schlessinger Media, which had materials designed for grades 1–3 (www.LibraryVideo.com). I purchased some mythology DVD's about Perseus, Prometheus, Hercules, and Arachne at the lower elementary level. These materials were used sparingly. I would show them only about 10 minutes of a video and then show more on another day. These materials supplemented the direct instruction with the students during the 65-minute class period. Because each class was divided into three different activities, I remained aware of the attention span of the students. If I thought things were not working, I could quickly shift to a different activity.

We did more than learn Latin in the classroom. Sometimes we would walk outside on a field trip. The story of Narcissus and Echo necessitated a trip downstairs to the courtyard where the daffodils were starting to bloom. I tried to use the terms masculine and feminine to teach the grammatical terms for gender. It failed. So, the plants were all “girls,” and the trees were all “boys,” except for the story of Eurydice, a nymph who came out of a tree. That was hard to explain. One student saw a wild plant in the flower bed with the daffodils and wanted to know more about it. After school, I took the thorny leaf of that plant to a local landscape company to identify it. Then I researched that thistle plant so I could talk with the class the next day about its Latin name and other flowers in the same plant family.

We did another field trip on the last day during final exams when the class period was longer. After viewing my own photos of cars projected on the big screen in the classroom, we went on a field trip into the parking lot to examine the names on the cars. They discovered “Focus,” “Taurus,” and “Equinox.” I had about 40 different pictures of cars in my photo album so we did a scavenger hunt finding the cars in the safety of a parking lot which had limited access. An extra adult came with us to keep the students together.

Our best field trip was a bus ride. We included some of my Latin 4 students as group leaders and 15 of my other 9th grade Latin I students, who received parent permission to join us on this field trip. Forty-one students and seven adults, including Brandy and her student teacher, visited the planetarium in the Grand Rapids Public Museum. I scheduled two different shows, one told in an elementary way for the special education students, and the second show for the general public and my other high school students. At the museum, we saw a bronze statue of Icarus. The students were excited to see the statue since I had read the story of Daedalus and Icarus. They also visited the animals identified with Latin names, and they saw the coin exhibit. Then we went as a large group to the fountain in front of the Gerald R. Ford Museum, where we ate lunch. The special education students were in groups mixed with their group leaders from Latin 4 class and the 9th grade Latin I students. The Latin 4 students listened carefully to the special education students and helped them with opening their lunches and drinks. We visited the grave sites of Former President Gerald R. Ford and his wife Betty, and we sang our Latin songs loudly to them.

The most memorable teaching moments of the class happened when the students clearly remembered something we had done

the day or week before. Remembering things and applying them to the real world were class goals. We studied constellations and planets. We negotiated with parents to take them outside on a weekend after dark if the sky were clear. One student came to class one day saying she had seen the queen in the sky! She did not remember the name Cassiopeia, but she remembered and could re-tell the story. She also could find the constellation Cassiopeia as a “W” in the night sky. Most of the students with Mild Cognitive Impairment could share their experiences with the night sky. None of the CI students with Moderate Cognitive Impairment, except for one, and none of the ASD students reported seeing the constellations in the night sky. Perhaps they just could not see the patterns. It is possible they may put it together at some point in the future as they mature and spent more time outside at night.

Other memorable teaching moments came when students would recall stories I had read to them or recognized connections between two things. One student had seen a spider at some point the day before. She remembered the spider story about Minerva and Arachne and retold it to me as she explained how the spider she saw was called Arachne. Another student would compare modern sports with Olympic Games. He could see the connection between throwing a discus or javelin and throwing a basketball. He also could see the connection between our discussion of boat races in Book 5 of Vergil's *Aeneid* and horse racing in the Circus Maximus. Another student would talk about running in the Special Olympic games and compare that with Daphne running from Apollo because she could also run very fast. She would act it out for us, demonstrating the great victory when Daphne became a tree nymph, and Apollo never caught up.

How successful was this class? For me, this was the most satisfying and rewarding experience I have had in almost 30 years of teaching! The students learned how Latin is related to many other things around them. They learned to read and write English and some Latin, increasing their vocabulary and grammar skills in both languages. The 65-minute class went by quickly, and I started walking with the students to the cafeteria. Sometimes I ate lunch with them while continuing the conversation about something we discussed in class.

Could I teach Latin to all students with Cognitive Impairment and Autistic Spectrum Disorders? No. Could I teach Latin to students with Moderate Cognitive Impairment and Moderate Autism Spectrum Disorders? Yes, and these students were very successful in this modified Latin I class.

COURSE SYLLABUS

Week 1: *Salve/Vale* (Hello/Goodbye). Numbers and Counting 1–10. Stories: Midas; Cupid and Psyche. Songs: Chant 1–2–3 and “There’s so many numbers.” Grammar: *est* (is), *sunt* (are); simple nouns around the room, plus *puer* (boy) and *puella* (girl).

Week 2: Latin on Michigan flag; Mythology: Gods and Goddesses. Story: Birth of Apollo and Diana (sun/moon concept). Songs: *Romani* (“One-Two-Three Little Romans”); *Si hodie sis felix, manus plaude*.

Week 3: Roman numerals; Latin on money; Animals. Story: Daphne and Apollo. Song: *Horatius villam habet* (“Horace Has a Farm/Old McDonald”). Students choose Roman names.

Grammar: Simple sentences with *est/sunt*. Simple sentences with action verbs (intransitive only). Add direct objects with action verbs. Review concept of linking and action verbs with gestures.

Week 4: Constellations. Visit to planetarium. Star charts. Stories: Orion, Callisto and Arcas, Perseus and Andromeda, Cassiopeia. Song: *Mica* ("Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"); *Duc Duc Remos Duc* ("Row, Row, Row Your Boat"); *Nonne Dormis?* (Frere Jacques). Grammar: Reading simple Latin sentences.

Week 5: More constellations. Medusa. Clothing. Story: Minerva and Arachne. Song: *Araneola* ("Eensy, Weensy Spider"). Grammar: singular and plural. Endings: a/ae; am/as (subject and direct object).

Week 6: Icarus and Daedalus; Prometheus, Pandora. Song: *In Terra Agricola* ("The Farmer in the Dell"). Grammar: more sentences with subject/direct object/action verb. Introduce predicate adjective with linking verb.

Week 7: Hercules, focusing on the twelve labors. Song: "Twelve Labors of Hercules" (my translation of "The Twelve Days of Christmas"). Schlessinger Hercules video for young children. Grammar: review direct object and predicate adjective.

Week 8: Olympic games. Circus Maximus. Ben Hur video clip of horse racing. Chariot racing; Greek, Trojan, Etruscan games; discus, boat racing, birds, running. Colosseum. Sponge Bob video on Colosseum. Modern Marvels-Colosseum (show first 20 minutes only). A little information on gladiators. Song: *Aufer Me Ad Arenam* (My translation of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame").

Week 9: Medical Latin: directions, body parts, bones, muscles. Video: "Human Body in Action" (25 min. about skeletal and muscular systems). Song: *Ossa, Ossa, in Corpore Tui* (my translation for "Bones Inside of You" from Sesame Street.) More spoken Latin: *Cras te videbo* vs. *Mox te videbo*. The difference in English between "tomorrow" and "soon." Singular and plural imperative forms: *Vale* and *Valete*.

Week 10: Holidays: Saturnalia, Lupercalia, Terminalia, Salaria. Vertumnalia. Stories: Bellerophon, Chimaera, and Pegasus. Vertumnus and Pomona. Calendar, Months, Day (noon, midnight). Songs: *Tinniat* ("Jingle Bells"); *O Abies* ("O Fir Tree"). Christmas theme to songs.

Week 11: View Hercules (Disney) (93 minute video over 3 days with about 30 minutes each day). Discuss details in video, such as "Call I X I I" (Call 911). Review songs. Visit to school parking lot to view names of cars.

Deborah Stakenas has taught Latin and English for Kentwood Public Schools for almost 14 years. She has taught in Michigan since 1975 at Belleville High School, Plymouth-Canton High School, St. Francis Cabrini, and Schoolcraft College. She also served as Assistant Principal at Clarenceville High School in Livonia and at Willow Run High School in Ypsilanti. She has been State Chair for Michigan Junior Classical League since 2004 and has presented at four ACL Institutes in Memphis, Winston-Salem, Philadelphia, and Nashville.

Prima Lingua

A Preparatory Course for the
Study of Foreign Languages

NEW!

All-digital
course materials
Fall 2013

Available in print AND online

students complete
assignments online

lesson plans and activities
all at the same convenient site

teachers grade
assignments online



Prima Lingua is a preparatory language course for middle school students. By studying grammatical topics across languages, students become well versed in the language of language study.

PrimaLingua.net

215.948.2135

info@primalingua.net