

Title: Creating a Community of Practice in the Latin Classroom: Enhancing Student Learning through a Flipped Classroom, Peer Workshops, and Written Praxis

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Summary: A Latin professor recalibrates the first semester of elementary Latin to deepen and enhance student learning. Her methods included introducing podcasts, online “tasks,” focused peer workshops, and a culminating composition project.

Background:

Introduction

My project focuses on Latin 121: Elementary Latin I, the first of two courses in a year-long sequence that introduces students to the Latin language and ancient Roman culture. In addition to counting toward the university’s language requirement and contributing to our mission to educate global citizens, the courses support departmental priorities of writing in the target language and facilitating intercultural competency. For the last four years, the course has been taught on a competency-based model: students advance through each unit (either a chapter or collection of chapters) as they demonstrate their command of that body of material.

Institutional Context

Throughout the duration of the fifteen-week semester, the class meets three times a week for seventy minutes per meeting. Students work in peer groups that emerge after the first challenge (test) and the course benefits from the help of a peer mentor, an advanced student who works like a coach (a model which differs from that of a teaching assistant in that s/he neither teaches nor grades the students). The course is usually capped at twenty-two students, with enrollments ranging from twenty-one (2014) to fifteen (2015) to twenty-eight (2016). Demographics are inconsistent: sometimes about half of the students are in their first or second year, but it’s not unusual to have a class that consists of predominantly third and fourth year students. Most students enroll in the course to complete the university language requirement (which goes through the 122 level, the second course of the elementary sequence); a handful of students are (or become) Classical Studies minors or even pursue an independent major in Classics.

Pedagogical Principles

Prior versions of this course used a traditional textbook; a significant change concurrent with the start of this project involved the introduction of *Lingua Latina* in the 2014 version. Unlike the traditional textbook, this text is strictly a reader: it contains no English, no paradigms, and uses an inductive approach to language learning. Inductive approaches are fairly uncommon across the languages but perhaps especially so in classical languages. Unlike traditional methods and textbooks that emphasize the memorization of forms, rules, and paradigms before students encounter them in sentences or passages, the inductive approach is reading-based: students read a series of fifteen chapters in the target language, and in this way learn to recognize and formulate for themselves the syntax and vocabulary of the language.

In-class activities center almost entirely on reading. As students progress through the first chapter and then after some pass the first challenge, the number of groups can increase and vary between one and six for the remainder of the term. We sometimes reconvene as a full class and take some time for discussion and, often, practice with writing in Latin. For example, once everyone has read a chapter about the Roman house, students are asked to compose a brief paragraph (in Latin) about homes either in the ancient world or the modern. At all other times, the peer mentor and I circulate among the groups, answering questions and reading with the students. When a group demonstrates that they have worked through the chapter, they come to the board and their questions about the new material (grammatical and syntactical, mostly) drive my teaching of that material. Often we discuss cultural items of interest as well; here too students' questions and comments, not the instructor's agenda, drive the time spent with the instructor.

Intellectual Goals and Student Performance Objectives

Each year, the course has had the same goals, namely for students to:

1. acquire a basic knowledge of how to read and write in Latin
2. acquire a basic knowledge of ancient Roman culture
3. take responsibility for and ownership of their own learning
4. become reflective and self-aware learners

Student performance in each of these areas over the first two iterations of the course prompted me to find new ways to support and enhance their learning. The items discussed in this portfolio touch upon each of these goals; the composition project is the moment at which these elements are most fully intertwined and student work should be at its most refined. For these reasons, I focus the discussion in the sections below on the composition project. A second thematic element of the portfolio, however, and one closely tied not just to the course goals but also to student performance as it was measured throughout the course, is the question of student motivation.

Identifying Necessary Changes

On the one hand, some of the 2011-13 course elements worked quite nicely: relieved of the pressures of high-stakes testing and benefitting from the interaction with peers that the course offers, students were bubbly, engaged, and focused on learning the language rather than acing a test.

On the other hand, students easily lost track of their standing in the course, seemed to lack motivation to complete the course on-time, and often had to repeat challenges. Left almost entirely to their own devices, students seemed to lack intrinsic motivation and had only the challenges as opportunities for assessment. Although they were encouraged to keep a reading journal that I collected randomly, this alone was insufficient as a means of compelling students to prepare better for class, for challenges, and for moving through the course in a timely manner.

Based on these observations, I introduced the following changes between 2015 and 2016:

- mandatory "tasks" (see below) to be completed before a workshop and included:
 - instructional podcasts
 - cultural content related to each chapter
 - metacognitive moments

- a reading journal, including Latin composition
 - a synthesis of all task material
- revised challenges, including composition and an essay (in English)
- chapter-specific challenges
- a refined composition project

Implementation:

A few words about the changes I introduced each year will be helpful contextually. In 2014, in addition to using the new, inductive text, I organized the challenges into five units of three chapters each. I also introduced a composition assignment. In 2015, I kept the composition project but did away with the units so that there were fifteen separate challenges, the format of which also shifted (one example). I also added online “tasks” that helped to “flip” the classroom and create gated, formal preparation for in-class work and the challenges. Even with changes introduced in 2015, I was dissatisfied with student progress, which I understand as connected to their intrinsic motivation. My notes in the ‘Reflections’ section speak to my observations as well as to ways in which I hope to address my concerns in the 2016 version of the course.

Although the 2014 and 2015 iterations of the course shared a method, the introduction of the tasks in 2015 restructured the point distribution and grading. The two courses had in common that no points in the course were reserved for participation, engagement, *vel sim*. In keeping with departmental policy, no distinction was made between excused or unexcused absences, and more than three absences resulted in the deduction of three points (per absence) from a student’s final course grade. Similarly, the courses had no exams (midterm, final, etc.). I separate the two versions here for the sake of ease and clarity.

I have organized this section by the year in which the course was offered. Those readers who are interested in additional details on the evolution of the project may see the links to the 2014 and 2015 iterations of the course, while those who are curious about the most recent semester may skip ahead to 2016.

2014

In the 2014 iteration of the course, students prepared for each class by reading the chapter which they and their group were currently studying. In addition, students were asked to keep reading journals which were gathered repeatedly throughout the semester but not assigned a grade. It became abundantly clear (though not surprising) that preparation is key to student progress and learning. Those students whose reading journals were filled with observations and questions generally were those whose work in class and on challenges demonstrated the deepest learning; those who merely listed new vocabulary words demonstrated grasp of the material but not sophisticated understanding.

2015

In terms of the in-class activities and pedagogical methods, the course remained the same as described above. However, in the 2015 iteration, I made the reading journal a requirement, added more instructional videos that work through the grammar of the chapter(s), and linked the instructional podcasts to cultural content introduced in each chapter. I made these changes to the course in order to (1) increase the degree to which students are both introduced to and assessed on their understanding of cultural content, and (2) transform the reading journal into something that served the purposes of preparing students for class, making them more accountable, and gathering data on their metacognitive experiences.

2016

In the Fall 2016 offering of the course, the tasks mimicked those created for the Spring 2016 Latin 122 course – instead of being worth a cumulative ten points, they were worth twenty points, allowing me further flexibility and precision in grading as well as, I hope, increasing the perceived worth of the tasks in the students' eyes. A second important component of the tasks was the introduction of a brief (50-75 word) summary of the chapter's content in Latin composition as part of the second task. Although students received formative feedback only, if they did not include this Latin summary, they were not be eligible for the full ten points allotted to that task.

Results

Although each of the course components was designed to relate to each of the four goals of the course, the composition assignment at the end of the semester most clearly captures and provides an avenue for discussion of student performance and achievement. Only the rubric and point allocations differed between the 2014 and 2015 iterations, for which reason I will discuss the 2015 version throughout this section. I begin with a description of the project (with links to its constituent parts) and then discuss the relationship I have perceived between student performance on the tasks, challenges, and the composition project.

Composition Project

Beyond a typical final examination in which students often regurgitate and apply sets of information in a high-pressure, tightly-timed situation, a cumulative, high-stakes, carefully constructed composition assignment provides them with an opportunity to integrate various compartments of knowledge, to process that knowledge on multiple levels, and to engage with topics and questions related to cultural, not just grammatical, material. Further, project elements such as revisions and a face-to-face meeting compel students to revisit their work in critical and analytical ways, and they employ multiple and varied skill sets throughout the process. The composition assignment continues to be the most cumulative and integrative assessment of the course. In ways that will become more clear below, the project involves more than the composition of a Latin passage; it offers students an opportunity to practice time management and organizational skills, to engage in the processes of revision and reflection, and to weave together both the grammatical and the cultural pieces of knowledge that they have accumulated over the course of a semester or a year of Latin studies.

After encountering writing in repeated, exceptionally low-stakes tasks and having had to compose on the spot on the challenges, students are prepared to approach the composition project. In order to progress to the creation of this final product, students must complete all assigned chapters of reading and must successfully demonstrate their competency of that material by means of the challenges. The project is intended to replace a final examination in the sense that it requires students to take stock and make use of a semester-long accumulation of knowledge both cultural and linguistic. Its design offers an experience more holistic than a final examination, however, in the sense that it fosters creativity, demands that students make and defend specific choices and asks them to reflect on their work over the course of the term. The element of creativity does not go unnoticed by students, some of whom noted that “Additionally, during this project, I was challenged to think creatively. I am not very good at writing fiction, and this assignment forced me to think outside of the box,” and that “The basis of this project provided us with the opportunity to creatively capture any grasp of the Roman culture that we chose to.”

Presented as a chance for students to write their own (much shorter) chapter of *Lingua Latina* for an audience of their peers, the project is broken into four parts. In a structure that parallels that which students find familiar from the chapter readings and challenges, I distribute each part's instructions once I have received and returned with feedback the previous part's work. Generally, the composition project elicits a number of questions early in the semester; not surprisingly, students want details and information about what amounts to their final product for the course. Despite many such inquiries, I have refrained from telling students anything other than that they should focus on the tasks and challenges at hand, and that the project's requirements are manageable if begun with sufficient time left in the course to complete the assignment (roughly a week, although about ten days is ideal). The rationale for not sharing the instructions immediately is to ensure that students focus on the material they are learning at any given time and that they are fully competent in their understanding of that material once they do approach the composition at the end of the term.

The parts, described in detail below, are as follows: Part I - Inventory; Part II - Drafting; Part III - Meeting; Part IV - Final Product. Taken altogether, the project asks students to collect and evaluate their knowledge, to grapple with English-to-Latin translation, to engage with cultural material, and to work through the process of receiving feedback and then revising their work.

Part I encourages students to revisit and reflect on what they have learned, not only as a way for them to order and catalog the course content but also to come away with a sense of accomplishment and achievement. Students craft a grammatical and cultural inventory for what they have learned over the course of the semester; they also identify three grammatical items with which they struggled and three cultural topics of special interest to them.

In a manner not unlike studying for a final exam, students often experience a sense of achievement as they order, categorize, and consider all that they have learned. Unlike most exams, Part I allows students to use their books, their notes, and any other resources that they have created themselves. Although it cannot be prevented, they are discouraged from and penalized for using the internet or any resources other than their own notes. After receiving feedback from the instructor and armed with a rubric that details grammatical requirements as well as the inclusion and infusion of cultural content, students draft their chapter. In essence, two drafts are necessary: a first one that is put away for a suggested twenty-four hours and then the revision of that document. Both drafts must be submitted to the instructor along with any and all supplemental items – an outline, brainstorming, English compositions, etc. – and contribute to their mark on this section.

One of the richest pieces of the project, it seems to me, is the required conversation (Part III) that takes place between student and instructor after Part II is submitted. In these meetings I highlight general areas for improvement, point out and discuss a handful of specific examples of those general areas, and give students a marked-up version of their composition that indicates the errors but not how to correct them. On the whole, the approach of offering three general areas on which a student should focus their revision has been most conducive to the receipt of much-improved drafts. As one student remarked, "I also learned how to make corrections to my story and I understood what I needed to fix and why." Another commented that they "also enjoyed the meeting because it was a

refreshing motivation to continue on with the project. I became more excited about the end result and want to put my best effort into it. It was nice to see a teacher who was putting in just as much effort as I was for my benefit.”

Often these interactions move beyond the immediate concern with getting the right answer and instead invite comparisons to English, considerations of the differences between the structure of the two languages, and explorations of how these structures are reflections of culture and society. Although not every student reaches this level, those who do consistently engage more deeply with the course material, proof of which appears in Part IV. To complete the project (Part IV), students must revise their composition based on the feedback they received in our meeting and their own identification of errors. A rubric similar to that for Part II again details the requirements; in addition they must write a brief reflection in which they discuss their perception of their own development throughout the course of the project.

Student Work and Reflections

Rate of Progress through the Course

I expected that the tasks would increase students' progress through the course and that student performance on the tasks would correlate with their performance on the challenges as well as the final composition project. In other words, I thought that high performance on the tasks (a low-stakes assignment) would bode well for strong, one-time-only performances on the challenges (mid-stakes), and that the depth of preparation would translate to higher performances on the composition (high-stakes). Based on the evidence of the 2015 and 2016 offerings of the course, there is no clear, consistent correlation between the completion of tasks and high performance in the course. Those students who completed tasks quickly in 2016 finished the course ahead of their peers, and students who completed the tasks thoroughly (and earned high marks on them) generally needed only one attempt on each challenge.

It also seems to be the case that there is no direct, consistent relationship between student performance throughout the course. For example, Student A can finish the challenges first, have the fourth highest final grade in the course, the fifth highest tasks average, the third highest challenge average, and the second highest composition score. On the other end of the performance spectrum, Student O can be among the last to finish the challenges, have the second to lowest final grade, the ninth (out of fifteen) task average, the lowest challenge average, and not complete the composition, thereby placing them at the bottom of that bracket. Although a handful of students are consistently high scorers, they are inconsistent across categories and other students exhibit wildly different performances across each category, as displayed in the (not very pretty but will suffice for now) chart, which shows student performance across the categories, with each column ordered by highest to lowest scores.

Despite these variations, the tasks do seem to have reduced the number of times that students took challenges before passing them in both the 2015 and 2016 versions of the course. Here again, however, I think that 2016 was somewhat of an anomaly: of the twenty-eight students enrolled, five were Classical Studies majors and another three decided to minor in Classical Studies by the halfway point in the course. Roughly a third of the students, then, arguably had a stronger motivation for succeeding in the course.

Composition Project

I had intended to make more meaningful changes to the composition assignment but ultimately focused on the challenges as assessment tools and introduced only minor changes to the composition project. In the revised assignment from 2016, the most significant differences are that the rubric now includes a section on cultural competency and the final version of the story must be accompanied by a reflection on the process as a whole. These elements of the final product's assessment are combined insofar as the rubric evaluates students on the changes they have made to the composition itself as well as how they respond to a series of prompts about the process of creating the inventory, drafting their story, reviewing some of their errors and receiving feedback (in person) from the professor, and then making other required changes.

Evidence of Student Learning

In terms of process, the most learning seems to occur midway through the project. During and after Part II (drafting), students frequently comment that they have come to realize how little they know or fully understand the grammatical content of the course. Interestingly, students express this sentiment of inadequacy early in the drafting process and in our meetings but it almost disappears by their final reflections on the process. One student articulated this by saying, “I am not as bad at the language as I think I am.” Similarly, another noted that “I do have to say I feel very accomplished that I was able to write the above composition though...Only a few weeks ago and I’m not sure I would have been able to [do] that!”

On the one hand, an expression of insecurity early in the process might indicate that students are quick to forget their accomplishments, as their achievement throughout the course should suggest to them instead their competence. On the other hand, it strikes me that this seeming disconnect is in reality an expression of the difficulty in shifting from translation of Latin into English and thus of the sort of reverse-processing in which they must engage to go from English into Latin. Indeed, many students noted that this was the primary difficulty of the project; their cumulative comments are concisely expressed by the one student who wrote that “Before writing in Latin, I only knew how each grammatical concept worked, but after writing this chapter I learned how they worked within the context of other Latin writing, which provided a whole new dimension of understanding.”

Student Reflections on Writing

In their reflections on this process, most students noted that the inventory was a helpful item to create, that the project was more daunting than they had anticipated, and that it challenged them to use the language in ways that they had done in only a limited way before. In a summative comment, one student stated that “The composition, as a whole, was a good way for me to see what grammar and vocabulary I had retained throughout the semester, and where my trouble spots were.” Further, almost all students expressed pride both in the cultural material they had learned in the course and what they had specifically researched for the project; they also remarked on their pride in the ways in which they had integrated cultural material into their compositions and in so doing had mimicked the example of the *Lingua Latina* reader. One in particular wrote that “I felt that I succeeded in keeping the personalities of the characters from the book fairly consistent” and suggested ways to develop their story further. A few students directly commented on a new-found recognition of the inherent link between language and culture; as one student phrased it, “I always thought of learning culture as being separate from understanding the storyline, as if the fact that because the story is fiction, actual cultural facts could not be related to the capitulum [sic].”

[Examples of student work include a series of Tasks performed at the A-level, B-level, and C-level, as well as all components of the Composition Project from a cross-section of students doing work at the A-level, B-level, and C-level.]

Motivation

Moving forward, I am most interested in the question of student motivation. The changes that I, along with the peer mentor, made to the structure of the Latin 121 course over the summer of 2015 were designed to help motivate students to proceed quickly, to give them a clear picture of where they were in the course at any given time, and to make all elements of the course as transparent as possible. To that end, students signed a separate “policies” form indicating that they understood the way that the course worked, the Moodle site was engineered for them to be able to monitor their progress individually and against the class, and we successfully (I think) integrated systematic, consistent, and relevant cultural material for the first time. This last goal was perhaps the most important for the two most recent iterations of the course as the off-loading of such content was the primary purpose for this project.

To return to the question of student motivation, it seemed to be the case that the introduction of the Tasks encouraged some, already highly motivated students, to move quickly through the course and the material. Those students who tended to hover in the middle usually comprised the largest section of the course and finished either right on time (i.e., the last day of classes) or one or two class periods before that date. A small number of students, who also missed several class meetings, required time after the end of the course to complete the final challenge and then begin, hurriedly, their composition projects. How do we successfully encourage all students to complete their work in a timely fashion?

Also interestingly, to me, is that students can recognize and articulate the ways in which they need to improve and/or put more effort into a course. As noted in previous discussions of the elementary sequence, one life skill that I hope students learn along the way is that of taking responsibility for their learning and for themselves. Evidence for this belief is rooted in the course structure itself and given voice in a somewhat metacognitive way, as students respond to a series of questions in weekly self-reflections. In these documents (which are returned to them at the end of the term), students who struggled often express recognition that they should seek help from the tutor and/or the instructor, that they had not put very much time into preparing for the course or challenge(s), and that they needed to exert more effort in order to pass the course. In Fall of 2016, I re-introduced mid-semester check-ins, an opportunity for students to meet with me for c.20 minutes to talk about the course, how I might support their learning, and how they planned to complete remaining work. A similar final self-reflection in the form of a “supplemental evaluation” at the end of the 2016 term sought to bring further clarity to this issue.

How can this information inform future teaching practices and what future modifications could be made to further improve student learning?

I think that there are ways in which an instructor of almost any subject could adopt one or more features of this course and adapt it to their own. Three elements of the class might be particularly useful: the incorporation of pre-class “tasks,” offering students frequent opportunities to reflect on their work and progress, and the replacement of a final exam with a project, in this case the composition.

Through the tasks, students were introduced to a variety of materials that supported their learning in different ways and required them to think about the material from different perspectives and with

constantly evolving and layered pieces of background. In addition to providing students with a multi-faceted context through which to approach the linguistic material, the tasks successfully insured that students came to class prepared (in essence, if a student didn't do their homework, in the form of the tasks, they lost the chance to deepen their learning in class) and that they didn't feel like they were teaching themselves the language in a bubble. The tasks also afforded the peer mentor and the instructor the ability to deepen and enhance their discussions of course content during the workshops. Rather than lecture-style, top-down introductions to basic material, the workshops became problem-solving sessions.

By weaving reflective prompts into the two writing tasks, offering prompt-specific feedback on the tasks, revising the weekly self-reflection, meeting with students at midterm, and including a supplementary evaluation at the end of the term, students were often encouraged to think about learning as a process that required their attention and internal engagement, that is, an awareness of how and why they were doing and thinking as they were. After three years, it still seems that the benefit of these moments is only appreciated by the student in the next or a later semester, but that does not, for me, detract from their immediate value in the current course. An instructor could adapt and incorporate any one of these strategies into his or her course.

Finally, by replacing the final exam with a composition project (and in particular one that was heavily rehearsed by low- and mid-stakes student work throughout the term), students were compelled to avoid cramming large amounts of information for only short-term gain and instead had to synthesize yet again all the elements of the course, linguistic and cultural. The student feedback on the project in the form of their reflection pieces suggests that it is here that student perceptions of their work most clearly align with the professor's aims and hopes for their learning. The form and scope for such a capstone project are myriad and will vary greatly by the class, yet the basic idea of replacing an exam with a multi-step, iterative project or activity holds and should be adaptable to any course.