

College Professors and the New Standards for Classical Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

The new *Standards for Classical Language Learning* should be required reading for all college professors. These new Standards will drive classical language instruction for many learners of Latin and Greek. Therefore, to be fully informed about the classics profession one should be informed about the Standards. Those of us involved in teacher-training programs need to become aware of these Standards, for they will influence how our teacher candidate students will be evaluated. In addition, we as college professors have something to learn from these Standards about how we ourselves teach and how we might teach even more successfully. College professors will learn how the 5C's (Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities), active Latin (or Greek), Modes of Communication (interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational), Performance (and Scaffolding) vs. Proficiency, and Culture and its Place, all are features of the practice of classical language learning.

KEYWORDS

professor, active, Standards, college, Latin

INTRODUCTION

The new *Standards for Classical Language Learning* are happily yet another accomplishment from the classics community created by classicists teaching across various levels of instruction. When the new [Standards for Latin Teacher Preparation](#) appeared, I argued that college professors should be aware of those new Standards ([Ancona](#)). As a member of the Task Force that wrote that earlier document, I learned, not for the first time in my career, how collaboration among classicists who teach at different levels of instruction can be productive and how the results of that joint work, even if aimed at or motivated by a need related to a specific segment of the profession, benefits us all. During the work of that Task Force, as a college professor I became more fully acquainted with terms like “formative” and “summative”

assessment and with the 5 C's of Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities that lay at the foundation of what new Latin teachers were being prepared to teach in their subject area. Even though that document was designed primarily for preparing Latin teachers at the precollegiate level and for those involved in training them, I realized as we worked to produce it that its guidance could be just as useful for Latin teachers at any level.

When I read the new *Standards for Classical Language Learning*, my reaction was fundamentally the same as it had been with the new *Standards for Latin Teacher Preparation* – any Latin or Greek teacher should be familiar with these new Standards for learning and should care about their content irrespective of teaching level. I see four basic reasons why college professors¹ should take seriously the new Standards: (1) these Standards will drive classical language instruction for many learners and therefore to be informed about the profession one should be informed about the Standards; (2) those students we teach in college, if they have studied Latin or Greek in secondary school, will soon have been taught in the context of these Standards, so if we want to understand our college students, we need to understand the underpinnings of their prior learning experience; (3) those of us involved in teacher-training programs need to become aware of the Standards that either will be or will influence the standards against which our teacher candidate students will be evaluated, and finally; (4) we as college professors have something to learn from these Standards about how we ourselves teach and how we might teach even more successfully.

Before turning to the Standards themselves, some additional context may be useful. College professors often grumble when, with pressure from administrators on high, we are required to write up assessment guidelines for our programs. However, such guidelines for assessment are becoming required more and more at the college level, and some professors are learning that some use of formal, articulated assessment may produce better teaching results, which is of course a goal we all share. Most of us college professors have had no training in the field of assessment, but institutions are gradually providing some resources to college faculty

¹ Some of my remarks, such as those below on devising assessment plans, will likely apply more to full-time college faculty than to others teaching at the college level. That said, I am eager for all faculty who teach at the college level, regardless of status, to become informed about the Standards. Many graduate students teach college-level Latin or Greek, as do adjunct faculty, and some may, in fact, be involved in teacher-training courses and assessment work. I use the term “college professor” as an umbrella term here. Graduate student TAs, who are typically at an early career stage, may be particularly interested in new developments in the profession.

for developing assessment. My own institution, Hunter College, now has an [Office of Assessment](#) with information for faculty to consult as they develop assessment plans. Our departments are now required to engage in formal assessment, even if with slow steps at first.² We college professors often struggle with shifting to listing “learning outcomes” rather than just stating what a course will “cover,” and we often do not know why the shift matters. We frequently have not articulated fully in our program materials exactly what our expectations are for our students studying classical languages. Standards for learning are an expected part of the pre-college teaching world, if only because states certify teachers and evaluate them, in part, in accordance with how the students they teach measure up against specific standards. However, standards are not yet an expected part of the college world, at least in quite the same way. Therefore, for this article I will comment on the Standards specifically with college professors in mind. I think many of us college professors can learn from their content and direction.

While the Standards have a great deal to offer, in general, I think the following 5 areas within them are particularly worthy of attention for classics professors.

1. THE 5 C’S

These goals for world language learning provide a useful framework for shaping our students’ learning at all levels: Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. The 5 C’s have been around for a long time and are part of the current [Standards](#), but many college professors are still unfamiliar with them. Definitions of each of these goals and a useful summary are available on the [ACTFL website](#). I highly recommend that college professors become familiar with these common goals for foreign language study that have been articulated now for two decades.

While Communication is rightly, I think, seen as the primary goal of teachers in the new Standards (4), each of the five goals is important as a part of world language study. “Culture” shows that language learning is not narrowly about vocabulary and syntax. “Connections” points to the interdisciplinary connections we can make with other fields of study. “Comparisons” engage students in the process of reexamining what is their own by learning about the “other,” and finally the goal

² It is ironic that the teacher candidate students at Hunter take a required Education course in assessment, while many of their instructors in Classics have had no formal training in this area. This is indicative of the fact that how we assess student learning is seen as an essential teacher-training topic for instruction, but not typically for those training to teach at the college level.

of “Communities” extends language study to broader contexts that are especially useful for lifelong learners of classics. I think every college professor would benefit from thinking about which of these goals he or she tries to meet with students from the large scale (a curriculum or program) to the small scale (a specific instance of instruction) and why. It is almost a given, I would think, that all college professors would share these goals, but examining which ones we emphasize in which courses and at what levels of instruction or in our programs overall and why can be a useful exercise for us as we reflect upon and continue to develop our college-level language programs. For example, having students work as Greek or Latin tutors or intern in community outreach settings where Latin is used would be two opportunities for meeting the goal of “Communities.” Such Outreach activities, when examined in terms of goals for foreign language study, can be seen as more integral to our mission than they might otherwise. In addition, such use of a foreign language can cement the learner’s knowledge in a way that is different from what occurs through more standard classroom instruction. I think looking at the 5 C’s can force us in a good way to broaden what we hope to accomplish with our students and to suggest additional ways in which we can make Greek and Latin a part of our students’ lives both in the short term and the long term.

2. ACTIVE LATIN OR GREEK

The fundamental nature of Communication among the 5 C’s for classical languages learning is the appropriate context for the Standards’ new recognition of the presence of active Latin (or Greek) in our profession. Such recognition, appearing in a widely collaborative document of our profession, means that college professors can no longer ignore the fact that active Latin (or Greek) is an aspect of our profession with which one must become familiar. While some college professors are aware of developments in active Latin and Greek, many are not. Attention to this area of classical pedagogy has been much stronger at the precollegiate level. Hopefully the new Standards will generate more conversation about this topic at the college level. The Standards give many examples of how spoken and written production of Latin (and Greek) in presentational and interpersonal modes can be achieved and the rationale for how that active production of the language fits into the traditional fundamental goal of Communication.³ This carefully crafted statement

³ For more information on the 5 C’s and the three modes of communication (interpretive, presentational, and interpersonal), see ACTFL’s [Performance Descriptors for Language Learners](#).

from the new Standards, I think, is worth quoting: “There is growing evidence that the use of spoken Latin in the classroom facilitates student comprehension of the language, which facilitates reading it” (15). College professors will benefit from becoming more aware of the value of hearing and replicating with appropriate adjustments chunks of Latin for the goal of comprehension. I provide one simple example taken from an advanced Roman Comedy course I taught in spring 2017 of how active Latin could be incorporated into an advanced Latin class. A series of questions and answers that must include repetition of the Latin common to both question and answer can get at major issues in Terence’s *Eunuch*, while reinforcing vocabulary important to the play and common Latin grammatical structures. Here are just two sentences one might employ, asking several students in a row to answer the same questions to provide multiple opportunities for hearing and speaking. *Quis amatur in fabula Eunucho? Quis vitatur in fabula Eunucho?* Substitution of a name in the nominative for the interrogative “quis,” repetition of “in fabula *Eunucho*” as a piece common to question and answer and as an opportunity to hear and speak words in apposition, and both knowledge of and judgment about the content of the play are all tapped in such an exercise. (“*Quis vitatur...*” has a single correct answer, while “*Quis amatur...*” could have multiple answers and involves interpretation.) I hope the attention given to active Latin and Greek in the new Standards will encourage college professors to explore ways in which even a small amount of instruction in this fashion can enhance any class. Hearing chunks of relevant Latin or Greek repeatedly and being asked to respond to them in a structured fashion provides us with one more tool for enhancing comprehension and internalizing the language.⁴

3. STANDARDS FOR COMMUNICATION: MODES

Many college professors will be unfamiliar with the modes of communication mentioned above: interpretive communication, interpersonal communication, and presentational communication. Although these modes were present in the 1997 Standards as well, as we continue to rethink what it is we want our students to do in the college classroom, increased focus on modes vs. the four skills can be productive. The modes framework includes the purpose of communication and thus allows for a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of communication. Giving a speech (presentational mode) is a different activity from asking questions and

⁴ For an engaging and useful discussion of how instructors can do this, see Justin Slocum Bailey’s “The *Ars* of Latin Questioning: Circling, Personalization, and Beyond.”

answering them (interpersonal mode), although both are oral. My example from my Roman Comedy class was interpersonal. The new Standards describe a shift in perspective: “The understanding of communication has shifted away from a focus on a four-skills approach, where speaking, reading, listening, and writing were separate and distinct actions” (7). “The Standards focus on the purpose behind the communication more than the means...” (7). While interpersonal Latin might include conversation involving greetings, or the weather, or modern events, structured conversation in Latin about the texts we are teaching college students is also an opportunity for interpersonal communication. A student presenting aloud to the class a summary in Latin of work being studied would be an opportunity for presentational communication. Both of these activities involve oral and aural skills for students, but the purposes are different as would be the skills entailed in developing the appropriate materials. Second language acquisition research in comprehensible input shows that hearing and reading a lot of comprehensible Latin is more important than speaking or writing a lot of it at the early stages of learning.⁵ It is easy to see how repeated hearing of certain Latin structures fixes that linguistic information in one’s mind in a different way from learning rules about them. My biggest surprise when visiting for a full day at a comprehensible-input-based Latin program a couple of years ago was the high proportion of teacher-generated Latin heard vs. student-generated Latin spoken, but now that makes sense to me.⁶ Input must be prioritized.

4. PERFORMANCE (AND SCAFFOLDING) VS. PROFICIENCY

College professors often struggle to find the balance between covering enough text and building Greek and Latin language skills. The clear distinction between language performance, for which teachers create scaffolding⁷ that leads to higher levels of understanding and expression, and language proficiency, which is “independent of specific instruction or curriculum” (Standards 5) and involves how

⁵ See Justin Slocum Bailey’s “[Teaching Latin to Humans](#)” for a discussion of some of these issues.

⁶ I thank Dawn Mitchell of Dulaney High School in Maryland for that very informative visit. I also thank Elizabeth Szylejko of Central High School in Philadelphia for letting me observe her questioning in Latin with her advanced Latin students. Those visits, plus attendance at a workshop by Justin Slocum Bailey and at The Paideia Institute’s Living Latin in New York City, have added to my practical experience of new work in Latin pedagogy. I am grateful to the Classical Association of the Atlantic States for a three-year Leadership Initiative Grant I received to visit 15 Latin programs in the CAAS region for an entire day each. It was through that grant that I was able to spend the day at Dulaney (2015) and at Central (2017).

⁷ For background on instructional scaffolding, see this [Wikipedia article](#).

the student can handle “non-rehearsed situations and tasks” (Standards 5), is significant. Covering the next 20 lines of Ovid, with appropriate guidance from the professor, leads to performance. Such guidance could include, for example, scaffolding techniques like the use of a simplified version of a Latin text to prepare for the reading of the original authentic text or the use of visual aids, such as pictures, to support the learning of vocabulary.⁸ Having the students answer comprehension questions on an unseen passage in Latin or Greek or translating it shows proficiency. We hope that some of the scaffolding for performance will then translate into better-developed skills for tackling non-rehearsed tasks. The stark distinction, though, between performance and proficiency is one we college professors do not talk about much at the college level. Perhaps with more self-conscious attention to scaffolding – a term that is only slowly making its way into college conversations – the distinction between performance and proficiency will make more sense and professors will also see how the two can be synergistic.

I think college professors would find useful the [NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Global Benchmarks](#), which are referenced and utilized in the “Lifelong Learning” section of the Standards (59-61), to distinguish performance from proficiency. “Can-do” statements are useful for defining learning outcomes, rather than teaching goals, and can help us professors support proficiency over mere coverage. Whether the learner is at the novice level or the advanced level, each can demonstrate proficiency and can have a “can-do” statement about, for example, “interpretive reading” or “presentational speaking.” For example, an intermediate range student according to the Standards “[u]nderstands main ideas and some supporting details on familiar topics from simple, straightforward texts that contain predominantly high-frequency vocabulary” (9). Rephrased in the student’s voice, this functions as a performance descriptor for what he/she “can-do” in the area of “interpretive reading” (I can understand...). A “can-do” example for “presentational speaking” for novice low learners could be the “sample indicator”: I can “state the names of familiar people, places, and objects depicted visually using words or memorized phrases” (Standards 24). Seeing what learners can do broken down into small incremental steps can inform curricular planning as well as suggest scaffolding techniques that can

⁸ The Legamus Transitional Readers from Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, edited by Kenneth F. Kitchell Jr. and Thomas J. Sienkewicz, are based on the practice of scaffolding. Having cowritten *Horace: A Legamus Transitional Reader* with David J. Murphy, I can say that developing scaffolding techniques forces one to confront what may or may not be difficult about a given text and that finding techniques for making texts we value more approachable can be quite satisfying.

enhance performance and develop proficiency. Lower level performance indicators themselves provide a useful guide to various tasks that are the stepping stones to higher level performance. If instruction is to lead to the superior level, for example, of “interpretive listening,” review of and practice with lower level tasks in this same area can provide appropriate scaffolding. For example, listening to a simplified version of a story can serve as scaffolding for success with listening to a more complex version of the same story.

5. CULTURE AND ITS PLACE

The Standards state that “A significant shift in how culture is taught in the language classroom is the move away from teaching isolated facts to integrating culture with language.” (30) and “In terms of instructional approaches, it is also true that when one leads with culture, language will follow. Rather than adding culture as an afterthought, beginning a new unit of instruction by examining cultural images and artifacts and authentic materials, can tap learners’ interests.” (31). These comments about newer ways of integrating language and culture and the matter of what one “leads with” led me to reflect on another potential piece of language instruction that can seem tangential, like culture: the use of secondary scholarship in the college language classroom. While some might argue that college students need all their time in our courses for language study alone, others would argue, and I include myself among them, that reading a scholarly article about a Greek or Latin text being studied, while time-consuming, can lead the student back to reading the text with higher interest and understanding because he or she sees the Greek or Latin cited in the article in the more emphatic context of its use for making an intellectual argument. For example, reading a scholarly article about Aeneas’ final actions in the *Aeneid* makes reading the poem’s ending in Latin more motivated. When reading articles from scholars who disagree with each other, students will recognize that scholars can quote the same Latin text to make divergent arguments and that recognition can make the Latin come alive and become memorable in a new way because of its scholarly context. Both cultural study and the reading of a scholarly article can become motivators for approaching language or deepening its understanding. What we “lead with” can affect learning.

CONCLUSION

The new *Standards for Classical Language Learning* should be read by every college professor of classics. Staying informed about what the profession has said collectively about language learning through a task force composed of classics teachers at various levels of instruction is essential. The document will dispel any notion that what we do in college is completely different from what others do teaching students at the precollegiate level. In fact, it is this sense the document creates of a shared professional enterprise that is so invigorating. While I chose just five specific areas to comment on in this brief article – (1) The 5 C’s, (2) Active Latin or Greek, (3) Standards for Communication: Modes, (4) Performance (and Scaffolding) vs. Proficiency, and (5) Culture and Its Place – I think we college professors will find in the new Standards many other specifics to consider with profit as we reflect upon our own evolving teaching practices.

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