

Mentoring and the Latin Teaching Methods Course

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Teaching Latin is hard work, but it is also very rewarding work. It is exhilarating to pass on our love of the beautiful Latin language to a new generation. Teaching Latin is also creative work. I always promise my Latin teaching methods students that when, not if, they become Latin teachers themselves, they will never be bored.

In the classroom, Latin is most definitely a living language: not only do we watch our students grow and move on, but our teaching methods themselves evolve; so do our textbooks and the tests we give. We also change; like our students, we grow, we get better, but we also go through ups and downs, just like our students. I do not think I know any educator who does not experiment, or who teaches the same lesson or the same text twice in exactly the same way. By the time many Latin teachers retire, if not sooner, they have virtually written their own textbooks.

As a result of this creativity and experimentation in teaching, in addition to the uplifting successes, there are also errors and failures. Miscalculations, misunderstandings, and mistakes are a normal, even essential, part of the job of being a teacher. Here is just a small example: a methods student who designed a lesson on the passive imperative told me that she could hardly believe how many times she had to print out her handout; each time she looked at what she had printed, she found a new mistake. And yes, there were still mistakes on her handout. This realization, both the frustration and the acceptance of flaws, was itself part of the lesson.

Becoming and being a teacher requires a powerful belief in oneself and one's abilities in spite of mistakes. It also requires self-affirmation in the face of frustration over circumstances over which one has no control. A Latin teaching methods course that treats students as members of a team rather than as competing individuals can help to remove that fear of failure, particularly of making a public mistake. I am especially excited about my methods class this year, an equal mix of undergraduate and graduate students, because they do not just rely on me to be "the sage on the stage" or constantly seek my approval, but are very comfortable correcting and receiving corrections from each other. Unlike regular Latin classes that often focus exclusively on one's ability as a translator and facility with grammatical terms, a

methods course has a dual identity as both a Latin class and an education course. This double role is a challenge to manage, but I believe that a methods class has the obligation to nurture the confidence of a future educator, confidence which, to be honest, has sometimes been shattered in the language-focused classes. For example, I find that students are actually eager to translate a passage if I first project it in front of the room and guide the whole class in an open discussion about salient features, from the topic and context, to thematic vocabulary and surprising syntax. After this dialogue, all participants feel equally primed to tackle a precise word-for-word translation. My personal teaching theme for my classes this semester, both the first-year Latin class and the methods class, is “no fear.” I communicate this theme to my students often, and results are increased enthusiasm and engagement.

In this perspective, I will focus on the psychosocial aspect of a teaching methods class. I believe that one of the important qualities that such a class can pass on to our future teachers is empathy. This quality, more than anything else, will show our students that we care about them, we care about their learning Latin, and we believe in their ability to become teachers themselves. This quality of empathy is one which I would like my Latin methods students to carry into their own classrooms because only in the Latin classroom are future Latin teachers born. There is a poster in our department here at CU Boulder that says, “Why study Latin?” All of the familiar enticements are listed: improve your vocabulary and critical thinking skills, score well on standardized tests, get into law school, medical school, etc. But there is one really important item missing which I would like to add: become a Latin teacher: you will have a fabulous, exciting career. Convincing people to make that commitment, to become a teacher, especially in a discipline that many consider to be optional or even frivolous, is another function of a Latin teaching methods class. As Kenneth Kitchell proposes at the end of the opening article in *Latin for the 21st Century*, titled “The Great Latin Debate: The Futility of Utility,” it is the *experience* of studying Latin that will ensure the survival of our discipline (13).

One of the ways that a methods class can nurture new teachers is through mentoring. And I do not just mean that I am the mentor. Students make wonderful mentors to each other, and I too can introduce them to and encourage them to find other mentors. Mentoring is commonly defined as a developmental relationship that is embedded within a career context. Note that this simple definition does not necessarily indicate any kind of differentiated status between the parties. I consider myself a mentor to all of my students, even my first year Latin students, and to me

that means that I am a partner and a facilitator in their learning. You cannot force someone to learn vocabulary, but you can show someone the myriad ways that it can be done. You can provide praise even for small successes. I do not use the common classroom greeting, “*salvete, discipuli,*” but prefer “*salvete, comites.*” I tell my students that the greeting, “Hail, fellow travelers!” means that the study of Latin takes us all on an incredible journey together. I also consider my students as my mentors. Because I am open to this possibility, every day they teach me how to be a better teacher. For me, the best kind of mentoring relationship is one where the two parties behave as co-mentors, where each person has something truly valuable to offer to the other.

When I began to think about this topic, I went to the source, as many have done: Homer. Yes, everything goes back to Homer. And yes, the idea and the name of Mentor goes back to *The Odyssey*. Athena disguises herself, first as Mentos, then as Mentor, in order to guide and advise Telemachus, the son of Odysseus. What can the goddess of wisdom teach us about the project of mentoring? The first thing that Athena does at the beginning of *The Odyssey* is to confront authority, Zeus, on behalf of her beloved humans. She reveals herself as an advocate for a particular Ithacan family, Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus, who are all stuck in one way or another. Throughout the opening books of *The Odyssey*, Athena shows us that a mentor must work hard to be an ally and even a defender and protector of those she cares about. As any educator can tell you, we must be ready to serve in the same role for our students.

Young Telemachus sits, helpless and unhappy, among his mother’s suitors, daydreaming about what his father would do to punish them, if he ever came home. After a small hesitation, he takes the initiative and approaches a visitor, who happens to be Athena disguised as Mentos, king of another island. Telemachus is polite, but he is also incapacitated. He has no idea what the future has in store for him. He is not even sure he is the son of Odysseus. For all of his young life he has been surrounded by men who are determined to diminish him in every possible way. Some of our students are not unlike Telemachus, though we might not even know it. Athena as Mentos gives the young man hope that Odysseus will return, praises him and tells him how like his father he is: “But you must be, by your looks, Odysseus’ boy? The way your head is shaped, the fine eyes—yes, how like him” (8).¹ She does not

¹ All quotations from *The Odyssey* are from the translation of Robert Fitzgerald. Numbers in parentheses are the page numbers in the Vintage Classics edition of 1990.

evaluate his worthiness or put him to the test or demand that he prove himself. Her assumption is always of his innate worthiness.

At first Telemachus resists the praise; he questions again whether Odysseus is really his father, wishes he had a different father, and declares that his father is dead. Athena/Mentes listens and expresses empathy for Telemachus' difficult situation, calling the suitors "arrogant... gluttons" (8). Telemachus again insists that Odysseus has died and denies his paternity. He sees no future for himself. In spite of Telemachus' negativity, Athena/Mentes does not give up. Instead, she tells Telemachus an inspiring story about his father and offers him a way forward. She gives him a concrete multi-step plan of action: call an assembly, make a speech, get a boat ready, visit your father's friends, and gather information so that you can make a decision whether to wait for his return or not. Next, she gives him an example of a peer, Agamemnon's son, Orestes, who avenged his father. She ends with an encouraging compliment, "you are tall and well set-up, I see; be brave...and men in times to come will speak of you respectfully" (10). Finally, she models appropriate behavior: "Now I must join my ship; my crew will grumble if I keep them waiting" (10). Homer's narrator sums up Athena's visit: "But as she went she put new spirit in him, a new dream of his father, clearer now" (11). In her role as mentor, Athena is a good listener. She allows Telemachus to express his doubt and frustrations. She does not judge, but is persistent and kind. She knows that what Telemachus needs is someone who will affirm his identity, boost his self-esteem, envision a different future, and articulate a way to get there.

The positive influence of Athena/Mentes brings about a remarkable and immediate change in Telemachus. When Penelope scolds the minstrel for singing about homecomings, Telemachus shows a new capacity for empathy. He now realizes that he is not alone and not the only one grieving. Penelope is amazed at the transformation. When Telemachus argues with the suitors, who are astounded at his new confidence, he manages to hold his ground. In the assembly the next day, Telemachus now has the courage to speak out in public about the injustices of the suitors. He defends his mother and warns the suitors that they will get the punishment that they deserve. After the prophet Halitherses interprets a pair of eagles as a sign of Odysseus' imminent return, one suitor insults the seer and declares that Odysseus is dead. But Telemachus remains "clear-headed" (25) and announces his intention to travel to Pylos and Sparta for news of his father. When Odysseus' old companion, Mentor, castigates the assembly for not lifting a finger to help Telemachus, he too

is put down by a suitor, who suggests that even if Odysseus did come home, they would kill him. As for Telemachus, he is not even capable of going abroad. Perhaps Telemachus' first public speech has not been entirely successful, but at least he now knows that he has two advocates, the prophet Halitherses and Mentor, who will stand up for him. That knowledge is enough to keep him going. When Athena hears his prayer for further support, she adopts the human form of Mentor. Her work as ally and guide is not finished. Once again, she praises the young man for his spirit and good sense. She reaffirms for Telemachus that he is Odysseus' true son and possesses his fine qualities. She assures him of safety on his travels and promises doom for the suitors, naysayers whom he should just ignore. She even says that she will find the ship and crew and sail with him, and instructs him to gather provisions. Nobody ever said that being a mentor is easy.

At home, Telemachus shows for the second time that the support of a mentor has given him confidence. When a laughing suitor tells Telemachus, "Come on, get over it, no more grim thoughts, but feast and drink with me, the way you used to" (28), the young man replies assertively, "Antinoos, I cannot see myself again taking a quiet dinner in this company. Isn't it enough that you could strip my house under my very nose when I was young? Now that I know, being grown, what others say, I understand it all, and my heart is full" (28). At this point, the goddess of wisdom does something remarkable; she disguises herself as her protégé, taking on Telemachus' own form as she secures a ship captain and crew. She puts a spell on the suitors so they fall asleep and then returns as Mentor. She tells Telemachus that all is ready and to get moving. Homer's narrator describes the scene: "Pallas Athena turned like the wind, running ahead of him. He followed in her footsteps down to the seaside, where they found the ship...Telemakhos, now strong in the magic, cried: 'Come with me, friends, and get our rations down!'" (31). Once on the ship, he sits beside Mentor as they row away side by side. Athena provides a wind and Telemachus issues commands. A mentor is a guide, a model, and a partner.

Telemachus, a young man who has never left home, has literally been launched. And yet, Athena's work as Mentor is not finished. What more can she do? She has given Telemachus a new belief in himself and a plan; now she must provide contacts and introductions. As with human mentors, Athena cannot always be there herself, but she can build a network of other relationships. Telemachus and Mentor reach Pylos in the middle of a nine-bull sacrifice. When Telemachus sees this incredible scene, for all his progress, he is intimidated and refuses to get off the

boat. Again, Athena/Mentor is not critical; she simply reminds him why he came on this trip and tells him to approach Nestor “with courtesy” (35). He replies, “‘Mentor, how can I do it, how approach him? I have no practice in elaborate speeches, and for a young man to interrogate an old man seems disrespectful.’ But the grey-eyed goddess said: ‘Reason and heart will give you words, Telemakhos...’ so she went on quickly, and he followed her” (36). The strangers are welcomed as guests and served. After the meal, Mentor, as the elder visitor, is asked to pray. After praying, “She passed the beautiful wine cup to Telemakhos, who tipped the wine and prayed as she had done” (37). This beautiful sentence conveys the essence of mentorship: a mentor offers her own practice as an example worthy of imitation. Telemachus has much more to learn, but he is no longer the boy simultaneously believing that his father is dead and daydreaming that he will return after nine years at sea. Through the influence of Mentor, he is becoming someone who could deal with the suitors on his own, or perhaps with support from his newfound friends. Athena/Mentor’s final instruction is that Nestor send Telemachus on to Sparta, where he will make more important connections. She transforms herself into a seahawk that all recognize as divine and flies off. Nestor assures Telemachus that Athena has been with him and all will be well. He plans another sacrifice to honor her.

I suggested earlier that the mentor/mentee relationship is a partnership. How does that fit with the picture in *The Odyssey* of a powerful goddess disguised as an older man coaching a tyrannized young man with no clue and no resources? To this I respond simply that gods and humans are in a reciprocal relationship. If humans were not around and willing to worship them and make sacrifices to them, the gods would not be here either. Though as a teacher I am in a position of authority, a sort of goddess over my students, and required to evaluate their performance and give them grades, I would not be here if my students were not here. We need the support of our students just as much as they need ours, because if we do not give them heart, as Athena does for Telemachus, we will not have any students to teach.

How can a Latin teaching methods class fulfill the functions of mentoring I have been looking at through the lens of *The Odyssey*? First, the instructor of a course on teaching must be especially aware of her significance as a model for teaching. For example, pronunciation of Latin should be correct. Assignments should be clear and well developed. Class time should be organized and valuable. Second, the methods course should introduce students to the professional expectations of our field. We do this through a study of the *Standards for Classical Language Learning*,

the *Standards for Latin Teacher Preparation*, and our state language teaching standards. We also study the AP Latin curriculum guide, the National Latin Exam, and ALIRA, the Latin Interpretive Reading Assessment. Third, the course should help future teachers begin to form their identity as teachers. I do this by having students read, report on, and express their opinions about a wide variety of Latin textbooks, new and old, that use a wide variety of methods. At the end of the course, they write their own statements of teaching philosophy. Fourth, the methods teacher should strive to create a positive, optimistic, and affirming atmosphere where students are not judged but encouraged to talk about their own challenges with the Latin language, the challenges of teaching this language, and to share their experiences and make suggestions. For example, a collaborative project as simple as breaking up a Latin passage into gradable syntactic segments (in imitation of the grading of the AP Latin exam) encourages students to reflect on and share their concerns about subjectivity in grading and the fairness (or not) of various kinds of assessments, including the AP Latin Exam. Fifth, the methods course should provide ample opportunities for students to be creative while practicing their skills and getting feedback. My students do this through mini-lessons on morphology and syntax and by analyzing and presenting passages of Caesar and Virgil to their classmates. In the course of the mini-lessons, students learn that listening with respect to their fellow presenters is just as important as doing a presentation themselves. Sixth, a methods class exposes future Latin teachers to new ideas about how to teach Latin, so that they are not stuck in old ruts using outdated methods. They do this by reading and discussing pedagogical articles by other teachers about how they teach Latin. When students discuss the articles in pairs and plan together how to present information to the larger group, they are beginning the process of becoming mentors to those who are their future colleagues in the profession. Seventh, the methods class can provide contacts, introductions, and additional role models. I achieve this by inviting local teachers to come to our class to talk about the details of running a Latin program. I also introduce the next generation of teachers to the broader community that exists to support them, our state Colorado Classics Association, the American Classical League, the National Committee for Latin and Greek, CAMWS, and SCS.

In conclusion, I wish to thank my students, who teach me so much, and my mentor, Barbara Hill, an extraordinarily wise person who, like Athena, embodies the meaning of mentorship. Becoming a mentor, and being mentored, is truly life changing. I would not be where I am today were it not for her.

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