

Classics in American Schools

LIZ GEPHARDT

Williamsburg Middle School, Arlington, VA

For many students in American schools, studying Classics means studying Latin. Depending on available programs, students may elect to study Latin as early as elementary school, with the most students starting Latin in ninth grade. Although the exact number of students currently enrolled in Latin in the United States is unknown, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' most recent survey estimates national Latin enrollment at 205,158, comprising 2.3% of all students enrolled in Foreign Languages.¹ The number of students taking the National Latin Exam is somewhat smaller than ACTFL's estimate, since not all schools offer the exam. In 2010 138,000 students signed up to take the National Latin Exam, and the number of students actually taking the exam each year has ranged between 130,000 and 138,000 since 2004.² Considerably fewer students have access to Greek at the high school level with 1,709 students taking the National Greek Exam in 2010.³ A significant percentage of high school students pursue college-level coursework in Latin, usually after four or five years of study. High school Advanced Placement courses drive the academic curriculum for two reasons: school systems seek ways to quantify high achievement, and universities prefer to admit students who elect challenging courses.⁴ The number of students taking Advanced Placement Exams in Latin peaked in 2007 at 8,700. At that time the College Board offered two different exams: one exam covering Vergil's *Aeneid*, and a second Latin literature exam covering readings from Catullus and either Cicero, Horace, or Ovid. Since the College Board discontinued the Latin literature exam in 2009, the overall number of students taking Advanced Placement Latin exams dropped to 6,523 in 2010.⁵ From these early numbers, it is difficult to determine whether enrollment in high school Latin literature courses has dropped altogether, or whether schools continue to offer Catullus, Cicero, Horace and Ovid, but are simply not counted by the College Board. In 2012, the College Board plans to introduce a revised Advanced Placement Latin exam that covers readings from Vergil's *Aeneid* as well as Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* and *Bellum Civile*. Teachers, classicists and advocates for the Classics are closely following the development of this combined Vergil-Caesar exam and its impact on Latin programs across the nation.

The majority of students in the United States does not study Latin or Greek, but encounter Classics in "core curricula" classes like English and social studies. As part of the movement towards accountability in education, individual states have published standards for each discipline, and states are working together toward setting educational standards for the nation. As a result, many states already mandate that the general student population study ancient Greek and Roman culture. Obvious examples of this include world history and literature courses in high schools, but standards relating to Classics also appear in the elementary school curriculum. For

example, the Virginia Standards of Learning for Social Studies for third grade stipulate: “The student will explain how the contributions of ancient Greece and Rome have influenced the present world in terms of architecture, government (direct and representative democracy), and sports.”⁶ This indicates that students will not only study ancient architecture, government, and sports, but also describe their impact on modern life. While standards alone do not guarantee successful instruction, making the study of ancient Greece and Rome a priority in third-grade indicates that we value Classics in education and find it relevant to our society.

Outside of the classroom, avid young readers can easily find classical content in the junior fiction section of the library as well as on the silver screen. Readers around the world have encountered Latinate spells and classical allusions in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series of books and films (now, even a theme park). More recently, students have discovered Greek mythology through Rick Riordan’s current series *Heroes of Olympus* and his best-selling series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, both of which portray Greek Olympian gods, demigods, and humans interacting in a contemporary setting. A film based on Riordan’s first book in this series, *The Lightning Thief*, was released in theaters in February 2010 with a sequel, *Sea of Monsters*, slated for release in 2012. In addition to Greek mythology, the Roman military has also captured students’ imaginations. In 2011, *The Eagle* – a film based on Rosemary Sutcliffe’s novel, *The Eagle of the Ninth*, first published in 1954 – has increased book sales as well as interest in Roman military conquest and, especially, Roman Britain. Taken together, the success of these popular novels and films underscores a general interest among school age children in Classics.

Students may be eager to read about mythology and ancient history, but many simply do not realize that they can pursue these interests by studying Latin. Other students are unable to study Latin due to teacher shortages and program cuts. Economic strain has also caused many schools to increase class size and limit after-school activities such as the Junior Classical League. Moreover, some parents and schools pressure students to study Spanish, Chinese or Japanese to prepare for the global job market. These are just some of the challenges that Latin teachers face in the current educational environment. Popular books and films can help recruit prospective students, but other methods are required to sway the parents, guidance counselors and school administrators who make vital decisions about academic programs. Teachers and advocates of Classics need to communicate effectively with these groups using current educational terminology. Unfortunately, some existing promotional materials for Latin and Classics use outdated language. Even the most up-to-date teachers can find themselves falling back on these well-worn arguments to defend programs: Latin is a challenge reserved for “top” students, Latin increases SAT Verbal scores, Latin helps students become doctors or lawyers via medical and legal terminology, Latin provides “essential knowledge” and entry into the world of the intelligentsia. While I am not questioning the veracity of these statements, I do posit that they are elitist and ineffective in the current educational marketplace. They paint a skewed picture of the Latin classroom, filled with brilliant students with giant vocabularies learning mottoes that can help them become a *Jeopardy* champion on the way to law school. In addition, these statements imply that Latin competes with other languages for “top” students with “lesser” students settling

for French or Spanish, when in fact students with a variety of learning styles can benefit from studying Latin. Teachers and advocates for Classics must take a critical look at posters, pamphlets, and presentations, carefully considering the messages they send about the value of Classics in education. How we market the study of Latin and Classics must reflect our own teaching practices and educational terminology.

Current educational models for teaching Latin bypass these elitist arguments and emphasize the skills that students develop. The most widely used national model was produced in collaboration with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages as a part of the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project.⁷ Since the first draft of these standards were written for teachers of modern languages, the American Classical League and the American Philological Association along with regional classical associations used the same framework to create *Standards for Classical Language Learning* which provided recommendations specific to Greek and Latin.⁸ Both of these documents emphasize the same five goals for classical and modern languages: Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons and Communities. These documents have become the blueprint for states' educational standards, making the five "Cs" an excellent guide for marketing Latin and Classics to the educational community. The task at hand is twofold: to describe the skills that students develop as they reach these goals and to reframe arguments for studying Latin around those skills.

The first and most important of the five "C's" is Communication. The *Standards for Classical Language Learning* states, "Reading, then, is the first standard and the key to communicating with the ancient world."⁹ Textbook series such as *Ecce Romani*, *Cambridge Latin Course* and *Oxford Latin Course* all structure lessons around progressively challenging reading about ancient Romans. Because reading is integral to the classroom and part of the daily life of Latin students, it is important to articulate the skills it develops: comprehension, analytical thinking, and flexible thinking. Latin students improve reading comprehension by using root words, prefixes and suffixes to increase word recognition. Students also use context clues to define unfamiliar words and interpret words that have multiple meanings. While navigating the matrices of Latin morphology and supporting arguments with examples from primary sources, students develop analytical thinking. Finally, students exercise flexible thinking by finding synonyms, creating alternate translations and making predictions about narratives. Because reading spans academic and work environments, parents and educators alike are eager to hear teachers describe the ways we develop these skills in our students.

There are many aspects of Greek and Roman Culture (the second "C") that fascinate both students and adults. Incorporating mythology and history in a way that engages the wider school community is a challenge worth undertaking. Two simple ways to use ancient and popular culture to promote the study of Classics are displaying novels in the classroom or school library and arranging field trips to films or viewings after school that include the broader student body, parents, and educators. Although Classics is by nature an interdisciplinary study, it can be difficult to describe its scope and complex relationships to other disciplines. To exemplify the

third goal, Connections, I imagine a poster with a “Classical Web” or “Classical Umbrella” that encompasses studies such as art history, epigraphy, and linguistics. Creating materials to illustrate these connections is indeed a worthy endeavor for any teacher, classicist, or committee. Until such a poster (or other equivalent) exists, however, students will rely on implicit messages that classicists can pursue multiple interests. In an effort to make the message explicit, some teachers use creative projects to help students understand the interdisciplinary nature of Classics, while others engage students in problem solving using examples from archaeology, music, and history. Ultimately, teachers and classicists need to find ways to articulate the sub-disciplines comprised by Classics as well as related fields of study.

As teachers we help students engage in a dialogue between the ancient and modern worlds. Students then use Comparisons, the fourth “C,” to make Latin and Classics relevant to modern life and language. These can be cultural comparisons, in the case of Virginian third grade history students, or linguistic comparisons that students make between Latin and their native tongue(s). In this way studying Latin does more than raise SAT Verbal scores, it expands students’ linguistic awareness. While students do increase their English vocabulary through word study and derivatives, they also develop a deeper understanding of grammar, syntax, and word relationships. These types of linguistic comparisons improve students’ writing in English and also facilitate the study of other languages. Rather than competing with other languages for students, the fifth and final “C,” Community, recommends that students apply the study of Latin to other languages, engaging in a multilingual community. Students also bring Latin with them to their other coursework, and participate in student networks such as the National and State Junior Classical Leagues. As these students interact with peers, parents and members of the community, they become ambassadors for Latin and the study of Classics, invigorating programs and becoming advocates and teachers of the future.

Notes

1. American Council of the Teaching of Foreign Languages 2011, *Foreign Language enrollments in K–12 Public schools: Are Students Prepared for a Global Society 2007–2008: Report Summary*; retrieved from <http://www.actfl.org/files/ReportSummary2011.pdf>.
2. National Latin Exam 2010, *National Latin Exam Participation Statistics 1977–2010*; retrieved from <http://www.nle.org/stats.html>.
3. American Classical League 2010, *Results of the ACL/ NJCL Greek Examination*; retrieved from: <http://www.aclClassics.org/uploads/assets/files/NGEANNOUNCE2010.pdf>.
4. Jane Miriam Epperson Brinley, “Et tu, College Board?” *The Washington Post* May 14, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2009/05/13/AR2009051303254.html>.

5. College Board 2010, *AP Examination Volume Changes 2000–2010*; retrieved from <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/Exam-Volume-Change-2010.pdf>.
6. Virginia Department of Education 2008, *History and Social Science Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools: History 3.1*; retrieved from http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/sol/standards_docs/history_socialscience/next_version/stds_history3.pdf.
7. National Standards for Foreign Language Education Project 1996, *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century*; retrieved from <http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3392>.
8. American Classical League, American Philological Association, Classical Association of the Atlantic States, the Classical Association of New England, Classical Association of the Middle West and South 1997, *Standards for Classical Language Learning*; retrieved from: http://www.aclClassics.org/uploads/assets/files/Standards_Classical_Learning.pdf.
9. *Standards for Classical Language Learning*; retrieved from: http://www.aclClassics.org/uploads/assets/files/Standards_Classical_Learning.pdf.