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Research Article

Steps towards inclusivity: modifying challenging content, navigating pedagogical materials and initiating student reflection within the Classics classroom

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Abstract

Although there is plenty of scholarship regarding the concerns of addressing controversial and sensitive subject manner in the Classics classroom, and I have considered these to quite an extent, my own interest in these practices emerged where they matter the most: my own experiences within the classroom. For me, it came to a head with one pupil who demonstrated an active enthusiasm for Latin study and the classical world at large, but was slowly becoming disheartened after several classes, despite not displaying any overt academic challenges to any of the presented material. When I brought this issue up privately with her, she said: 'Sir, it sucks that this culture and language which I adore, wouldn't value me as much I value it.' She also expressed regret at choosing Latin, as she felt 'it seems to be a subject where only boys can succeed.' It also became apparent that this consensus was common, and shared with several of her friends and peers. This paper describes some of the actions I undertook to address their sensitivities in the Classics classroom.

Keywords: *Cambridge Latin Course*, Latin, pedagogy, inclusion

Changing the tone

Although many current and past Latin students of mine are fond of the plot and characters of the *Cambridge Latin Course (CLC)*, which is the main textbook used in my classroom, students regularly displayed a distinct lack of empathy regarding the historical realities presented by Metella, Melissa, Grumio and Clemens (as noted by Allan, 1986; Cambridge School Classics Project, 1998; Hunt, 2016; McHardy and Deacy, 2016; Ong, 1959; Sawyer, 2016). These perspectives were further confirmed as consistent patterns when I reviewed students' work and while reflecting on multiple classroom interactions and discussions between me and my students, as well as with each other. These ranged from students viewing *servi et ancillae* [*slaves and slave girls*] as sanitised Victorian era servants, the perfect models of the 'happy slave' trope, or having strong, salient, stereotypical views based on women's supposed passivity in Roman society (see, for example, Dugan, 2019). All these factors caused me to reflect on my own role in the classroom as well as the nature of the pedagogical resources utilised in the teaching and learning of classical languages.

However, this should not be surprising to us. Besides the *CLC*, other pedagogical resources and the fictional personalities within them – whether they are the Xanthias of *Athenaze*, Scintilla and Flaccus of the *Oxford Latin Course* or Davus of *Lingua Latina per se Illustrata* – present similar concerns (Hunt, 2022; Lockey, 2021; Nicoulin, 2019). Beyond the depiction of the enslaved and women, there are issues with the portrayal of differing ethnicities, races, and the disabled within these materials (Hunt, 2022; Lockey, 2021; Nicoulin, 2019). This is further compounded in senior and tertiary language study, where students can be exposed to more confronting material in authentic classical texts like the romanticisation of sexual violence in verse or the brutal realities of total war and genocide in historical prose (Bostick, 2018, 2020a, 2020b). Ultimately, this creates tension in building an inclusive culture, with students being alienated by the taught content. However, and more importantly, it can actively promote misconceptions in understanding the classical world (Hunt, 2022, pp. 165–166, 171–172).

As such, this reflection allowed me to experiment with my teaching approaches to facilitate and create a more welcoming and deeper space for students to grow their understanding of the Latin language and classical culture, especially when it presents its harsh, brutal and unjust realities. The principles which I utilised in these activities did not involve reinventing the wheel and were simple practices embedded in regular teaching practices; whether it was allowing student voice, permitting students' opportunities to critique course content or create their own material to facilitate deeper cultural understanding while maintaining academic rigour (Hunt, 2022). It also allowed me to explore new possibilities for approaching Latin study as well as to link the teaching of Classical Languages to more holistic learning outcomes.

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Slavery

The first example is for a New South Wales Educational Standards Authority (NESA) Stage Four (Years 7–8) class expanding upon an introduction of Roman society. Previously, students were introduced to *cives*, *libertus*, *liberta*, *servi* [citizens, freedman, freedwoman, enslaved persons] in terms of vocabulary and cultural understanding in a comprehension-based activity conducted in class time. However, this new activity begins with students brainstorming relevant vocabulary and concepts related to enslavement in both Latin and English as a formative strategy, which allows students of all abilities and capacities to engage with the activity. After consolidating this brainstorm, students engage in a brief interactive multimodal presentation which expands in more detail the nuances of enslavement in the ancient Mediterranean as well as building upon students' related vocabulary, involving other types of enslavement such as *verna*, *nexus* or *gladiatores* [home-born slave, debt-slave, gladiators] (Bostick, 2018), as well as introducing Patterson's concept of 'social death' to further frame the nature of the institution conceptually (Rankine, 2011). Students are then asked to engage in a collaborative activity analysing authentic Latin material of their choice, with supporting scaffolds and English translations (DuBois, 2014, pp. 194–198). These materials include receipts of financial transactions for the purchase of enslaved people, inscribed slave collars or short extracts of Latin writers noting attitudes towards enslaved people. Students comprehend and note how the language interacts and informs the interpretation of these artefacts.

One of the most immediate responses drawn from these activities was that the majority of students did not associate the experiences of enslaved people with negative connotations. Despite this, a few students made connections to verbs like *laborat* [works] and the power dynamics implied by a *dominus* [master]; the majority of my students thought that the conditions of the enslaved were not only acceptable but certainly tolerable. This correlates with research conducted by Parodi (2020). Likewise, during the multimodal presentation students expressed the most surprise with the diversity of the origins of enslaved people, with most being familiar with those born into the institution or as captives of war, yet not that piracy, kidnapping or child exposure and abandonment supplemented human traffic into the institution and the associated trauma with it (Gold, 2014). Students seemed to gain greater clarity regarding the structures and role in the institution through linguistic connections and they informed Roman perspectives such as the shared relationship of the verb *servo* [protect, serve] and the noun *servus* [enslaved man] (Bostick, 2018). This was further reinforced by how students noted in the Latin materials how the language reinforced these experiences despite some having multiple interpretations due to linguistic ambiguity. In one example several students discussed the ambiguity of *suae* [his/his own] with *ancilla* [enslaved female] noting how it can indicate or be interpreted by either a coercive power dynamic or a more benevolent experience between master and enslaved person. Others noted the types of verbs and their use such as *teneo, capio* or *fugio* [I keep, I catch, I run away] on inscribed slave collars as well as the perceived value placed on the enslaved based on content and the terminology found in the artefacts. Likewise, students made note of the comparisons Roman writers made of the enslaved such as *plaustra*, *boves* and *instrumentae* [wagons, oxen, tools], as well as the descriptive language to enhance these perceptions. By exploring this diversity of enslaved persons and their experiences, students were more reflective in developing parallels to contemporary contexts and peoples including the experiences of refugees, asylum seekers, child labourers and workers in the third world (DuBois, 2014; Dugan, 2019). Although these present their own concerns, students did seem to more aware of the nature and relationship these individuals have to narratives of the oppressed.

Women

Regarding the depiction and representation of women, the first sample is a formative assessment task conducted in another *CLC* Stage Four context. The task was based on a series of inhabitants who lived or had influence within Campania, Herculaneum or Pompeii. Students have a wide variety of choices between documented inhabitants including Marcus Nonius Balbus, Marcus Holconius Rufus, Eumachia, Poppaea Sabina and Julia Felix, amongst others. Students were expected to research a basic biography of the inhabitant, their own role and place within society, and their knowledge of daily life in a Roman town. This informed the creation of a short Latin composition based on an aspect of the chosen inhabitant's life utilising their own understanding of taught Latin vocabulary, grammar and syntax.

The *CLC* Stage Five (Years 9–10) task is intended to be completed towards the end of the learning cycle, within a larger unit examining the legacy of the Classics in the modern world. Due to some of its content, it did initially involve some communication with families and guardians and getting support from my colleagues in PDHPE,[1] who were exploring consent and power dynamics in relationships as well as strategies to support positive behaviours and decision-making with the same cohort in their own units of work. This allowed me to mediate an issue that could arise while sharing a common conceptual vocabulary.

This learning sequence inquiry was framed by an initial enquiry-debatable question: 'Should we judge the ancients by modern standards?' The activity itself involved the collaborative reading, translating and analysis of selected extracts from Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*. Some students were further extended to compare their translation with other documented translations over time. However, all my students also had to consider the implication of these extracts when viewed in isolation, in an Augustan context, and to a modern audience. They were also expected to identify stylistic devices and language techniques to support these interpretations. Furthermore, they also had the opportunity to explore how others interpreted these passages across different time periods, whether in wider academic scholarship or modern culture and consciousness.

Regarding the *CLC* Stage Four task, many students displayed a greater nuanced understanding of roles and the dynamics between men and women within Roman social relations, noting the challenges some women, whether *civis* or *liberta* [citizen or freedwoman], would have in certain situations while allowing them respective autonomy and agency (for similar, see James, 2008; Upchurch, 2014). This was also reflected to an extent with several students who chose a male inhabitant for the task (for similar, see Amos, 2020). One student, who wrote about Holoconius Rufus, described how his fictionalised wife and daughter aided in the management of his household and political office. One student focused on Eumachia's role as a patroness to guilds and businesses around Pompeii, even conducting a morning *salutatio* [greeting]. Another described how she supported her son's political ambitions as a Roman matron and as a *materfamilias* [female head of the household] in the wider community. Another student, who focused on Julia Felix, considered how in the narrative the potential

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challenges which a *liberta* [freedwoman], who was a landowner and businesswoman, may have endured when dealing with male patrons, clients, tenants and other business owners. This further demonstrated a greater understanding with the diversity and complexity of women's' experiences in Roman communities while grounding them in a sense of historical reality (for similar, see Churchhill, 2006).

In the *CLC* Stage Five task the students yielded diverse insights. Although students in the formative discussion agreed unilaterally that they should not judge the ancients by modern moral standards, they found their preconceptions challenged by the ideas subsequently expressed in the extracts. Despite having different opinions and perspectives on the text itself, whether it was satirical or didactic, or by comparison to contemporary texts, the majority of students could see the problematic interpretations of the extracts and how these perceptions were reinforced by individual stylistic devices, like simile, hyperbaton or anaphora (see James, 2014). Most of the students recognised derogatory remarks, misogyny and clear objectification of women in certain extracts. This initiated a student-led discussion on the perceived value of women according to the text and whether it was an honest reflection of Augustan society as well as the tension that must have existed between the sexes in these elite Roman contexts (Bostick, 2020; Hong, 2013). This was hotly debated by the students when reflecting on the text's audience, especially considering the content and nature of Book 3 of Ovid's text. Furthermore, through this opportunity students became more informed on how concepts within the classical literature can be revaluated across different contexts from its reception in the Middle Ages as a legitimate guide to courting, to its utilisation in the poetry of Robert Graves, and more recently its use by the 'game' community as discussed by Donna Zuckerberg (Thakur, 2014; Zuckerberg, 2018).

Pedagogical approaches

Although the activities I have outlined seem elaborate and require dense planning and preparation, there are a number of pedagogical underpinnings which can be embedded into your own regular teaching practice to promote inclusivity while mediating the issues that arise in our teaching. One such example, is using the 'Four P's' approach by Joffe (2020). Essentially it provides a relatively simple scaffold for the teacher to support an analysis of 'made' Latin found in pedagogical materials (Joffe, 2020). This not only uses the lack of diversity or the problematic representation of individuals to provide teachable moments, but it also promotes high order and critical thinking when reading and comprehending texts, which is a crucial skill set that not only needs to be developed within the Latin curricula but also other learning areas (Joffe, 2020). In my own practice I have modified the scaffold further to allow my own students to embed these practices in their regular reading and translation activities while engaging with Latin texts.

Likewise, one could attempt activities to deconstruct and focus narratives – the 'cross dressing' approach as described by Churchill (2006, pp. 97–100). This can be in whatever capacity, whether it be a free-writing prose activity, cloze passage or within a short, gamified learning experience at the end of a lesson. These allow an opportunity for students to revert cultural expectations typically found within Latin narratives as well as an opportunity to review grammatical concepts such as adjectival agreement and participles (Churchill, 2006). In my classroom students are expected to justify their choices to further reflect on specific roles in Roman society, such as an enslaved person haggling in a business transaction with a non-Roman merchant on behalf of his master due to dialectal or cultural differences.

An even simpler activity used to foster inclusion in classical languages is to consider the manipulation, utilisation, and supplementation of vocabulary, particularly those based on occupations and gender roles. Harwood (1992) notes there is a general focus on male experiences in made Latin texts. Allowing students to identify feminine equivalents of masculine concepts fosters linguistic connections between words and expands vocabulary. In Latin it is relatively simple due to the abundance of such terminology in the 3rd declension i.e., *cantatrix* [female singer] and *gladiatrix* [female gladiator]. These activities also allow the opportunities for students to consider and reflect on the cultural baggage and associations with these differences. One example which emerged in my own classroom practice was a student conducting an independent investigation for the Latin Standard Level of the International Baccalaureate Diploma about the positive connotations of a *senex* [old man] compared to that of the closest feminised equivalent, *anus* [old woman] within Latin literature supported by their own research. This has grounding in wider academic scholarship (Rosivach, 1994, pp. 107–108).

Simply we can also ask ourselves as educators how we critique and refocus within our programs, how these groups and individuals are approached and whether they are undocumented 'invisibles' or Camilla, Spartacus, Hypatia and Boudicca – the personalities that grip and fascinate us and our students (Churchill, 2006; Garrett, 2015). Although we all represent them in some manner, one could consider how this material is framed within a learning cycle to remove the stigma and 'otherness' of such individuals, which is prevalent in wider classical scholarship (Churchill, 2006, pp. 97–100). The creation of units which allow senior students to consider the role of the patriarchal authorship in informing their legacy and the portrayal of this within literature and prose or 'othered' writers in antiquity is worth exploring in learning cycles (Thomas, 2007, pp. 91–92, 107; Lamb, 2021). My own students did this by co-designed learning sequences on the subject of Clodia Metelli using the writings of Cicero and Catullus, as well as Tacitean and Suetonian perspectives on Agrippina the Elder and Agrippina the Younger. I have also engaged and planned shorter learning sequences based on Sulpicia, one of the few surviving female Latin writers in antiquity, which provides many merits for students in both the middle and senior years (Garrett, 2015).

These strategies and techniques bring in many more opportunities for engagement in the Classics classroom, particularly in environments such as mine, which regularly contain students of differing abilities and many cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, it has facilitated greater communication with parents, guardians and the wider members of the school community about the study of Latin. This empowerment of students not only fosters inclusivity but provides classical languages an opportunity to have meaningful connections to other learning areas and contemporary circumstances, situations, and concerns which impact upon our students' lives. In my own experience I have found by approaching the contentious subjects in an open and welcoming manner, I can use these approaches to provide an opportunity for classical language study not only as a subject associated with academic success but as a forum to discuss and connect these issues across time, space and culture.

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Author biography

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Note

1 PDHPE: Personal Development, Health and Physical Education.

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