

An Immersion Class In Ancient Education

by Eleanor Dickey

In November 2014 the Reading University Classics Department held an unusual event as part of the national 'Being Human' humanities festival[1]. We re-created an ancient schoolroom and invited more than a hundred local school-age students to experience antiquity at first hand (specifically, Greek-speaking Egypt in the fourth century AD, as that is the time and place for which we have the most information). Before entering the schoolroom participants donned a complete Roman school costume, removing watches, glasses, and any other visibly modern accoutrements, and learned how to play the part which they would assume once inside. Students learned how to act like an ancient child (a relatively simple process), while the classroom slaves (headed by a distinguished Oxford papyrologist) and the teachers (a superb team of three lecturers and seven undergraduate and MA students from Reading) underwent a longer training to enable them to teach in the ancient fashion.

The differences between ancient and modern educational practices run much deeper than the presence or absence of the Internet. Ancient students did not arrive promptly for the start of school, sit quietly and listen to the teacher talk, or raise their hands to answer questions. Instead, the first thing they did each day was to walk in to a class already in progress and interrupt everyone by saying hello first to the teacher and then to all the students, expecting replies in return. The disruptive nature of this custom is totally alien to our own classroom practices (and rightly so!), with the result that following it in the ancient schoolroom was the perfect way to plunge participants into living the parts of their ancient equivalents.

After their initial greeting, students in our ancient school were handed a piece of real (but modern) papyrus on which hard-working volunteers had copied by hand the beginning of the *Iliad* in the Dryden translation - in the format most ancient readers would have experienced: without word division, punctuation, or a distinction between capital and lower-case letters. We chose Dryden's *Iliad* because it is the best approximation now possible to the first reading task a Greek-speaking child would have experienced. Such children learned to read on the *Iliad*, which by the fourth century AD was more than a thousand years old and sounded deeply archaic. In fact since Dryden's *Iliad* is a mere 300 years old it might have been more authentic to use *Beowulf* in the original Anglo-Saxon, but that had some obvious disadvantages. Our participants sat on the straw-covered floor and attempted to prepare this passage so that they would be able to read it aloud and explain what it meant. This was no mean feat considering that it began like this:

THEWRATHOFPELEUSSONOMUSERESOUND
WHOSEDIREEFFECTSTHEGRECIANARMYFOUND
ANDMANYAHEROEKINGANDHARDYKN IGHT
WERESENTINEARLYYOUTHTOSHADESOFNIGHT

The children worked on this for as long as they wanted. When they felt they had mastered a reasonable portion of it, they went up to any of the three teachers at the front of the room to read the passage aloud, explain it, and ask about any portions they had not understood. They then handed in their papyrus so someone else could use it - ancient schools were very efficient in their use of materials - and moved on to the next exercise: copying poetry using ancient writing equipment. For this we had two types of materials: ostraca (pieces of broken pottery, mostly smashed flowerpots for which the DIY store *Homebase Oxford* had allowed us to raid their skips in the weeks leading up to the event) and wax tablets (replicas of ones actually used in ancient schools, provided by a wonderful German enterprise called *Der Roemer Shop*[2]). Both writing materials were surprisingly easy to use — with a metal stylus in the case of the tablets and with a reed pen and inkwell in the case of the ostraca — and were quickly mastered by the children. Both were also endlessly re-usable, as the tablets could be erased with the back end of the stylus and the ostraca were washed and dried by our trusty team of slaves; as several participants pointed out, the ancients were far ahead of us when it comes to sustainability.

The walls of the schoolroom were covered with poetry written in red paint, in imitation of a Roman-period classroom recently excavated in Trimithis in Egypt.

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In keeping with ancient classroom practice the poetry chosen was famous, moralising, somewhat archaic, and written without word division or other modern aids. Children chose a poem (options included Shakespeare, Milton, Housman, Keats, Tennyson, and Carlyle), copied it onto a tablet or ostracon, and practised reading it aloud until they could do so convincingly; they then demonstrated this skill to a teacher of their choice.

Among the other exercises available were memorisation (this was by far the most common exercise in ancient schools, so everyone was encouraged to try it), doing mathematical calculations in Roman numerals (this was not entirely authentic given the setting of the schoolroom in Egypt, where students would actually have used Greek numerals, but Greek numerals are too difficult to master in a short session), learning the Greek alphabet using the alphabet-learning techniques practised in antiquity, and learning Latin from a papyrus copy of an ancient Latin textbook. Students chose their own exercises and decided for themselves how long to spend on each one; they could work independently or together as they wished, since the final product in each case was a recitation demonstrating skill and understanding, not a fixed production to be handed in.

We wondered what to do about that well-known staple of the ancient classroom, the whip: should we hang one on the wall and threaten to use it? Should we take miscreants out of sight, ask them to yell convincingly while we made thumping sounds on a chair, and then send them back in with some fake blood on their tunics? In the end everyone was so well-behaved that we would have had no opportunity to use either of these ploys even if we had wanted to - the students were enthralled with the experience, and everyone was free to leave when no longer interested, so there was no need for any discipline (a fact that disappointed some devotees of authenticity).

Participants had no way to tell that the schoolroom was on most days the library room of the Reading Classics department, with a window facing onto the blank brick wall of the building next door. On the day, the room's book-covered walls were entirely hidden by cloth panels imitating the plastered and painted walls of the Trimithis schoolroom, and the view out the window, courtesy of translucent panels produced by an artist associated with the department, was of the ancient Nile. The students sat on the straw-covered floor and used their legs as desks in true Egyptian fashion, while the teachers sat on folding chairs and needed no desks as they did no writing. We wore leather shoes (copied from Roman examples found in a bog), long-sleeved tunics (copied from those shown on a relief from Trier depicting an ancient school), and for the girls *vittae* (also known as hair ribbons).

Sometimes there were lengthy queues to enter the schoolroom, since the students inside were very reluctant to leave and make room for someone else, but two other activities kept people happy while waiting. The staff of the *Ure Museum*[3] offered students the chance to handle real ancient artefacts, and our friends from the *Classics Kitchen*[4] sold authentic Roman food and explained how it was made.

The re-creation was based on detailed research into how ancient schools functioned; such research has made great advances in the past half-century, so that an event like this would not have been possible even a few decades ago. Until recently research into ancient education relied primarily on ancient theoretical discussions, such as Quintilian's explanation of how an orator should be educated, coupled with the reminiscences of former students, for example St. Augustine's laments about how often he was beaten at school. Then archaeology and papyrology began to shed more light on the physical surroundings in which ancient students learned, the writing implements they used, and the types of exercises they did at school. We now have literally hundreds of papyri, ostraca, and tablets containing the fragments of ancient schoolwork. Then a few years ago came the publication of a set of ancient schoolbooks that describe in detail what a day at school looked like from the perspective of the child (known by the unfortunate name of *Colloquia of the Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana*). Extracts from these schoolbooks, which were distributed to participating school groups in advance, formed the model of our classroom routine. Here is a typical passage:

> 'I lifted the curtain over the doorway and entered the school. First I greeted the teachers and my fellow students, as a polite child should. Then I wrote my name, and waited while those ahead of me recited, paying attention to their pronunciations and especially to that of the teacher. This is how we learn: from paying attention when something is being explained to others. In this way one both progresses and achieves self-confidence. Then I sat



Figure 1. | Scene from a Roman classroom.

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down in my usual place, extended my right hand and drew back the left one, and recited my lesson, just as I had received it to learn. I recited poetry in metre, with proper pauses for full stops and for commas, and with the sound *h* pronounced where it should be. I also gave a paraphrase of the poetry. While I was reciting the teacher corrected my mistakes, so that I would develop a better speaking style. I came forward, handed over the tablet containing my lesson, and produced from memory an outline of the things I had done. Then, when the teacher dismissed me, I settled down in my place. I took my language textbook and copied out conversational phrases. I asked the teacher questions, and once they had been answered I read my work aloud to the teacher, who explained the text carefully to me, until I understood who speaks which lines and what the poet's words meant. Then I read at sight, quickly, an obscure work that I had never seen before. Everyone did such things, one by one, but with different assignments depending on the ability and level of advancement of each individual, as well as how old they were. The teacher also took into account the pupils' different characters, because there are some who have a difficult attitude to hard work. And literary study is hard work, for even when you make good progress, more still remains to be done before you reach the peak of achievement.'

(Colloquium Stephani 10–19)

After the event we received enthusiastic feedback from students, parents, teachers, and the large number of volunteers who had prepared and run the event. Typical comments included: 'It was a really fun experience because we got to learn about the Romans first hand, in a way we've never been able to before' (from a student); 'I have to say both my child and I preferred the Roman style of education to the modern "everyone learning the same" model!' (from a parent); 'It was a big success and the students loved the whole experience' (from a teacher); and 'It was such a great experience, and the atmosphere in the classroom was just magical!' (from a volunteer).

Many participants expressed the hope that we will repeat the event next year, and we shall do so on December 15 and 16, 2015. Demand, however, is likely to outstrip our resources in the long run, and we wonder whether it would be practical to enter into some kind of partnership with teachers who want to run an event like this themselves. If anyone is interested in this, we hope they will get in touch! More information about the event can be found at www.readingancientschoolroom.com

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Reference

Colloquia of the Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana, http://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/classical-studies/classical-languages/colloquia-hermeneumata-pseudodositheana

[1]*'Being Human' Humanities Festival: http://beinghumanfestival.org/*

[2]*Der Roemer Shop: www.roman-shop.com*

[3]*The Ure Museum: www.reading.ac.uk/Ure/index.php*

[4]*The Classics Kitchen: http://nasossong.wordpress.com/category/classics-kitchen/*

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