

“Higher Level Thinking, Synthesis, and Critical Scholarship: Two Projects for
Third Year and Advanced Placement Latin Classes”

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“So pleas’d at first, the tow’ring Alps we try,
Mount o’er the vales and seem to tread the sky.
Th’ eternal snows appear already past,
And the first clouds and mountains seem the last.
But those attain’d, we tremble to survey
The growing labours of the lengthen’d way.
Th’ increasing prospect tires our wand’ring eyes,
Hills peep o’er hills, and Alps on Alps arise!”

Though they would perhaps not give such eloquent expression to their emotions as Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Criticism*, few students do not experience the progression of feeling from excitement in the early days of exploring the land of gods and Caesars to weariness and even fear by the time they reach advanced levels of study. Three years of translation, declension, conjugation...and then translation again, begin to take their toll, and the spark of academic interest and curiosity begins to fade. Add to this little experience in writing critical literary scholarship of any kind and almost no experience critiquing literature in a foreign language, and students enrolling in Advanced Placement Latin face a fear that they are unwilling to admit to anyone, but which hinders their progress throughout the year. Often we address flagging interest with cultural projects that we hope will rekindle a spark. Though such efforts are good, and necessary, there are other strategies that will not only evoke new excitement for Classics, but will help students acquire the critical writing skills required for top performance on A.P. exams and in college.

In this article I propose to describe two such projects that I have used in public school Latin III and Advanced Placement classes. Let me offer the reminder at the beginning that no pedagogical strategy will meet the needs of every student, and these projects are no different. They do not guarantee that a third year student will enroll in the A.P. class, nor are they a promise that students will score above a three on the A.P. exam. For those, however, who have even an ember of interest still glowing, they can be quite effective, as some personal examples will hopefully illustrate. The final test of effectiveness rests squarely with the students themselves, as those who put the most of themselves into these projects reap the most benefits.

The first project occurs in the third of four nine week grading periods in the third year of study. Students are divided into groups of no more than four based on complementary skill sets, and the purpose of the project is for each group to produce and teach a fully annotated Latin text. Over the course of the nine week period, each group produces its own text of a selection from a Latin author, complete with grammar, vocabulary, and historical and literary notes. As a result, they gain a deeper appreciation for the various components necessary to understand and analyze a text. Once the texts have been completed, each group leads the remaining members of the class in a close reading, analysis, and discussion of the text. This component of leadership proves the adequacy of the group's textual preparation.

The project begins with a week of Internet research. The students brainstorm possible keywords and then group members work together to search websites for Latin text repositories. As groups discover significant sites, they share web addresses with the other groups. I avoid announcing any websites in advance so that this early stage can be one of true discovery. Many, if not most students have some Internet experience, but often this has come in the form of game playing or seeking pop culture information. Some students may be unaware of how to search using different search engines, and many have never heard of multi-search engines, such as www.dogpile.com. By allowing them to make mistakes and try again, this project helps them develop some of the critical thinking necessary for research. Searching a keyword like "Latin", for example, will most likely produce an avalanche of material that no one can use. Students must then think, "What exactly do I want?" Once they add words such as "text", "author", etc., they begin to see the power of well-organized thinking before launching a search.

Students then begin to sort through the various texts and decide as a group what text they want to produce. This requires an English translation so they can quickly determine if a particular text is interesting to them, meets their needs, etc. Once a group has decided on a particular author, I announce to the other groups that the author has been taken and no further works from

that author can be used. An important facet of the project is for the students to engage a variety of authors. For those continuing to the Advanced Placement level, this is an important step in the formation of the broad background from which they will draw material to analyze the A. P. texts. Those students not continuing their high school Latin studies, whether by choice or as a result of graduation, find a closure to their pursuit of Classics by exploring other authors.

Still working with the Internet, the students must then decide what selection from their author's work they will use. They must keep in mind that they will teach the text themselves, so it is important to pick a passage that they enjoy, understand, and that can stand reasonably well on its own. Each passage must be roughly twenty to thirty lines in length, so not every selection can have a clear beginning and ending. For such passages the group must lead the rest of the students in a discussion of what precedes and follows the passage they have picked. By the end of the week, all groups must have a hard copy of their text and an English translation, and then the next phase begins.

On a traditional schedule of seven, fifty-minute classes, the students have two weeks to work in their groups to annotate their texts. Each text must have a glossary with full dictionary entries. For example, if *vitarent* appears in the

text, the glossary must list: *vito, vitare, vetui, vetitus* – *to forbid*. Group members must decide for themselves how they will determine what words to include. Some are quite inclusive, setting as a criterion that if even one person in the group does not know a word, that word finds a place in the glossary. How the glossary is arranged is entirely a decision made by each group. Some prefer a running vocabulary, while others prefer to arrange the words alphabetically. There are those who include the vocabulary with the passage, and others who use a separate list at the end of the text.

In addition to a glossary, difficult or unusual grammatical constructions must also be identified, again by group consensus. Here a personal illustration may be helpful about how such a project can renew genuine academic interest. It had been my intent that the groups would identify and explain constructions in their grammatical commentaries. I was pleasantly surprised the first time a group asked if they could cite the construction and then leave its identification as a question to be answered by the rest of the class. They had moved from merely completing an assignment to making it their own. Their ownership in the project evoked from them a desire to design the most educational experience for their peers that they could.

Historical and literary commentaries must also accompany each text. Through the use of in-school and outside resources, students are able to find

most of the historical details that frame a particular work. Often this commentary expands to include not only the author, but details about the particular work and its genre. Literary commentary is largely based on the students' exposure to literary and rhetorical criticism studied the first semester when they read about the Catilinarian conspiracy and engage Cicero's philosophical works and letters.

Throughout this two week period, I function simply as a human resource. I move among the groups making myself available to answer questions, usually about grammar or formatting. Not infrequently students encounter grammatical constructions or literary devices that we have not studied. I explain these to the group that encounters them so that the group may then teach the concept when it is their turn to present. When a group picks a poetry text, I take time to explain the concept of Latin meter and scansion. We practice scansion together and talk at an elementary level about the effect of meter on the meaning of the poetry. As with new grammatical and literary concepts, I allow the group to teach scansion to the rest of the class.

At the end of this period, the groups spend an additional week in close work with me to polish their texts. I proof all annotations, paying particular attention at this time to grammar and vocabulary. Throughout the project the students have followed a checklist of items that must be included, so this

week is mainly spent correcting errors and discussing issues of format. At the end of the week each group submits a packet that includes copy-ready Latin text; glossary; grammatical, historical, and literary commentaries; an English translation; and a quiz.

It is important for the groups to construct their own quiz, for this helps them stay focused on what to teach and prevents their wandering too far on tangential topics. As a hedge against group members distributing quiz questions to their friends, I design the final format of the quiz based on what the group has submitted and some questions of my own. Again, ownership in the project by the students has produced positive results. The questions group members create tend to be more difficult than what I would normally ask, and during their time to teach, the groups are genuinely concerned about the success of their classmates.

For the remainder of the term, groups take turns presenting their texts to the class. Each group has approximately one week, and they determine the pace and length of nightly assignments. Group members lead the discussions of translation and analyzation of grammatical, historical, and literary features. During a group's teaching opportunity, I take a seat with the rest of the class and serve a minimal role of clarifying obscure points or leading the class back on task if the students begin to wander.

I should offer a word of warning and enticement here. Teachers who engage this project will end up watching themselves. The teaching groups do not mock, but they certainly mimic what they have seen over the years from their own Latin teacher. The exciting part is watching the teachers and students involve themselves in often heated discussions of certain grammatical points or historical interpretations. On one occasion a teaching group asked the form of a certain verb, and one student responded that it was a potential subjunctive. Another challenged that it was imperfect subjunctive. I could not help but smile at the intelligent discussion that ensued.

Where the pre-A.P. project in Latin III prepares students by introducing them to the various components necessary to understand and analyze a text, the project students complete in the A.P. course itself focuses their attention on the tools and skills of literary criticism. This project works equally well in conjunction with the Vergil or Latin Literature syllabus, but for the purpose of this article I shall focus on the Vergil. Toward the end of their first semester, students are each assigned one book of the *Aeneid* on which they must research critical scholarship. They must then summarize the scholarship and critique it on the basis of some clearly defined historical or literary standard. Papers are then presented to the rest of the class for analysis and discussion.

The project begins with a trip to a local university. In the morning students have the opportunity to observe a Classics class in session and/or speak with a professor about Vergil. As with the Internet phase of the Latin III project, observing a class and speaking with a university instructor exposes the students to the environment and type of work they will soon engage after graduation. Discussion with a professor focuses on what a seminar in Vergil is like, what kind of work is expected of the university students, and various aspects of the *Aeneid* itself.

The heart of the project begins afterward when the students spend the remainder of the day in the library. After a brief orientation of the library layout, we find the reference room where I start by explaining the use of *L'Annee Philologique*. For those who are unfamiliar with this resource, *L'Annee Philologique* is an annual, hardbound listing of all scholarship, whether articles or books, published in the field of Classics in a given year. Though a French publication, *L'Annee Philologique* contains entries in other languages, including English.

The work is divided into various sections, but the section of significance for this project is titled *Auteurs et Textes*. In this section, Classical authors are listed alphabetically, with all relevant scholarship listed beneath an author's

name. I show the students how to find quickly the Vergil section, and from there how to determine if there is any scholarship relevant to their assigned book. To do this, students must learn to scan rapidly long lists of information. This is a useful research skill for high school students to begin to develop, especially in a culture whose media is increasingly defined by quick-changing stimuli. Many of our students are easily side-tracked, and it is important for them to understand how to stay focused, yet quickly move through irrelevant material. Titles of articles and books in a foreign language are quickly dismissed, and soon their eyes become trained to look only for English references. Most article titles refer to scenes within a particular book, and from this students can determine whether a particular article will be of value to their work.

Once they have found a potentially useful article, they must find complete references for the abbreviated citations. *L'Annee Philologique* uses a standard form for abbreviating journal titles. *Transactions of the American Philological Association* becomes *TAPA*, for example, and these abbreviations can be decoded using the list in *L'Annee* itself. Once students have identified the full bibliographic information for an article, they must then find it in the stacks.

At this point the students are on their own. My role is again, as with the pre-A. P. project, that of a human resource, answering questions about difficult

bibliographic references, directing students to appropriate stacks, or helping them discern whether an article mentioned in *L'Annee Philologique* has potential significance for their paper.

The purpose of the remaining time at the university is to collect information. Students must bring enough money to copy articles, including full bibliographic information, but the real work of processing and critiquing must take place at home. This is especially true if the university is far away from the high school.

Once the information has been collected, students must work on their own time to sift and analyze what they have found. Finished papers must contain two basic parts. The first must give a summary of the assigned book, or, if the student's research has led in this direction, one particular scene within that book. The second section should summarize the relevant scholarship, and then offer a critique. Students are not to offer unsubstantiated opinions, and they must be taught that the scholars with whom they will agree or disagree are professional Classicists whose works merit their respect. At the same time, fame and a degree should not serve as an intimidating fortress before which the students must surrender their own understanding of a text. Having been introduced to the rudiments of historical and literary criticism the previous year, and having practiced critical writing throughout the first

semester, the students should have some experience from which to make a reasoned critique.

Similar to the teaching component of the pre-A.P. project, the proof of the students' work comes in their classroom presentations. They must read their papers to the class as they would in a university seminar, and the class is then free to discuss the paper, the scholarship cited, or any aspect of the book that has sparked thought.

Two principal benefits derive from this project. The first is exposure to professional literary criticism and the tools necessary to produce it. Such models of professional writing are invaluable to students who are discovering for the first time their own style within a well-defined genre of academic writing. To gain such experience while using the very tools that their professional colleagues have employed is to equip these students with the skills necessary for higher levels of success in their own university work.

Advanced Placement is far more than a placement exam. At its best it is a full-fledged college course taken in the familiar surroundings of high school.

The second benefit stems from the class discussions of the papers. Although there is a set syllabus for the A.P. exams, no syllabus is inclusive of an author's complete work or works. When the students discuss, for example, a

book of the *Aeneid* that will not be read in Latin during the class, they begin to form a deeper understanding of the work as a whole than they could have achieved by adhering strictly to the syllabus. This cannot help but enhance their essays on the exam itself, while fulfilling once again the goal of providing an enriching college course to high school students rather than an A.P. exam preparation class.

Though by no means are the projects described here definitive for what a pre-A.P. or Advanced Placement class must employ, they are examples of the higher level thinking and processing of which high school students are capable. When utilized in a well-structured high school program, they can rekindle interest in Classics and provide the kind of experiences from which students can profit in any of their future studies.