Latin in the 21ˢᵗ Century

by Moss Pike

Every Latin teacher has at some point been asked to justify why the study of Latin, a dead language, matters today. SAT scores, success in the medical and law fields, and its basis for the Romance languages are often cited as valid justifications to study Latin (see the NCSSFL "Benefits of Latin Study"); but these reasons are devoid of any true meaning or purpose, and I cringe when I hear them, even if they do help bolster enrolment.

In my opinion, many Latin programs are suffering today from a lack of a clear purpose, as study of the language is criticised vis-à-vis other more 'useful' content areas. It has often been claimed that coding, for example, should be counted as language study, replacing world language courses. I am a big advocate of coding, but I would not put coding and language study in the same category for reasons to be elaborated on below.

Still, Latin programs and language study in general have not fared well in the conversation about '21ˢᵗ-century skills' as technology and other ideas have been starting to change education systems. In fact, one prominent school in the Los Angeles area recently terminated its Latin program, supposedly because Latin did not meet the criteria for a 21ˢᵗ-century school mission.

Unfortunately, the term '21ˢᵗ-century' is vague and even misleading, and it is already falling out of favour with many educators. It is no surprise to me that, if we believe that Latin *as content* is first and foremost useful as a tool to study other languages or take tests, its study cannot be defended in the same way that coding, robotics, STEM / STEAM, and other content areas can, since it cannot actively be used in the same way that 'modern' content areas are used in school programs.

If, on the other hand, we are interpreting 21ˢᵗ-century skills as actual skills that include social and emotional literacy (SEL) rather than pure content, then Latin study becomes much more interesting and relevant to today's students (see a recent MindShift post on empathy and SEL). In other words, even if Latin is a linguistically 'dead' language, in that there is no living native-speaking base, it can not only still be studied with a modern, 21ˢᵗ-century purpose of the same sort we see in other programs, but it can be even more powerful in helping to teach SEL.

While STEAM programs have been on the rise, the field of design and design thinking, which is simply 'people-centred problems solving with a bias toward action', has lurked quietly in the shadows (see IDEO's Design Toolkit for Educators for more on design thinking). Now, however, that more school missions are embracing the idea of 'purpose beyond the self' (as does our own school's new mission statement), design principles are starting to filter into schools, as more curricula are beginning to embrace the value of meaningful work (see an excellent Aeon post on the value of meaningful work). In particular, the idea of empathy, or the ability to adopt another's perspective, has become a hot topic of discussion in building curriculum and school community. Moreover, schools are also embracing the value of creativity, another important idea in design, and curiosity, with a focus on people and human interaction (so-called 'human-centred design') through 'active listening' or listening to understand rather than listening to reply.

It is the design-based approach that can bridge the gap between Latin as an SAT tool and something more meaningful and relevant to today's students. As I see it, the study of Latin offers one of the most valuable opportunities for building empathy, given that the people we study who spoke it lived 2000 years ago. They lived in ways similar to us, but they also lived quite differently (my 7ᵗʰ-grade girls, for instance, are always surprised to learn that they would likely be just months away from marriage, if not already married, at their current age!). Latin should be treated no differently in this regard from French, Spanish, or any other modern language. Latin, Roman culture, and the ancient world in general have the power to spark curiosity and wonder as much as any other content area, in my experience.

While we may not be able to test our ideas without a living Latin-speaking population, we can nonetheless take advantage of the lack of contemporary Romans to build curiosity and wonder through the juxtaposition of the

similarities and differences between our lives and the lives that Romans lived.

With this in mind, we can ask meaningful questions about the Roman world that require both content mastery of the Latin language alongside design skills like empathy, creativity, and active listening (even if we're 'listening' to long dead texts!). And through answering their own questions, we can also teach students communication and presentation skills. Some of the questions may include:

• What would your life be like, if you lived 2000 years ago? What would you care about and what goals would you have? Build an infographic outlining your persona.

• How did Romans interact with each other socially and how did they design their space to facilitate interactions with others? Construct an authentic Roman space in Minecraft and be prepared to give tours of your space (see here for some more details on this project).

• Compare some of our modern culture codes (see here for a good review of Rapaille's book *Culture Codes*) to Roman codes, such as the Jeep as a modern American 'horse.'

• Based on the different codes you uncover for the Romans, how might you adapt modern advertisements? Would the famous 'Think Different' Apple ad have the same effect in Roman society and why? Based on your understanding of Roman culture codes, choose a modern product and create an advertisement you believe is appropriate for a Roman audience.

• How and why did stories spread to later become 'history' as we see it now? What is the difference between truth and belief? Interview an ancient Roman who was present at Caesar's assassination. What

details can he share that differ from the accepted version of the story?

• Consider why we make certain decisions when promoting ideas, based on our intended audience (for example, as in commercials and other advertisements). With this in mind, take a modern advertisement (such as a car commercial) and transform it for a Roman audience. What elements would change and why? What would be the most important elements to communicate to your audience? Use PowToon or another digital story tool to make your advertisement.

• How might we read Caesar and his commentaries as one of the first political bloggers in the western world? How did Caesar build his 'brand' and do you think he was successful? What brand strategy advice could Caesar give to modern bloggers. What could a modern blogger suggest to Caesar?

• Why are superhero movies and comics as popular as ever? With this in mind how might we compare them to the *Aeneid* and other Latin epics? Which hero does Aeneas most resemble and why? Using this hero, create an ancient screenplay of a comic that the Romans would have appreciated. Alternatively, convert the *Aeneid* into a modern film, making changes to suit your audience.

We Latin teachers have the opportunity to design our courses around the questions that we all have about the ancient world, teaching our students how to investigate their own questions using the Latin language and material culture. We can study the people who used the language as a means to interact with each other, so that we can better understand how we interact within our own communities, building empathy, active listening skills,

and our own creativity in the process. Coding is wonderfully useful, and I would love to see it offered earlier and with greater consistency in schools. But coding cannot yet replace the value in the interaction with other people and the efforts to solve problems with and for them. These are the skills that our students will need, to find their own definition of success in their futures and are what we should be discussing, when advocating the study of Latin.

So in the end, it is about cultural fluency as much as linguistic fluency. We are aiming to understand the people who used Latin, including their motivations, their desires, and the ways in which they interacted with each other. Using the skills necessary to address our questions, such as using the methods of design thinking, we can not only learn how to answer the questions, but also learn how to ask quality questions that welcome curiosity and wonder, while privileging people. For me, this is why Latin is as relevant as ever in schools. If that is not a 21st century approach, I don't know what is.

Moss Pike teaches at Harvard-Westlake School. mosspike@gmail.com

References

http://www.ncssfl.org/papers/index.php?latin

http://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2013/01/30/empathy-the-key-to-social-and-emotional-learning/

http://www.designthinkingforeducators.com/

http://www.hw.com/abouthw/Mission-Statement-Honor-Code

http://aeon.co/magazine/psychology/do-you-want-a-meaningful-life-or-a-happy-one/