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LATIN AND A DYSLEXIC STUDENT: AN EXPERIENCE
IN TEACHING

In the spring of 1981, an Ohio State University student diagnosed as dyslexic registered for Elementary Latin in order to begin work to fulfill the four-quarter (twenty credit-hour) foreign language requirement for students in the College of Arts and Sciences. The student (whom I shall call John) signed up for the Individualized Latin Study Program, a variable-credit, self-paced alternative to formal classroom instruction, available for the first three quarters (fifteen credit-hours) of Latin study.¹ John explained that his dyslexia² would require him to study from a tape recording of the course materials, and to do exercises and take tests orally. The Department of Classics began taping the materials.

Although John's dyslexia is quite severe, his maturity, intelligence, and motivation have helped him toward success in college. John was a junior when he decided to begin his foreign language requirement. Consequently, although Latin was new to him, study at the university level was not.³

It is my hope that sharing my experience of working on a one-to-one basis with a dyslexic Latin student may (1) alert teachers of Latin to some of the signs of dyslexia, and (2) provide some teaching methods which, although devised for a particular dyslexic student, may prove useful for others.

When I was first asked to undertake working with John, I expected the approach to be an aural/oral one, and my role to be mainly that of a reader and scribe, reading questions to John in English and Latin, and writing his answers. This proved not to be the case. I became instead a teacher (of English and Latin), a reader (of English and Latin), a part-time scribe (of Latin), and an adviser on English spelling. Although John imitated fairly well the pronunciation of words he had just heard, he did not remember the pronunciation for long.

I noticed that John had significant difficulty in connecting the spoken word with the printed word. Sometimes John said the Latin properly, but could not spell it; other times he wrote it accurately, but pronounced it wrong. That is to say, even though Latin is a phonetic language, John's saying the words correctly did not automatically lead to his writing them correctly, or vice versa.

Omissions and reversals were common errors, both in speaking and writing. He might leave out a single letter in a word, or an entire syllable. From a sentence he might omit one or more complete words. Reversals took many forms. Letters such as *b*, *d*, and *p* were mistaken for one another. John confused *cado* and *capio* visually, perhaps because *p* is the upside-down "mirror image"

¹ For a discussion of the Individualized Latin Study Program at The Ohio State University, see D. Lacey, "Options and Considerations in the Implementation of an Individualized Study Program in Latin," *CJ* 75 (1980) 253-58; D. Lacey, "Self-Paced Latin at the Ohio State University: Testing and Grading Systems," *CJ* 76 (1981) 342-52.

² Dyslexia is a specific developmental language disability, i.e., an innate difficulty with processing written language.

³ Latin was not John's first experience with a foreign language. He studied Spanish in high school for about three and a half years, at the end of which he had completed two and a half years of credit. His grades in Spanish do not indicate a highly successful experience.

of *d*. Occasionally John confused the order of syllables in a word. Memorized declensions were sometimes “flipped upside down”, causing him mistakenly to retrieve an ablative form instead of a nominative one from the “top” of the chart.

John occasionally exhibited a surprising inability to equate basic English forms or constructions with similar Latin ones.⁴ For example, he might know that *fuit* was the perfect tense, third person singular of *esse*, but would have trouble translating *fuit* into English because he was not aware that *was* is the past tense, third person singular of the English verb *to be*. Or he would know that *videsne* meant *you see* with a “question indicator” attached to it, but had difficulty in the act of “subject postponement” and the addition of the auxiliary verb to form the question “*Do you see?*”

As I became aware of the ways in which John’s dyslexia affected his learning process, I sought a method which would minimize the degree to which dyslexia would interfere with his study of Latin by bringing into play *all* his skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, thus providing him with as many channels for learning and reinforcement as were available.

John studied a lesson by listening to it on tape. I also discussed the lesson with him, simplifying, elucidating, or expanding on the material until I sensed that he understood it.

Whenever I referred to something in the text, I read it aloud, and pointed to it on the page, simultaneously. I did not assume that John was reading along, even though I sensed he sometimes was. I think that combining aural and visual stimuli enhanced both learning and reinforcement of information; it may also have led the way to improved silent reading.

John normally wrote exercises himself, whether I read him questions or he listened to them on tape. When we worked on them together, I advised him on English spelling, and occasionally on Latin. John corrected the errors pointed out to him in his writing of English or Latin.

Proof that John was eager for as much aural/oral practice as possible was his request for a Latin vocabulary tape which would give him the opportunity to listen to words, and then to repeat them during a pause after the words on the tape. He found this reinforcement very helpful.

Careful organization played a critical role in John’s learning. Aware of this, he created his own study aids. He kept charts of endings. As he learned new verbs and nouns, he wrote them by conjugation and declension, highlighting the bases of the words in a different color ink. Since a dyslexic is likely to make some transcription mistakes, even when writing slowly and carefully, I checked his work for any errors. The extra writing practice and the completed study aids served him well.

Since John worked significantly better when well-rested, we scheduled our meetings (as far as possible) for times of the day when he was usually most alert, mornings and early afternoons. To prevent “overloading”, I presented new information gradually. If he looked confused or unresponsive, we stopped to find out the source of difficulty.

Our testing procedure evolved from the method of instruction. I read the entire test aloud, question by question, including directions. John had the option of answering questions with either a written or an oral response. He usually

⁴ Difficulty with basic English is, of course, not limited to John, or to the dyslexic population. It is a problem which we frequently confront in beginning foreign language classes. Working on a one-to-one basis with John may have made me more aware of this problem than I might have been had he been merely one member of a class.

wrote his answers; if he answered orally, I wrote them. Distinguishing errors that result from dyslexia from those which reflect inadequate mastery of material is a difficult task, especially for a person untrained in dealing with dyslexia; nevertheless, I tried to make such distinctions. I looked for omissions, reversals, and anything else that might be an error resulting from dyslexia and not from faulty knowledge of Latin. I pointed these out to John and gave him an opportunity to try to correct them within the testing situation.

Although most students occasionally draw a blank, John often did so, particularly during tests. Once when John was asked for the neuter singular forms of the Latin adjective meaning *easy*, he remembered the Latin word for *easy*, but drew a blank on the adjective endings. When I asked him for the dictionary form of the word, he replied: "*facilis, facile*." His identification of *facile* as nominative, singular, neuter triggered his ability to reproduce the remaining forms of the declension correctly. I asked "leading" questions to jog his memory, even in the testing situation, because I suspected that such episodes of poor recall were either a result of the dyslexia itself, or of the added stress most dyslexics feel in the testing situation. After overcoming an episode of poor recall, particularly at the beginning of a test, John visibly relaxed and proceeded more confidently with the remaining portion.

Our work together had its ups and downs. Patience was essential. Occasionally I became frustrated when John did not understand something, or seemed to have forgotten something on which we had just spent a great deal of time. Sometimes, though, he would surprise me with his understanding and retention. A few times I think he surprised even himself.

As of this writing, John is working on the seventh credit-hour of the twenty credit-hour foreign language requirement. His average grade in Latin has been B+. He worked exclusively with me through most of the fifth credit-hour. He then made the transition successfully to working in the Individualized Program.

The nature of the Individualized Latin Study Program has enabled him to continue studying Latin on a one-to-one basis. When the Individualized Latin Center is open (about forty hours a week), staff members are available to discuss Latin, correct exercises, or administer tests. John tries to work with the same staff member each time so that he hears consistent Latin pronunciation. The Department of Classics has continued to tape the Latin materials for him. His tests are still read aloud, and either a written or an oral response is accepted.

My experience with John has led me to believe that Latin, although it may be difficult for a dyslexic, is accessible. In fact, some features of the Latin language may make it particularly suitable.

The fact that Latin is a phonetic language facilitates correct spelling. It also helps the dyslexic to connect the spoken word with the written word. Since Latin is not a "living" language, the aim of most Latin programs is to teach the student to *read* Latin, not to speak it. For the dyslexic student of Latin, the "burden" of conversing in a foreign language is eliminated, yet the opportunity for aural/oral reinforcement is retained.

Studying an inflected language requires breaking words down into smaller units (i.e., base + ending). This is useful for the dyslexic, who has probably experienced difficulty in discriminating morphemes in the native language. Similarly the dyslexic, who may transpose words in an English sentence, may find relief in the inflected language where word order is less important to meaning.

The particular set of difficulties each dyslexic has is unique. I would not pretend to have pointed out all the difficulties such a student might encounter in studying Latin. At the same time, John has some problems which another

dyslexic may not. Nevertheless, inconsistent spelling, writing involving frequent omissions or reversals, poor ability to connect the spoken with the printed word, a striking need to organize material in order to learn it, and poor recall of something ostensibly learned, all deserve our attention as possible signs of dyslexia.⁵

John and I both consider our mutual Latin venture a success. His motivation, intelligence, maturity, and sense of humor undoubtedly played their part. So did the amount of time we spent together.⁶ Having become aware of some of the dyslexic's problems, and John's in particular, I gradually developed a method of Latin instruction and testing suitable for him. The significant features of the method were: (1) one-to-one instruction; (2) sensitivity in establishing a stress-free, but demanding pace; (3) use of multiple modes of learning and reinforcement, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing; (4) acceptance of either a written or an oral response in the testing situation; and (5) intensified sensitivity, patience, and encouragement, and occasional humor. It is my hope that John's and my experience may be useful to others.⁷

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⁵ In this article I have tried to reflect the experimental nature of my work with John. I came with few preconceptions. I did, however, find it useful to do some reading about dyslexia. Two books I found particularly useful and would recommend to those interested in further reading are: E. Simpson, *Reversals: A Personal Account of Victory over Dyslexia* (New York 1981), brief excerpt in *CO* 58 (1981) 105; L. Clarke [pseud.], *Can't Read, Can't Write, Can't Talk Too Good Either: How to Recognize and Overcome Dyslexia in Your Child* (New York 1974).

⁶ John and I worked together for two consecutive ten-week quarters. We usually met four days a week, spending about an hour and a half together each time.

⁷ I would like to thank Professors Charles L. Babcock and Douglas M. Lacey of the Department of Classics at The Ohio State University for their support, encouragement, and helpful comments during the preparation of this article. Mr. Warren L. King, Director, Office for Disability Services at the university, was also kind enough to read this material and offer comments. John has confirmed that this article is an accurate representation of our work together. He was not only willing for me to share with others what was essentially a private experience, but was eager for me to do so. For this, I would like to thank him.

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