Latin: Beyond the SAT Score

by Peter H. Vande Brake

Latin is enjoying resurgence in high schools across the nation. Latin was once a requirement in many public and private schools, but fell out of favor and eventually out of the curriculum in the 1960s. It gained some ground in the 1970s and 1980s, but the growth has been much more significant in the last decade. The number of students taking the National Latin Exam has increased by over 33,000 students from approximately 101,000 in 1998 to more than 134,000 in 2008. The number of students taking the Latin AP test has doubled in the same amount of time. If the present trends continue, Latin will soon overtake German as the third most popular language taught in secondary schools behind Spanish and French.[1]

Popular explanations for this increase range from pointing to the fact that Latin increases one's proficiency with English to the perception that it helps students "stand out" from their friends. Some even suggest that fascination with the Latin-based incantations in the Harry Potter series has prompted young people to delve into Latin.[2] Regardless of why students are gravitating toward the venerated language, the fact is that Latin is not only flourishing in high performing suburbs nationwide, but there have also been large increases in student numbers in more remote parts of the country like New Mexico, Vermont, and Alaska.[3]

Most parents who are urging a child on toward a college degree believe that Latin will help boost SAT and ACT scores. Every student who aspires to be a doctor or a lawyer knows that Latin will help with MCAT and LSAT scores. Better scores get you into better or more prestigious schools; more prestigious degrees mean that you can acquire better jobs and ultimately make more money. Thus, there are pragmatic, utilitarian, whimsical, and even financial reasons for taking Latin.

Through a study of Latin, students are able to cement a more fundamental understanding of grammar and how language functions.

At Christian and classical schools, Latin is a foundational piece of the curriculum. At many classical schools it is a required course for several years of a student's schooling. But why do we require it? What is it that we are trying to accomplish by compelling our students to take Latin? In part, our answers will be the same as what has been mentioned above: it helps a student to master English which in turn can help a student do better on standardized tests or college entrance exams. However, the more important function of teaching Latin is that it provides a paradigm for how students should go about learning with the important advantage that it opens the door to a deeper level of education by making classical culture and ideas more accessible.

For a long time, advocates of Latin argued that one learned Latin to help one's English—end of case. However, as Tracy Simmons points out in his book, *Climbing Parnassus*, "the case eventually broke down, mainly because smart people recognized that learning modern languages could yield some of the same benefits, with the added advantage that they could be used to communicate in the modern day."[4] The argument of mental training has also been touted as a reason to take Latin, but this too could be supplanted by mathematics which has the same advantage of being more useful in modern society that is becoming ever more calculating and technical. Simmons states that "these two observations—along with Latin's inherent, unavoidable, and cussed difficulty—shut down its supremacy in school curricula."[5] In a society and an educational system where utility and pragmatism are the definitive criteria, Latin is found wanting. Being able to translate inscriptions on cathedrals and federal buildings as well as the mottoes of most colleges and universities does not constitute a marketable advantage in the eyes of most employers.

Despite the fact that it is possible to achieve dexterity with the English language and mental agility by other means, Latin (and I would suggest that Greek be included in this category, too) retains some distinct advantages that cannot be garnered from other sources. Latin opens centuries of philosophy, literature, history, science, and theology to students.

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Works can be read in the original language without the mediation or meddling of a translator. There are many wonderful translations of Latin and Greek works, but inevitably nuances, emphases, cadence, rhyme, and concepts are lost or remediated in translation. Frankly, there are some aspects of an idea, especially ones that are closely bound up with a culture, which cannot be translated into another language.

In our Latin classes, the immediate objectives of instruction will be for students to learn conjugations, declensions, vocabulary, grammatical constructions, and the like. We will be striving for fluency and proficiency in the Latin language. We want students to be able to translate Ovid, Virgil, Quintillian, Caesar, and a whole host of others, not only to hear the ideas of great thinkers and leaders as they expressed them, but also to master language. The Latin language is efficient and pointed with few exceptions. It forces students to pay attention to linguistic detail and nuance. It imposes careful word selection for the best meaning or understanding of the given text.

We should also strive to have our students translate English into Latin. Karl Barth would often say that if he wanted to express an idea well, he would express it in Latin and then translate it. The fifteenth century humanists required their Italian-speaking students to speak in Latin because "its vocabulary could make many fine shades of distinction, while its syntax could render them briefly and gracefully. If students could fly a phrase in Latin, they could fly it in any other language. Latin was the bridge to eloquence, a bridge students had to show they could cross."[6] Our students can prosper in the same way if they are translating their English thoughts into proper Latin prose. As they begin to gain command of Latin, more of the classical world is open to them.

Realistically, many students of Latin will not climb to the top of Parnassus; they will not become fluent readers and writers of Latin prose, but that does not mean that their efforts in memorization and translation have been in vain. Latin provides one of the best foundations for comprehending language generally; from this base, other languages may be learned more easily, especially the Romance languages—French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, or Romanian. Through a study of Latin, students are able to cement a more fundamental understanding of grammar and how language functions. English grammar and syntax constructions makes a lot more sense when they can be compared to parallel constructions in Latin. Conceivably, this could be said of any inflected language, but Latin does this with more precision and fewer exceptions than other languages.

In a broader sense, Latin provides a working example of how students should go about the task of learning any subject. Students must learn the unique vocabulary of a subject whether it is chemistry, British literature, geometry, or New Testament. They then learn how the meanings of those vocabulary words fit together to form ideas and concepts. They are able to push on to learn new ideas from the foundation of what they already know. They are then able to explore the subject with greater freedom to discover and articulate concepts and ideas with eloquence and understanding. In short, Latin does the extremely important work of helping our students learn how to learn. In Christian and classical education, this is one of our loftiest objectives—to teach students how to learn independently. It offers a sturdy framework for learning.

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Again, it could be argued that labor with any language will yield these same results, but there are other benefits Latin offers that cannot be matched by comparable languages (with the exception of Greek perhaps).

One of these benefits is a classical education. There has been much debate over whether one can have a truly classical education without Latin and Greek. Simmons states that "the judgment of history is 'No.' "[7] He then goes on to soften this assertion by saying that "it is safe to say that we can procure, with enterprise, certain intellectual and cultural benefits of classics by means other than a formal classical schooling," but he makes his case for the "full package, the deluxe deal—declensions, conjugations, syntax, lexicons, verse exercises, and all."[8] The point he makes is one of the importance of nuance and meaning. What will be lost in translation? If we don't know Latin and Greek, we will never know what we

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have lost. This also gets at the importance of studying the culture in which the language resides.

Language is the circulatory system of a culture. The foundations of government and European culture were laid in Italy and Greece. Learning Latin gives us an understanding of the roots of Western culture that cannot be gained in any other way. Latin continued to be the dominant language in academic and ecclesiastical parlance for at least 1500 years. The mastery of Latin opens the world linguistically and culturally to many of the greatest works that have been articulated in writing in human history.

Exposure to the classics does not in and of itself create virtue, but it helps.[9] A Christian and classical education provides the surest footing for the educated mind because it exposes one thoroughly and systematically to the best—the best thinkers and the best theologians throughout the early centuries both before and after the birth of Christ. As Simmons points out in the introduction to his book: "We drift without the classics, floating on our own deracinated, exiguous islands. And we become fodder for demagogues. We need not a revolution, but a restoration."[10]

The classics (Bible included) give us a foundation for judgment. We are not blown to and fro in ideological debate because we have universal truths to anchor our thinking. Learning Latin can contribute to this foundation in a seminal way. Latin not only helps us with our native language, but it gives us a framework for learning, and it opens our eyes to the world of classical literature in significant ways.

NOTES

1. Winnie Hu, "A Dead Language That's Very Much Alive," *New York Times* (October 6, 2008) http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/07/nyregion/07latin.html?pagewanted=1.

Jessica Calefati, "Latin Surges in Popularity," *U.S. News and World Report* (October 17, 2008) http://www.usnews.com/blogs/on-education/2008/10/17/latin-surges-in-popularity.html.

2. Winnie Hu, "A Dead Language That's Very Much Alive," *New York Times* (October 6, 2008) http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/07/nyregion/07latin.html?pagewanted=1.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Tracy Lee Simmons, *Climbing Parnassus* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2002), 166.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Simmons, *Climbing Parnassus*, 102.

7. Simmons, *Climbing Parnassus*, 26.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Simmons, *Climbing Parnassus*, 17.

10. Simmons, *Climbing Parnassus*, 20.

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