Classics - a classic itself
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Classics students Justin Nafziger and Marie Skinner pose as Philemon and Baucis, in myth an elderly couple who received a gift from the gods allowing them to spend eternity as two intertwined trees, an oak and a linden.

For a language created centuries ago, Latin remains a dominant force.
The drama and debate written in ancient Greek go back some 3,000 years. Latin, on the other hand, is only 2,000 years old. But when calculated in 2017 years — our sound-barrier-blasting, meme-making, whoosh-here's-the-next-fad years — Latin and ancient Greek are, well, fossils. Latin was a college standard well into the 1930s, but its biggest body blow came in the 1960s. In that age of free love and the relevance movement, Latin seemed both unlovely and irrelevant.

In more recent years following the economic near-collapse of 2008, we’ve seen a surge in STEM. Careers in science, technology, engineering and math promise trendier, higher paying jobs — something Latin is not exactly known for.

But these so-called dead languages are now gaining a relevance they haven’t seen since the mid-20th century. In an interesting turn, two modern commonplaces are encouraging students to blow the dust off traditional Latin instruction.

First is standardized testing. Students who take Latin score significantly higher on the SAT than students focused on any other subject.
And, secondly, the logic that structures Latin is reflected in today’s computer programming languages.

Autumn’s golden sunshine shimmers through the windows of an Old Main class room where distracted students can gaze down at the big block A.
The day’s only storm is passing across the face of a student, her forehead resting on her palm. “You’re looking stressed,” classics professor Mark Damen says as he makes his way between desks in this first-year Latin class.

He sits in the adjacent desk and says soothingly, “We’ll struggle through this.” A bit more muffled chat, some shuffling of index cards filled with Latin grammar. “Good?” he asks. “There we go.”

Across the room, Makayla Findlay puzzles over a worksheet covered with her translations of Latin phrases into English. Each sentence is neatly ordered in green and teal ink. “You know,” she says to no one in particular, “that’s a lot of English words for not that many Latin words.”

Old Main’s classical Romanesque structure is a most appropriate home to Classics. And the trio of professors who for decades have taught in this corner of the Department of History are classics themselves. Frances Titchener this year marks her 30th year at Utah State University. She, with colleagues Damen and Susan Shapiro, have been the program’s mainstays for more years than most of their students have birthdays.

Chuck Oughton, a fellow Latin instructor, was introduced to the Classics trio when, unhappily suffering through biology classes, he took a Latin class on a whim. Titchener was his first instructor. He stayed on for an advanced Latin class from Shapiro, next stopping in Damen’s class for a study of Virgil, the Roman author of The Aeneid.

“They’re all wonderful, and they all bring different strengths to their students,” Oughton says. “They complement each other very well.”

Oughton earned his history degree at USU with a minor in Classics. But as he headed to graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin, he fretted about competing with fellow students from universities with large Classics programs.

“But I was very well prepared by the three of them,” he says now. “A lot of people were impressed with my ability to get into the program and do well because of the preparation they provided.”

The University of Texas, he adds, has continued to welcome USU Classics grads “because everyone they admitted from USU has been impressive.”

Oughton has returned to his Classics home as a post-doctoral teaching fellow. He teaches Latin and advanced classes in ancient Greek, where students are now working their way through the original text of The Apology of Socrates by Plato.

Latin is enjoying a resurgence nationwide. Utah itself has several strong high school programs. Indeed, Latin teachers are in such high demand that USU Classics established a minor in teaching Latin.

“There are way more high school Latin teaching jobs than there are Latin teachers,” said Shapiro, an associate professor of history. “Anyone who graduates with a degree in Latin teaching can pretty much pick their position.”

USU’s Classics program offers minors only — majors usually fall under history. In addition to Latin teaching, the
A year of Latin is required before a student ventures into ancient Greek. Many students do both, said Damen, although “they’re actually very different languages.” Latin is a bit more approachable, he adds, because it shares an alphabet with English (except Latin has no W), and “it’s only 2,000 years old.”

First-year Latin learners focus on grammar, said Shapiro. That’s memorization times duo, tres, quattuor. Latin uses declension — a noun or pronoun’s ending changes according to its role. In English, by comparison, the word’s role is usually determined by its place in the sentence. Classics teaches visual Latin. In a world where the only Latin spoken daily is the Vatican, translation is the focus. In the second year, said Shapiro, “students are reading Latin authors and that involves some of the greatest literature ever written.”

The logic behind Latin’s resurgence is that, well, it’s logical. As a result, says Shapiro, it trains the brain to be logical.

This result may be most evident in that high-school ritual students anticipate and dread: standardized college tests like the SAT. According to Shapiro, several studies verify what she already knows from experience: Students who learn Latin do better on the SAT than students focused on any other subject. “I have statistics,” she adds.

Other things aside, critical reading scores for Latin speakers are 30 points higher than the next ranked subject, French, according to the 2015 College Board SAT Total Group Report. The same goes for writing scores. “Students who take foreign language, physics and math do better than others,” said Shapiro. “But Latin students do the best of all.”

That’s because learning Latin — with all its structured, rational and logical complexities — transforms the brain itself into a more effective tool.

“One of the great values of Latin is that it teaches you how to learn,” said Damen. “You understand how to take a very complex topic, organize it in your brain and make it work.” Oughton clearly recalls this process in himself. “I felt this as I was learning all the basic rules, and I relearned them as I was taking Greek,” he says. “It heightened my ability to analyze the logical structure of things, not just languages but in the world.”

The logic and structure behind Latin make it resonate in the world’s newest language: computer programming and engineering. Oughton recalls a friend in graduate school who left Classics to enter a post-grad computer programming workshop, settling in next to computer science grads. “He soon had the best understanding of the computer language they were teaching,” said Oughton. “He said, ‘I can look at this the same way I look at Latin and Greek.’”

For Damen, who entered college after several years of high-school Latin, “It opened my mind to seeing the world as a logical place.”

Latin instruction, he adds, “connects two parts of your brain that often aren’t as directly connected — the logical part of your brain where you structure your thoughts and you communicate.

“Putting those two things together is a very enriching way to proceed through life, because it makes a lot of things make sense that don’t make sense otherwise.”

You’ve seen some version of this antique, Harry Potter-ish image: A teacher, usually dressed in a depressingly dark robe, intones Latin grammar while bored children pass notes under the cover of desks.

That’s not a scenario ever seen in Classics, where professors have embraced the philosophy of “flipping” — not spitballs, but the structure of class itself.

In place of traditional and tedious midnight homework, students watch videoed lectures by their professors. Then, class time is devoted to homework, with helpful coaches at hand to work through especially difficult translations or other, uniquely Latin, anxiety attacks. “It’s absolute pandemonium in class,” said professor Frances Titchener, “because they’re all talking to one another or their coaches.”

For students who balk at the perceived perplexity of Latin, the idea of the flipped class has gone a long way toward “helping them understand they don’t need to be intimidated,” says Titchener. “In our classes, they’re working with coaches nonstop.”

It’s also helped another student population: Distance Education students who are looking to learn a language for their goal of a bachelor’s of arts degree.

“Many of our distance kids are B.A. track more than B.S (bachelor’s of science). So we try to figure out ways we can give them more options,” she said. The “flipped” class, for example, offers flexibility for students who can attend only a few face-to-face classes.

“That’s part of the deeper goal,” said Titchener, “of finding ways to extend this opportunity.”

As ancient Greeks once exclaimed, Gnothi seauton (“Know yourself!”). For Damen, Latin is indeed a crucial part of knowing himself.

The Classics, adds Shapiro, are a means to “self-knowledge.”

“It’s a deeper understanding of oneself and one’s culture,” she said. “It’s really a deeper understanding of yourself.”

Damen offers this illustrative metaphor of the role Latin plays in one’s life.
“If you want to be involved in the world of driving cars, you can just get in a car and drive and be a perfectly good driver,” he said. This is much like “a very broad, thin horizontal knowledge of a rich and diverse array of existing knowledge,” he said. “And if that’s what you want, fine.” He continues: “If you want to be a great driver, you understand exactly how the car works. So when this thing starts making some noise, you know it’s part of the ignition system. “If you want to be a truly great driver, you understand how ignition systems have evolved over time and why, for instance, it’s where it is because when ignition systems were first made they were put here, and that shaped the way motors were done later on. “A really great driver is truly a mechanic who understands not only how the car works, but how the car evolved,” he said. “Does it necessarily make that person’s driving better?” he asks. “It makes that person’s driving more informed. And that’s what we want with language: a more informed speaker and writer.” Shapiro nods, adding, “And, it makes the person more interesting and intelligent and helpful. That’s why I say a year of Latin is a wonderful thing.”

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