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The Peer Mentor: A Pivotal Teaching and Learning Partner in Elementary Latin

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THE PEER MENTOR: A PIVOTAL TEACHING AND LEARNING PARTNER IN ELEMENTARY LATIN

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Introduction

Much about our elementary Latin sequence at Elon University is innovative: it includes an inductive text and approach, self-paced advancement on a competency-based model, elements of the flipped classroom, and peer-to-peer learning. Although these remain defining features of the two-course sequence, the participation of a peer mentor, an advanced student who works as a sort of coach alongside the elementary students, remains a distinctive component of the courses. In this essay we describe the ways in which the two of us, the instructor of the courses and the peer mentor, worked in partnership to prepare the syllabus for each course and support the students who enroll in them.

Our approach to writing this essay is in keeping with the partnership approach we took to our work. We begin with a few words about the various moving parts of the courses to contextualize both the need for the peer mentor and the work that we undertook together not just in these courses from 2014-2016 but also during the summer of 2015. Following that introduction to the courses, we provide complementary discussions of our experience, shared and separate, as partners in this endeavor. We begin with some thoughts about the nature of the peer mentor's role and then highlight some moments of curricular and strategic interactions in the partnership. Reflective elements are woven throughout our back-and-forth, with special attention paid to the experience of preparing the course of the summer of 2015 and of processing our work with students. To wrap up, Megan offers some insights as to how this role has prepared her for a job teaching Latin to third through eighth graders as well as suggests how this teaching and learning relationship might be deepened and enhanced in the future.

The Context: The Coursework

In all of its iterations, the elementary Latin courses have taken as a starting point the belief that students do not learn the same material at the same pace. Language learning is itself notoriously reiterative, requiring much review and laps back to ensure deep, lasting comprehension. This emphasis on reiteration begins with our choice of an inductive text (Hans Oeberg's *Lingua Latina*), a selection that flags early on the need for students to take responsibility for their learning and spend meaningful time engaged with their Latin work. Importantly, the courses are not self-taught (see below on the "tasks") but they do require students to work in ways unfamiliar to many of them. In support of this goal and in recognition that not all students grasp the same content fully the first (or fourth) time around, the courses are self-paced: students progress through the material as they feel ready or demonstrate mastery of it. (Confidence and mastery are

not always connected: a student may perceive that they are insufficiently prepared but their assessment score proves that they are.) In order to demonstrate mastery, students take a series of "challenges," each of which focuses on one chapter of material. Challenges include sections on short answer, translation, Latin composition, and brief topic-based essays and can be taken up to three times; students must earn a score of 86% or above to continue to the next chapter. In both semesters, the classes meet three times a week for seventy minutes each.

Preparation for a challenge involves a series of "tasks" which students complete via the course Moodle site (see screenshot, below). Broken into six steps, these tasks ask students to (1) read and re-read the chapter, (2) respond to a series of prompts in a reading journal, (3) listen to a few podcasts that introduce the chapter's grammatical material, (4) take a "concept check," a quiz used only for formative assessment, (5) engage with the ancient Mediterranean world through supplementary material via a "Culture in Context" task, and (6) synthesize what they have learned throughout their completion of the tasks, again with specific prompts. Only the second and sixth tasks (the reading journal and synthesis) are assigned grades that count toward the students' marks in the course. These online written tasks receive feedback from the instructor and offer another point of contact for answering questions, clarifying content, and suggesting study approaches. They likewise provide useful information about when students complete their work, in what stages, and an approximation of how much time they spend on the tasks.

Upon completion of a chapter's tasks, students read the designated chapter with one another in groups of (usually) two to six. (There have been times in some semesters where students became very fragmented in their progress and we had multiple one-student groups; see below for discussion.) Each group spends as much time as possible working with the instructor. If there are four learning groups, for example, each group would have about fifteen to twenty minutes with the instructor. During this session, the instructor responds only to questions generated by the group — the session, importantly, is not a recap of the podcasts or a reductive explanation of new material but rather specifically assesses (indirectly), deepens, and supplements student learning.

It was often the case that the students' tasks were graded after they had discussed the material with the instructor in class; by both the content and the quality of the questions students asked in class, one already had a good sense of their comprehension, their level of preparedness, and the advantage of being able to refer back to our in-class conversations while leaving feedback on their tasks. Time in class that is not spent with the instructor or with their peers is spent working with the peer mentor, who rotates between groups to answer questions, practice translation, and read with the students.

Our Partnership Approach

Kristina: Terminology is important, and what the peer mentor does not do is in some ways as important as what the peer mentor does do. Unlike the model of a teaching assistant that might be most familiar from large lecture courses with separate discussion sections, the peer mentor model excludes grading, independent instruction, and duties of an administrative nature. From the beginning I as the instructor believed that it was critical for this student to remain on a level

close to that of the students with whom he or she would work; introducing any element of evaluation or assessment would, I feared, jeopardize the trust and camaraderie which I had hoped that the elementary students would feel for the peer mentor. At the same time, I wanted to work to insure that the peer mentor would be respected and that their perspective would be valued by students in these classes. The partnership described herein reflects, for the most part, the third academic year in which a peer mentor was an integral part of the elementary Latin sequence and the second year in which Megan and I had worked together as a team.

Megan: As a student myself, my perception of TAs was that they were there to assist the professor. As peer mentor, I believe my role in the classroom was aimed more at being an aid to the students. While outside of class Kristina and I worked together to improve the course, in class my focus was on the students alone as they sought help in understanding translations and new concepts. This role allowed a stronger peer relationship than might be developed with a TA and the students were typically comfortable approaching me frankly. What makes the partnership between professor and peer mentorship so dynamic however is that it takes place in and out of the classroom. As the students work through the material in class, the presence of the peer mentor allows them not only to progress through texts with the aid of a peer but also to express concerns or difficulties without the pressure of approaching the professor. Outside of class, the peer mentor is then able to further assist both the students and the professor by providing a student perspective in discussing possible improvements and shifts in class experience. In fact, as peer mentor my partnership with Kristina began first in developing class materials before the beginning of the semester.

Kristina: As a general rule, I would write the syllabus and send it to Megan for feedback a few weeks before the start of the term. When she had been an elementary Latin student, the fall course had been taught the traditional way by another faculty member and the spring course, although similar in method to the way it is now, used a different textbook and had different components. Her reading of the syllabus offered me crucial insights as to how students new to the course might react, particularly when it came to items that were completely clear in my mind but not as much so on paper. Especially by her second year on the job, Megan was adept at anticipating what and how students might think and react to the course and to the various tweaks we made to it along the way.

In terms of the day-to-day, I would share the lesson plan with Megan, usually via email early in the morning (this was in part because students have until 5:00am on the day on which they wish to learn a chapter's material with me). Lest the term "lesson plan" conjure up images of a very thorough, detailed blueprint for the day's work, I should note here that these lesson plans almost always consisted of a series of letters and students names: the letters for the groups and names of students in that group. Each group was identified by its task for the day, for example, Group A had four students who were together (1) reading chapter 13 with one another, (2) working with the instructor, and (3) re-reading with the peer mentor. Either over email or before class began, Megan and I would plan out who would work with which group and when; the basic idea was to have a rotation that did not privilege any type of learner, any student, any group, or any pace through the material. Importantly, and as a testament to Megan's grammatical prowess, the lesson plans did not include any information about what was in the chapters listed or any sort of refresher of relevant grammatical ideas or syntactical constructions (but see below, on our work

during the summer of 2015). With the plan in place, we began each class often without communicating beyond simply confirming or clarifying the logistics of the day's work.

Megan: My work and focus in participating in the introductory course shifted from my first year to my second. During my first year as peer mentor, I spent significant time working through the text in order to stay a chapter or two ahead of the students in the class. As I had never engaged with this particular reader, it was essential to prepare myself to aid the students that I familiarize myself with the material ahead of time. (Preparing now to myself teach students using course materials different than those I learned with, I appreciate having had this experience.) This preparation as well as the regular time spent helping students through the chapters for that first year allowed me to shift my focus during my second year as peer mentor. Without the need for so much chapter preparation, I was able to allot more time to assessing the student atmosphere more generally and work towards improving performance and class productivity. By the second year Kristina and I fell into a rhythm with classroom dynamic and with less time used with logistics, our partnership involved more reflection on student performance, classroom dynamics, room for adjustments, etc.

Kristina: Our walk to the next class, intermediate/advanced Latin (in which Megan was enrolled) offered us fifteen minutes or so to debrief and compare notes: does Bob still struggle with the ablative absolute? How did the chapter 12 group work together today? Did you notice how much better Jenny's translating has been this week? While this space provided time for quick reflection and processing, we often took another fifteen or twenty minutes, twice a week, of our directed research time (Megan was working on her thesis) to strategize, determine what was working and what was not, and puzzle through bigger questions about student motivation, their (in)completion of tasks, and student chatter in the course. In many ways, Megan as peer mentor was my ear on the ground, a window into what the students were thinking and feeling and, at times, why. I think that this was a candid partnership and therefore one that allowed for the constructive criticism to become a better teacher in real-time, rather than merely between semesters or offerings of a course.

Megan: Kristina's comment on the "real-time" improvements reflects one of the foremost benefits to our partnership. As we were both able to engage with the students in unique ways, we could guide each other in how best to improve the student experience and understanding of the language. For example, while students tended to be more frank with me about questions or insecurities regarding their work, Kristina had access to their assignments and had better perspective on how much work the students were doing in preparation for class. Knowing both what the students are actually doing as well as how they felt about their work allowed us to tailor our approaches to best improving student production and attitude. I found that many roadblocks occurred when students convinced themselves they were unable to succeed and thus did not put their best foot forward. This partnership improved our ability to break down those roadblocks. For example, in some semesters, as mentioned above, a number of students ended up in one-person groups. I think a big part of this is the pace at which students garner either confidence or work ethic. Some students start off unmotivated by the self pacing while others seem to start off excessively unconfident and thus unable to gain momentum (since their anxiety prevents them from thinking they're capable). So then all of these students end up fragmented as their being one step behind only further lessens their belief that they can accomplish the task.

Kristina: We also were able to discuss questions of *how* to teach. On the one hand, Megan as a former elementary student and then as an intermediate, and finally as an advanced student had heard me explain elements of Latin grammar and syntax for quite a while. On the other hand, having to explain those same concepts again requires an even deeper level of cognitive command. Although Megan's work as the peer mentor and as the Latin tutor in the 2014-15 academic year likely helped her to internalize the material and find her own ways of repackaging it for students, it seems to me that this process became an even more deeply ingrained one during the summer of 2015. This was the summer of the tasks: prior to the 2015-16 year, elementary Latin students had no formally assessed, graded homework or out-of-class preparation. In an attempt to add some degree of structure to the courses without sacrificing my dearly-held commitment to the idea that students need to learn how to take responsibility for their work and learning, we tossed a number of potential ideas back and forth. Ultimately, we decided on creating a series of "tasks," as described above, which had the aim of helping students to approach their learning in an organized way.

Because so much of the course content is delivered online through the tasks, we consider this an example of a flipped classroom (indeed, part of this project was inspired by my work with the Collaborative Humanities Redesign Project, now in its third year). Although we had ideas about what we wanted these tasks to accomplish, we took some time determining how best to order and populate them. As we began to think of the tasks as a series, we decided also to add some gate-keeping measures. For example, students had to formally submit, by clicking a button, written tasks and had to complete each task in order before the next one would be "unlocked." Additionally, students could see only the material for the chapter they were currently studying as well as those before it; new chapter folders remained hidden until the previous chapter's challenge was passed. (We would be remiss here not to note the phenomenal amount of support we had from Dan Reis, a member of Elon's Teaching and Learning Technology team.)

Of all of the tasks, the third was probably the most important to students (from their perspective), for it was here that we introduced the grammatical material new to each chapter. We carefully considered different media by which to present the material and eventually chose podcasts over videos (a typically preferred format). Informal surveys conducted by Megan indicated that students wanted the most portable medium possible: podcasts could be downloaded onto an iPod or phone, played in the car or at the gym, and had the added bonus (we thought) of being less likely to be dated quickly as well as being easier to produce. Finally, the absence of video meant also (for this iteration at least) an absence of text, thereby compelling students to listen carefully, frequently, and while taking notes.

Megan: As part of my work that summer, I went through the book, carefully assessing each chapter not only for grammatical content but also for theme in vocabulary and storyline. I put together a chapter-by-chapter content map listing out each new bit of grammar (e.g. genitive nouns and possessive adjectives) as well as possible cultural themes (e.g. the Roman family or sailing). As I developed this content map, I would send updates to Kristina in order that she could begin work on the scripts used for recording the audio podcasts.

Kristina: While the cultural content and themes that Megan extracted from each chapter became the basis for the fifth task ("Culture in Context"), the grammatical content that she distilled became the podcast topics. In order to give students an array of voices throughout their learning process, we decided that I should write the scripts for the podcasts and that Megan would record them. I shared drafts of these topics throughout the process, paying particular attention to clarity and concision. In an effort to underscore the inductive nature of the course book, the grammar was introduced almost always from an English framework, the hope being that students would follow prompts to go back and re-read the chapter to find the Latin examples of what they had heard described.

Megan: After we had settled on final drafts of the chapter scripts, I began working on recording the audio files. The scripts were organized by chapter, and each chapter was broken down into individual grammar lessons. For example, if a single chapter introduced the nominative case, the genitive case, and the present tense, each of those would be recorded as their own audio file and would be organized under the heading of nouns and verbs. As I recorded, I considered tone and pace with concern for interest/attention span as well as ability to grasp concepts and take notes. By having separate recordings for each grammar concept, we were able to keep almost every podcast between one and three minutes. As Kristina and I had discussed in advance, this would allow us both to maintain student interest and provide an easier method for students to access those concepts for which they felt like they needed additional review.

As I worked through the podcasts, Kristina and I met with Dan Reis in order to begin developing the Moodle site. Here all of the podcasts would be uploaded to their respective chapters and tasks. We then added the concept check, which asks students to complete a series of questions based on the grammar reviewed in the podcasts and fleshed out the culture in context for each chapter. Once the site was fully developed, I worked through each chapter playing the role of the student. While I was not required to write a reading journal, I tested out the podcasts, took the concept check practice quizzes, and reviewed the culture in context just as the students would. Here I was not only able to check for malfunctions or errors but I could also get a sense for time allotted to each task and fluidity of the material. It was during that summer spent developing the curriculum with Kristina that I believe our partnership was solidified in ownership of the course. Participating in the real structuring of the course not only helped me more fully understand the backbone and aim of curriculum, but it further bolstered my sense of partnership with Kristina and my confidence in my role as a peer mentor to introductory students.

Conclusion: Taking Lessons from Our Partnership Approach Forward

Megan: In approaching further partnerships I think that spending some time together tweaking the class materials can be beneficial. As I mentioned above, the time spent over the summer working with Kristina on developing curriculum allowed me to take ownership of my role as peer mentor and as a partner to Kristina. Having this kind of experience significantly improved my work as peer mentor from year one to year two. I would recommend working alongside any future peer mentor during the summer prior to their first year in the role allowing them to work through some of the materials and make suggestions for improvements. I think that working through the tasks would not only improve every peer mentor's ability to help the students

throughout the year but will also allow them to take that same ownership of the position. Secondly, I suggest continuing the regular conversations throughout the week between peer mentor and professor. These low-key updates are helpful for keeping the pulse of the class environment and making sure things do not slip through the cracks. During my partnership with Kristina we both had unique perspectives on the students' engagement with material and these conversations allowed us to broaden our perspectives. The walk to class allowed for easy candid conversation but if schedule does not permit, I think being intentional about finding time for these brief updates would maintain a strong partnership.

As someone about to begin my first year teaching Latin in primary school, I certainly owe much of my confidence in the subject as well as passion for educating to my experience as a peer mentor in the elementary Latin courses. When I began as in introductory student myself, I knew early on that I was passionate about the language. However, it was not until I worked alongside other students as peer mentor, helping them grasp the material themselves, that I gained a sense of ownership of the language. Guiding others and finding ways to help them understand solidified the grammar and diversified my way of approaching it. Particularly during my first year as peer mentor, I came across grammar concepts that I myself struggled with but found new confidence in as I studied them with a mind to teach them. Knowing I would be aiding other students through a certain chapter, I was able to strengthen and solidify my own mastery of a concept by working to know it well enough to explain it to another. And beyond just those concepts that I originally struggled with, I also learned new ways of approaching subjects I grasped well, finding that each student grasps these concepts in unique ways. Thus, by learning how to talk through a given concept to a variety of students, I developed differing methods for approaching problems and questions.

As peer mentor I was also able to see the diverse benefits of learning Latin and how students change across the semester. I was able to watch students grow from viewing the language as a requirement they felt unqualified to succeed in to seeing it as something they can and are excelling in and understanding its connections to their unique academic experience. Those who put in the effort began to develop not only a mastery of the language but also improved confidence and intellectual curiosity. My first year as a peer mentor I had a student who despite having frequently expressed frustrations and insecurities about her ability to master the grammar, ended the year with an appreciation for the language, explaining that Kristina and I helped inspire in her a stronger passion for her academic work. I became passionate not only about my own Latin education but also about seeing students succeed and broaden their intellectual boundaries. This partnership with Kristina has allowed me to observe closely her teaching methods, which have inspired my own as well as cultivate a stronger sense for student learning habits and interaction with the material.

Screenshot of Fall 2015 Moodle Tasks, Capitulum I.