

Probing Question: Is Latin valuable for today's students?

April 29 2011, By Melissa Beattie-Moss

Yale University's famous motto is *Lux et Veritas*, Latin for "light and truth" while Princeton's crest reads *Dei Sub Numine Viget* ("Under God's power she flourishes"). The University of Pennsylvania based its cautionary motto -- *Sine Moribus Vanæ* or "Letters without morals are useless" -- on a line in one of the Roman poet Horace's odes. But in 1898, when someone pointed out that the line could also be translated as "Loose women without morals", the University rushed to revise the wording.

Although Latin -- an Indo-European language at its height during the Roman Empire -- is nobody's native tongue these days, it certainly remains a topic of conversation. The usual point of debate? Whether learning Latin is valuable for modern-day [students](#).

"I don't think people know what they mean when they dismiss Latin as a dead language," said Paul Harvey, associate professor of classics at Penn State. "Of course it is not spoken in many places, save for the Vatican and a few classics departments. But whether a language is currently spoken is irrelevant to the continuing value of learning it and to the value of literature written in that language."

Even if you never read Virgil or Cicero in the original, explains Harvey, "Latin is the root language from which variations developed into today's modern Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian and a few less-spoken European tongues. On a practical level, it is far easier for those with a firm foundation in Latin to learn a modern Romance language."

Whether you've studied Latin or not, most people already use it constantly, Harvey adds. The ancient Latin/Roman alphabet is the most widely used writing system in the world, and is the alphabet of English and almost all other European languages. Up to 60 percent of modern English words derive from Latin, directly or indirectly.

Latin is our foundational language, explains Harvey, and that awareness may be a factor in the current revival of interest in Latin in our schools. One indicator is the number of students taking the AP Latin exam has doubled in the last decade. "From what I've seen and read," Harvey said, "the revival in schools—including inner city schools—has less to do with a renewed interest in the classical past than a realization that the more Latin students learn, the higher their SAT verbal and analytical scores." In fact, students of Latin had notably higher mean SAT Verbal scores than students of Spanish, French or German.

"Furthermore," Harvey notes, "there is a continuing appreciation that studying Greek and Latin -- the classical languages of Western civilization -- demonstrably enhances the ability to write cogently in English." The reason for this is "rather straightforward," believes Harvey: "The successful study of a highly inflected language forces students to understand better the grammar and syntax of their own native language and that, in turn, encourages clarity of expression and analytical thought."

In today's era of online chat acronyms and text-messaging abbreviations, the ability to write well in English may be an increasingly rare and valuable career asset. Future attorneys, doctors and scientists would be well advised to study Latin to get a jump on the professional jargon, says Harvey. "And students wishing to study practically any aspect of ancient, medieval, and Renaissance literature, art, music, and history are at a serious disadvantage if they do not know Latin well."

With such clear advantages to students, why don't more schools encourage the study of Latin? The language may have suffered from an image problem in years past, concedes Harvey. The association of Latin with the wealthy and privileged "is a modern hangover from the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries when only the educated elite studied Greek and Latin," he notes. "The classical [language](#) curriculum pretty much dissolved after World War II."

Contrary to its image, Harvey adds, not all works in the classical canon are somber tomes. "Most folks don't realize that Greek and Latin literature includes an extraordinary range of works in different genres, including risqué and very funny love poetry."

Of course, risqué and funny may not be everyone's taste either. But as the Romans said, "De gustibus non est disputandum." One must not argue over matters of taste.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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