

Memorization: Mastery or Modification?

Some years ago a student informed me on a college Latin class evaluation that the course “required too much memorization.” I considered the observation amusingly uninformed, the defense of poor performance from a mulish, uninterested student in a required course: For how could one learn Latin, or any foreign language, without proper attention to memorization? This student remark came to mind when my attention was attracted to the CFP on *Rethinking Memorization in Learning Latin* -- but with less disdain on my part for the student’s own disdain of Latin than with an interest in exploring the implications of teaching Latin that may involve “too much memorization.”

This exploration would be based on a half a century of life with Latin, about 10 years learning it, and some four decades of teaching it, almost altogether on the college level. It would be informed by the belief that strategies of teaching elementary and intermediate Latin have much in common on any level.

The constant in this exploration would be the conviction-- based on my experiences as student, teacher, and parent-- that students are indeed less adept at memorization than in my days as a beginning Latin student. The variables would be the different times and institutions in which I dealt with Latin: as a student in a public high school in Virginia and then in a small Virginia liberal arts college; and as a professor in a highly regarded Northeastern university, in a comprehensive Midwestern university, and finally in a Midwestern liberal arts college, with four recent summers of teaching Latin to disadvantaged high school students in an Upward Bound Program.

Although the reasons that today’s students lack strategies for memorization are less important than the fact, some speculation may be offered for the attenuation of a once

fundamental aspect of education. As memorization was evaporating, curriculum was changing on all levels of instruction. A somewhat limited core of subjects offering what was considered to be facts worth knowing became subdivided into a wider array of options at the same time that new subjects were introduced attuned to the backgrounds of an increasingly diverse student population. Judgment was suspended on facts essential to an informed citizenry as the very composition of the citizenry was in flux.

Before the nadir of the status of Latin in the 70s, memorization was fired by the demands of the regulated and standardized next level of instruction: so-called first-year forms were needed for second-year Caesar, who was required for Cicero and Vergil, who were expected background for placement into advanced Latin on the college/university level. Eventually, as AP mania took hold, instruction was driven toward that goal. For a very long time the Latin train was leaving the station, but it was spending much time in transit, and many students got off in the process, often very early on.

In such a model of preparatory Latin, memorization cannot but be fundamental, as also in intensive Latin courses that have some further very clear goals in sight. But should all other students interested in the Latin language and Roman culture be contained in courses that prepare them through intensive memorization for a future that never comes? I think not. Students with limited time for Latin will profit more from work with the grammar and structure of the simplest well-constructed Latin sentence, its derivatives in English, and its comment on, or beckoning toward, Roman culture. Memorization may be undertaken bit by bit during the time that a framework for the Latin language and Roman culture is being raised for the student; it need no longer be a heavy foundation that keeps the student down. For many students Latin's potential

to emancipate and to enrich lies much less in its quantity than in its quality. This proposition will be explored in the proposed presentation.