

Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Alexander... Philip Lockhart: The Legacy of Teaching Classics

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by Sarah Weinschenk



"We study Latin because without it we cannot know our history and our heritage. Without that knowledge, we cannot know ourselves. Nosce teipsum (know thyself). If one can read that, one can—in one's life—begin to do that. The link between Latin and our lives is deep and abiding. . . . We also learn grammar, an ancient art and science that tells us how to put together our thoughts and hence our lives with clarity, dignity, and gravity. Claritas, dignitas, gravitas."

— Dr. A. Bartlett Giamatti, former president of Yale University and English professor

Everyone is familiar with that tired old saw, "Those who can, do. Those who can't do, teach." Perhaps it would be more accurate to say, "Those who can inspire, teach." That was certainly the case in the classroom of Philip Lockhart at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Whether his students came from public high schools, or prestigious prep schools, this was where their education began in earnest. Somehow, in an 8:00 a.m. Latin 101 class, Professor Lockhart had his students bright-eyed and eager to conjugate Latin verbs and decline nouns until they were ready to read Cicero, Vergil, Horace, and more. He was able to make the Catilinarian conspiracy, described by Cicero, seem as exciting as the movie *The Godfather*, and to make his students believe that no human being could really mature without learning life lessons along with Vergil's Aeneas in the *Aeneid*.

With a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania and his knowledge of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Sanskrit, ancient Persian, et al., Professor Lockhart certainly had the makings of an eminent classical scholar. Yet, he chose to pour his time,

talent, and love for classics into teaching at Dickinson College. In so doing, he prepared countless young men and women for careers in teaching Latin and Greek. He prepared many others for success in fields ranging from law, to business, to government service, to medicine, by helping them develop a deep understanding of language, discipline of thought and verbal expression, and

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letting them in on the millennia-old conversation of great minds seeking to find the meaning of Truth, Beauty, Wisdom, and the Good Life. His love for the Latin and Greek languages was abundantly evident in his

teaching and continues to shine through his students who have, in turn, become teachers.

Where does this passion for teaching a subject which many would deem at best, arcane, and at worst utterly useless, come from? In part, it comes from the thrill of knowing that one is part of a legacy that can be traced back to Socrates.

This humble philosopher, who claimed no wisdom other than the admission that he knew nothing and who refused payment for his teaching, devoted his life to training young men to think critically and attain virtue.

One of these young men, Plato, in turn founded the Academy, composed the beautifully written *Dialogues* preserving Socrates' teaching and the Republic with its unforgettable *Allegory of the Cave*. Among his students was

Aristotle who used the skills instilled by Plato to take philosophy in a whole new direction and to train up one of the great leaders of the ancient world, Alexander of Macedon. This lineage of classical teaching illustrates how teachers educate young people both to preserve and build on wisdom, and to use their education in an active life of leadership.

As for teaching the Latin language, just one aspect of classical education, the value lies not only in helping students access the power of language fully through a deep understanding of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax; but also in opening to students a whole world of archaeology, history, mythology, religion, and culture. Through understanding the Romans better, students will gain an appreciation of their own history, law, government, literature, et al., which owe so much to the accomplishments of this complex civilization. The sheer extent, in time and space, of the Roman Empire ensured that it would have a lasting impact on cultures across Europe, the Near East, and North Africa. The founders of the United States would bring that influence to North America. In the Aeneid, Vergil writes that Rome's strength and destiny lie in its *leges et mores*,

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laws and customs. While its military conquest was ruthless and, at times, brutal, Rome was bent not simply on acquiring wealth and territory, but also was determined to bring what it considered to be the best system of law and governance to all parts of the world.

Language serves as a means through which a culture's accomplishments and values are preserved. Latin has been one of the most successful languages in history. Even after the fall of Rome, in the West Latin continued to be used as the language of science, law, theology, and scholarship for centuries. As the Romance languages developed across Europe, Latin continued to unite people of all countries culturally as an international language. Though Latin has lost its status as a commonly used language, it continues to play a role in vocabulary specific to science and law. Perhaps most significantly, it serves almost as a "laboratory language" which is very precise in its expression and consistent in its rules. Studying Latin allows students to make sense of their own English language, as its vocabulary and grammar are based on those of Latin. As students' understanding of the workings of language increases, so does their ability to think, speak, and write effectively.

Latin teachers derive satisfaction from knowing that they are exposing students to knowledge with such an illustrious history. At the same time, they can assure students and their parents that the hard work they put into learning Latin will bring rewards such as an expanded vocabulary, which may lead to higher verbal SAT scores, a foundation for learning a modern language, and honed critical thinking skills that will benefit them in whatever subjects they may study.

Sarah earned her [B.A.in](#) Latin from Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. After graduating Summa Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Dickinson, Sarah taught Latin for a year at Bishop McCort High School in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. From there she moved on to earn an [M.A.in](#) Latin at Fordham University in the Bronx, New York. Sarah taught Latin and Integrated Liberal Studies at Riverdale Country School in the Bronx.

After moving to California, Sarah taught for a year at the Santa Catalina School for Girls in Monterey before moving to Morro Bay where she first started working with the homeschool community on the Central Coast.

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