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From the archives

Editor's note: The following remarks are extracted from an article by Peter Taylor (1980), published in FLM1(1). Peter's current thinking about teaching mathematics to undergraduates can be found on p. 33.

The trouble is that you have spent almost all your time copying the works of others, like the school boy who is detained to copy 200 lines of Latin poetry. A sad and mindless task that, especially if he knows almost no Latin. Guaranteed to turn him bitterly against the language.

Of course it might have been Virgil. I can imagine copying Virgil under some circumstances. I can certainly imagine reading him, preferably aloud. The Aeneid is a masterpiece.

*ARMA virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris
Italiano fato profugus Laviniaque venit
litora, multum ille et terries iactatus et alto
vi superum, saevae memorem lunonis obi ram,
multil quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem
inferretque deos Latio; genus unde Latinum
Albanique patres atque altae moenia Romae.*

Good stuff that, though it takes a bit of practice.

But the texts you have copied so meticulously year after year are not masterpieces. For the most part they are tedious tales by minor Latin poets. The meter is poor and the stories are contrived. They describe obscure battles or ill-conceived skirmishes, where victory comes not by any stroke of genius, but from some unseen technical advantage enjoyed by the other side.

Your teachers chose this carefully-edited pulp over Virgil because they thought it would be easier to digest. That may be so, but it has ruined your appetite.

You would have been better to write your own poetry. The trouble is, you know hardly any Latin. You can't read it very well, and you can't speak it at all. You never acquired any burning desire to master it because you weren't exactly turned on by the pathetic examples that were put before you.

My first task then is to restore your appetite for Latin poetry. I shall do this by reading the Aeneid. Not for you to copy however, not even Virgil should in fact be copied. I shall read aloud in as rich and melodic a voice as I can muster, and you must sit back and let the stately hexameter capture your soul, and the heroic tale set it on fire.

And then I shall read you a few modest poems of my own that have been inspired by my encounters with Virgil. They are not great like the Aeneid, but I have worked on them very hard and they are the best that I can do. In spite of their modesty they have an important place in this classroom because I am your teacher.

Then finally you must find the muse yourselves. At that time you will be glad that I shared my poems with you. For Virgil is a hard act to follow.

What do you think?

Reference

- Taylor, P. (1980) On Virgil: my opening lecture to Mathematics 120. *For the Learning of Mathematics* **1**(1), 49-52.

Correction: *Apologies to Nick Wasserman and Julianna Connelly Stockton who were co-authors of a communication entitled "Horizon content knowledge in the work of teaching: a focus on planning" in the last issue, 33(3). While both their names appeared on the communication, Julianna Connelly Stockton's was inadvertently omitted in the contents pages.*