

# Improving the teaching methodology and evaluation of learning the course on «Latin and Classical Culture»

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## Abstract

The goal of this study is to offer the university community the outcome of two years of research in the Humanities. A website is being developed that includes theoretical contents, audiovisual materials, batteries of self-correcting questions and more. The course for which this portal was created is a core course in the first year of the Humanities degree programme; however, the resulting product can be extrapolated to the compulsory first-year Latin course taught in all the language and literature degree programmes at the UAB, with the exception of English, and to some of the courses from the first cycle in the Classical Languages and Literatures degree programme. This project covers the need to organise blended learning courses in order to capture the interest of a segment of the population which, because of time problems, cannot base their education solely on classroom learning, but who do not resign themselves to solely distance education. It can also be of aid to students who at certain points in a given course, for a variety of possible reasons, cannot attend class regularly.

## General area of interest of this innovation

These materials might be of interest to faculty teaching the classical languages, and in general to any professor interested in classical culture. The contents are mainly designed to support the teaching of first-cycle courses in the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts, although they can also be used by secondary and baccalaureate teachers as well.

## 1. Introduction

The adaptation of today's university programmes to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) can serve as an incentive to reflect on the learning strategies that

foster the development of the skills inherent to each subject. The degree in Humanities from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), where the first-year core course in *Latin and Classical Culture* (12 standardised credits = 9 ECTS credits) is taught, participated in the Pilot Plan implemented in academic year 2004-05 with the Department of Universities, Research and the Information Society (DURSI) of the Generalitat de Catalunya.

The new system poses a huge challenge not just for the faculty but also for the students, because it means a shift from the traditional concept of teaching based on classroom hours (of teaching) to a concept focused on student learning and a new way of calculating the academic workload. Students are estimated to work around 1,600 hours per academic year, that is, 40 hours a week for 40 weeks. Around 25-30 hours of work are equivalent to one credit in the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), and the 1,600 hours estimated per academic year are equivalent to 60 credits. At the UAB, one ECTS credit is equivalent to around 25 hours of student work. After reaching 180 ECTS credits, students may earn the degree in Humanities.

Far from being stressful, the new European Higher Education Area should be yet another pretext for continuing our reflection on goals, methods and outcomes.

### 1.1. Background in teaching innovation

The study presented in this article is part of a tradition that is unique to the area of Latin Language and Literature at that UAB, as a hallmark of research into teaching Latin in Catalonia and Spain. The first attempts to improve students' learning of the Latin language date back to 1976, with the experimentation with learning material that was quite novel back then, which was ultimately published and disseminated by the UAB's ICE in two volumes: *Introduction to Latin I* (Bellaterra 1982) and *Introduction to Latin 2* (Bellaterra 1983).

Several years later, based on the need to have new materials that were appropriate for students who had received their baccalaureate education under the new LOGSE system, a new book was published, *Introduction to the Latin Language* (Bellaterra 1998), which is still used in all the first-year classes (Classical, Catalan, French and Spanish Languages and Literatures degree programmes) in the Faculty of Philosophy & Arts. This proposal meant an educational transposition of some of the basic principles of functional linguistics to teaching Latin.

In 2000 the UAB's new Latin Language and Literature portal was launched, devoted to teaching Latin from the different standpoints: grammar, syntax, games and film: <http://antalya.uab.es/pcano/aulatin>.

## 2. Objectives

The goals proposed with the design of the educational web pages for the course «Latin and Classical Culture» were the following:

1. To adapt the contents of this core course to the interests of students in the Humanities degree programme and to the new directives coming from the new higher education framework.
2. To provide students with interactive materials based on independent learning, self-evaluation and distance tutoring.
3. To achieve an improvement in first-year students' learning outcomes.
4. To evaluate certain skills, including reflective and critical reasoning, the ability to express oneself orally and in writing, the capacity for teamwork, etc. by means of small seminars or course portfolios, yet without discarding other ways of evaluating learning, such as essays or expositions of topics, open-book tests, objective or multiple-choice tests, oral tests, practical tests, tutorials, etc.

### 2.1. Description of the course: Latin and Classical Culture

This is a first-year core course for 12 standardised credits (= 9 ECTS credits = 225 hours of student work) which is taught in the Humanities degree programme.

Because of the transversal nature of this degree programme and the conditions for being admitted to this programme, the students registered in it come from a wide variety of backgrounds:

1. Students from the Humanities baccalaureate – which are the ones with the educational background most closely related to the contents of the course.
2. Students from the Social Sciences baccalaureate – who have received very little or no education in knowledge of the Greco-Roman world.
3. Students who have taken the university entrance exams for individuals over the age of 25 – whose level of maturity and culture are generally higher, yet who tend to be weak in specific knowledge of the field; we should also mention that this group has risen considerably in the past few academic years.
4. Students with a diploma-level humanities or science degrees who are embarking on the second cycle but have to take this course as part of their supplementary education.

The course aims to give students the keys to understanding Greco-Roman civilisation as a whole and, to the extent possible, the Latin language. With this goal in mind, its backbone is a sweeping study of the Roman culture framed in its historical contents and with a special emphasis on studying the ancient literary genres and conveying the Latin language and ancient culture in the West.

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Comment on a text by applying the historical, institutional, literary and cultural knowledge acquired about Roman civilisation – and perhaps Greek civilisation.
- Comment on excerpts from the main Latin literary genres, relating them to their author and pointing out their main features.
- Explain the process how the classical languages and cultures were transmitted, especially relating it to textual transmission and to the shift from Latin to the Romance languages.

- Identify the presence of the classical tradition in European literature, in the fine arts, music, etc., based on the cases studied.
- Interpret the basic meaning of a Latin text based on their knowledge of the Romance languages and a series of guide questions.

### 2.1.1. Teaching-learning methodologies

The course includes both theoretical sessions and seminars, which enable us to make an in-depth analysis of not just the required readings but also the audiovisual material that is used to support the explanation of the contents.

Students have to pass three written tests with objective questions, essays and text commentaries. They must also develop an individual course project (to be presented to the group, as they are shared topics, albeit with a wide variety of approaches) that is supervised by the professor.

### 2.1.2. Evaluation

Table 1. Evaluation methods used according to activity

Procedure	Evaluation criteria	Weight
Oral presentation of the written project	Proper oral expression. The ability to work in a team and interpersonal skills.	10 %
Written project	Assessment of the written project (coherence, proper expression, use of bibliographic tools, originality)	30 % (10 % March + 20 % May)
3 written tests	Knowledge Analytical skills Ability to synthesise	60 % (20+20+20)

## 3. Description of the project

### 3.1. The design of the educational web pages of the course

#### «Latin and Classical Culture»

Thanks to the revolution brought about in recent years by the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into teaching, not only have they fostered distance education but they have also begun to be combined with the traditional teaching-learning system with virtual work outside the classroom. There is a gradation from a totally classroom-based classroom to intermediate methods (blended learning) to learning that is conducted totally virtually.

The educational web pages presented in this article serve to complement the classroom course, and they were planned and designed with this purpose in mind. The goal is not to turn the course into a virtual course – presence in the classroom is crucial, as

we are, after all, at a classroom-based university – but to offer support materials for all the students, and particularly for those who, for a variety of reasons, cannot attend class at given points in the course. With this system, we contribute to improving the quality of the teaching.

The materials included in these web pages are divided into three different sections:

1. They contain much of the theoretical contents covered in class (in teacher-led classes or in presentations in small seminars), always accompanied by the corresponding audiovisual material.
2. They include, as complements to the contents, a range of texts that are somehow representative as a reflection of each writer's style and their way of understanding and practising literary creation. The translation into Catalan or Spanish is always attached because the students' level does not usually enable them to get a profound understanding of the original. In the classroom, the role of the professor is limited to helping the translation process. In-depth translations of texts are relegated to secondary status in view of the students' backgrounds, in that none of them are pursuing language training per se.
3. For each of the subjects, there are several objective tests so that students may have material that can be used for self-evaluation after each section. Therefore, students are empowered to monitor their own learning, as from now on the goal is for students to become active stakeholders in their learning and evaluation process. These tests are similar to the ones that are later included in the objective tests.

The design of the web pages has the following aims.

- For students to improve their knowledge of the course based on the creation of interactive materials founded upon independent learning, self-assessment and distance tutoring.
- Based on alternative evaluation methods, such as small seminars and especially the portfolio system, for students to improve four basic transversal skills: oral and written expression, the capacity for teamwork and the ability to find information using the new technologies.
- In short, for students' outcomes to improve and for the number of students who drop out of the course to fall.

The web pages are found at the following URL: <http://claudia.uab.cat:81> (2008). In many cases, to avoid possible legal problems, users are required to identify themselves. The materials included on these web pages are accessible to all students after they provide a user name and a password. They can also be used in two courses, the core and compulsory courses, respectively, from the degree in Classical Languages and Literatures: «Latin Language and Literature I» and «Introduction to Latin Literary Texts» and in the core course «Latin», which are taught in the first year in all the language programmes with the exception of English.

#### 4. Academic results in recent years

During the first two years of adaptation to the EHEA, we could see that more students have passed the course, although we have not managed to significantly lower the number of students who drop out.

Below are the results in each academic year:

- Academic year 2002- 03

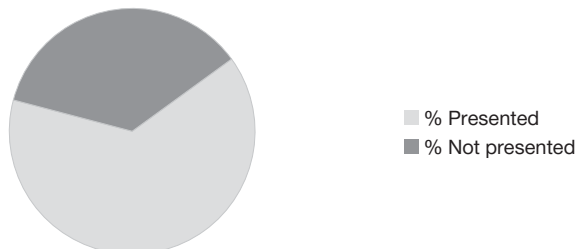
During academic year 2002- 03, of the 85.1 % of the students who remained in the course, 68.5 % passed it, and 18.5 % did not sit for the final exams (Graph 1).

Graph 1. Figures from academic year 2002-03, comparison of the percentages of students who did and did not finish the course.



- During academic year 2003-04, of the 64.1 % of the students who remained in the course, 54.7 % passed and 35.9 % did not sit for the final exam (Graph 2).

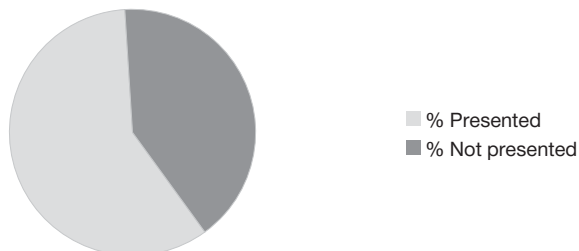
Graph 2. Figures from academic year 2003-04, comparison of the percentages of students who did and did not finish the course.



- During academic year 2004-05, of the 59 % of the students who remained in the course, 51.8 % passed and 41 % did not sit for the final exam (Graph 3).

Graph 3. Figures from academic year 2004-05, comparison of the percentages of students who did and did not finish the course.

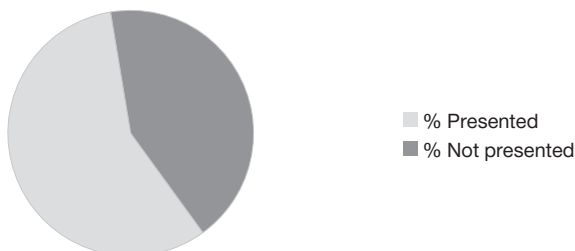
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- During academic year 2005-06 (when the ECTS credits were implemented for the first time), of the 45.9% of the students who remained in the course, 40.5% passed and 34.1% did not sit for the final exam (Graph 4).

Graph 4. Figures from academic year 2005-06, comparison of the percentages of students who did and did not finish the course.

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- During academic year 2006-07, of the 50% of the students who remained in the course, 33.3% passed and 50% did not sit for the final exam (Graph 5).

Graph 5. Figures from academic year 2006-07, comparison of the percentages of students who did and did not finish the course

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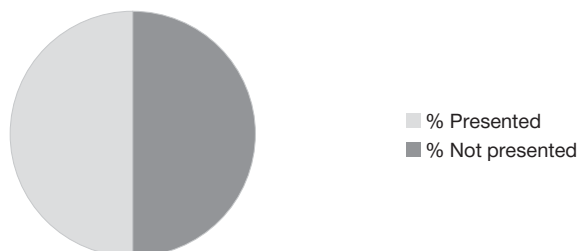


Chart 1 shows the results for each academic year:

Chart 1. Comparison of the percentage of students who sat for the tests vs. no-shows in each academic year

YEAR	Group	No-shows	TOTAL	% passing grades	% sitting for test	% no-shows
2002-2003	1	10	54	68.5 %	81.5 %	18.5 %
	2	14	44	56.8 %	68.2 %	31.8 %
2003-2004	1	23	64	54.7 %	64.1 %	35.9 %
	2	20	53	56.6 %	62.3 %	37.7 %
2004-2005	1	34	83	51.8 %	59.0 %	41.0 %
	2	20	59	54.2 %	66.1 %	33.9 %
2005-2006	1	20	37	40.5 %	45.9 %	54.1 %
	2	14	41	51.2 %	65.9 %	34.1 %
	50	3	7	57.1 %	57.1 %	42.9 %
2006-2007	1	24	48	35.4 %	50.0 %	50.0 %
	2	24	42	33.3 %	42.9 %	57.1 %
	50	5	11	54.5 %	54.5 %	45.5 %

The most significant figure is the increase in the no-shows, which can be attributed first to students' inability to keep up with the more intensive pace of evaluation, and secondly to the existence of many students who dropped out of the course mid-year for work reasons.

This analysis of the data for academic years 2002/03, 2003/04, 2005/06 and 2006/07 should enable us to compare them with the results in forthcoming academic years.

## 5. Conclusions

Although it is certain that the process of European convergence has posed a fantastic opportunity for experimental degree programmes like the Humanities to design a new degree structure and to reflect on the profile of students they want to educate and which skills we want to provide them with so that they may be successful in their future profession, it is also true that this convergence has also led to an in-depth reflection on the teaching strategies to be used in the forthcoming years. We believe that the teacher-led class must keep its place in the new system, just as there should be room for other educational activities that are rarely used in some programmes, such as small-group debate sessions, team projects, etc. This type of activity should enable us to make a



more accurate assessment of our students' oral expression skills, one of the competences that they should have polished by the time they finish their degree programmes.

Regular attendance at class is useful for students to be able to progress steadily. Given the fact that there are a multitude of cases (our degree programme is a clear example), we must strive for flexibility. Despite the fact that absenteeism is behind that vast number of cases of academic failure, some of the students who combine their studies with jobs are able to manage their time available and show outstanding academic performance. In this context, we believe that it is worthwhile to draw up blended learning teaching-learning materials.

Including innovations in teaching, along with continuous assessment, virtual tutorials and the very process of European convergence all entail a considerable effort for the faculty, as we have been able to discern from the surveys administered to the professors. The increase in teaching time is difficult to estimate, but we must find a way to evaluate and institutionally recognise the impact of this change.

### References

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### Interesting links

- Website of the project: <http://claudia.uab.cat:81>. [2008].

### Keywords

Latin, classical culture, European Higher Education Area, EHEA, Bologna, educational web pages, ICT, blended learning, continuous assessment.

### Financing

Project to improve the teaching quality at Catalan universities. Title: *Improving the teaching methodology and evaluation of learning in the course «Latin and Classical Culture»*. Identification number: 2005 MQD 00208.

### Supplementary materials on the CD-ROM

Demonstration of the *LATIN AND CLASSICAL CULTURE*: tour of the different parts of the syllabus.

**Project leader**

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**Project leader and the working group**

The project leader, Gemma Puigvert i Planagumà (full professor of Latin Language and Literature), and professors Joan Carbonell Manils (full professor of Latin Language and Literature) and Antoni Iglesias Fonseca (full professor of Historiographic Sciences and Techniques) are members of the Department of Ancient and Mediaeval Studies at the UAB. The first two, in conjunction with Francesc Carbajo Molina, secondary school teacher, had already worked together previously on teaching innovation projects.

The project leader has also been in charge of promoting DURSI's pilot plan in the Humanities degree programme in academic years 2004-05, 2005-06 and 2006-07. She is currently the coordinator of the Humanities degree programme and the leader of a project funded by AQU (Catalan Agency for University Quality Assurance) to draw up an evaluation guide for skills in the field of the Humanities.

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