

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

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**GRAND VALLEY
STATE UNIVERSITY**
COLLEGE OF LIBERAL
ARTS AND SCIENCES

GIVING STUDENTS PERMISSION TO ENTER INTO AN UNCERTAIN BEAUTY

Associate Professor and Chair of Classics Peter Anderson will certainly grant that he has a lot on his plate. For instance, Anderson is teaching first-year Latin, a Capstone course, Classical World, and an independent study with four students; mentoring the thesis of 2015 Glenn A. Niemeyer Award winner Abigail DeHart; serving as department chair; and keeping up with commitments to the international baccalaureate (IB) program; not to mention releasing a new book in March 2015 (*Seneca: Selected Dialogues and Consolations*, Hackett Publishing Co.). Yet, Anderson somehow carries a sense of relative calm, despite the fact you've caught him *in medias res* on his 12-hour teaching day, and he is one foot out the door to leave for Cardiff.

His book aspires to help students as they make translation choices. He wants to serve both the philosophical audience that strives for consistency of terms, as well as the classicist audience seeking beauty in English despite the different structures of Latin. He seeks, "beautiful eloquence to express a hard fact."

Some of his students note not only this characteristic generosity with his time, but also how his approach to his teaching has brought out the best in them and excited them about subjects that might otherwise seem a little difficult for modern undergraduates to engage, such as his recent course on Stoicism (CLA 365). Something rather wonderful is happening when students clearly want to infect others with their enthusiasm for Stoic philosophy.

The elixir that Anderson clearly has on tap in his classroom has something to do with technique, but perhaps even more to do with his general concept of what teaching is. Pretty much every aspect of the academic life has some relevance to teaching. He'll tell you that even committees are relevant to teaching, that all aspects of the rich professional life of faculty are organically related to the rest. So, his work for IB serves high school teaching and helps to shape what students internationally learn about his field. "The nexus of student accomplishment and teacher accomplishment," he notes.



PETER ANDERSON AND STUDENTS READING LATIN

At the very first CLAS Teaching Roundtables event in 2010, Peter introduced his colleagues to contemplative pedagogy, which has informed an increasing proportion of his teaching since 2006. In the description of his topic, he explained, “A growing body of research shows that the deliberate use of mindfulness and other contemplative practices in higher education can increase student engagement, focus in the classroom, and academic performance. Indeed, contemplative components or courses of study have been adopted into many programs at many institutions, from the Contemplative Studies Initiative at Brown University to mindfulness initiatives in K–12 classrooms through programs such as the Inner Kids Foundation in Los Angeles.”

In terms of his Stoics course, a secular mindfulness integrates well with the topic. To enter into it, students are mimicking Stoic practice. He estimates that 50 percent of the students really work at their own mindfulness practice, and, he reports, “80 percent wish they had done more because they saw the benefits to those who did.” These benefits come in the form of a higher degree of engagement and a higher quality of work. In addition, he sees that mindfulness practice proves to be a powerful way to let the outside noise fade away.

When he was first acquainted with this practice, Anderson used it only when it fit the course content, but he now thinks taking a moment at the beginning of just about any class to gather thoughts can work more generally toward student success.

He does encounter resistance, particularly from some young students, and makes mindfulness optional. He observes, “Students take suggestions or don’t in many areas, and this is one.” He sees it as a tool for success that will work for some.

In his language courses, one of his favorite practices is fronting knowledge. He acknowledges the long teaching tradition behind this pedagogical idea. He explains that students’ cognitive load in learning a second language is under stress. At first you need to go slowly — and slowing

down increases cognitive load. The brain is busy anticipating and discarding a great deal. Managing students’ expectations is brutally hard. And in the early stages, the teacher is in control of what the students see — it is not language “in the wild.” So, Peter takes away some student expectations by saying, “Today we will only be looking at...” and therefore relieving some of the cognitive load and its attendant stress. This focused approach is not yet the full complexity of the language, of course, but allows students to learn.

He explains that when students learn Latin they can get the false impression that the language itself is schematic and a collection of rules to follow. This occurs due to the language being taught with a strong focus on the analysis of grammatical forms through the use of schematic texts. Knowing that this false impression occurs, Anderson tries to push his students toward a more productive view of Latin as a language of ideas. He tries to leverage the way the student’s brain works. “Failure is an expression of uncertainty, never a bad thing,” Anderson notes. “Latin is the language of second chances.” Recasting (asking a student to do it again after a mistake) has some utility, but even better is not making the error in the first place. The teacher creates the environment for this success through guidance such as, “Remember when we talked about...now let’s look at...” Starting from a place of comfort, he is always gently pushing outside of that comfort zone into uncertainty. He reminds us of the unavoidable fact that there is uncertainty in expressing yourself in language.

This style of working continues until the students are more comfortably reading in the language. Healthy habits are established early. “We are habit-based creatures,” Anderson says. While a more “at your own pace” style would be optimal, it is impractical for most college courses. “The uncertainty of teaching and learning should be embraced,” he smiles.

Ultimately, he hopes to reveal with his students what makes us express in certain ways and how those ways can be beautiful.

UNSTOPPABLE CLASSICISTS

Every summer over the past decade, the Department of Classics has organized informal weekly reading groups for Latin and Classical Greek, in which students, alumni, and members of the university community are invited to participate.

The Greek Summer Reading Group started in 2002, the year after Professor Charles Pazdernik came to GVSU. In 2005, Professor Peter Anderson convened the Latin Group. Always informal and flexible, the groups have ranged from six to eight participants in Greek and a dozen or more in the Latin group. Anderson notes that in the Latin group, depending on student interest and ability, “We usually read myth stories,” but have been known to slip in the Latin translation of *Harry Potter* or poems. Pazdernik describes the readings in the Greek group as, “Often...selections from the *New Testament*, but also at different times Lysias and Marcus Aurelius. Lately it's been fun to read Plutarch's *Sayings of Spartan Women* — short (indeed, laconic), pithy remarks attributed

to Spartan wives and mothers of the ‘come home with your shield or on it!’ variety.”

These are truly labors of love for which the faculty members are not remunerated, but which sustain and expand their students’ language knowledge over the summer, as well as foster a strong sense of community that spills over into a thriving Facebook group, the annual Homerathon, and other events.

That sense of strong community was called upon in the summer of 2014. The Summer Greek Reading Group was interrupted when the organizer, Charles Pazdernik, sustained a debilitating spinal cord injury.

Classicists, however, are not easily deterred. On September 8, a group of Hellenists convened at Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital in downtown Grand Rapids in order to hold a special concluding meeting of the summer group.



(LEFT TO RIGHT) KENDALL FARKAS; KATHERINE BOYLE; JACLYN BINDER, '08; PROFESSOR PAZDERNIK; ABIGAIL DEHART; PROFESSOR CHARLES HAM, '06; MARK TEN HAAF; JUSTIN EBERT.