Introduction

Over the past few decades, pedagogical theory and practice have seen a shift away from a traditional, teacher-centered model of instruction to a more experiential, learner-focused model. One of the major fields that led this methodological shift was that of language instruction, particularly second language acquisition (SLA), as learners were encouraged to engage with their previous language acquisition experience and to reflect on how it could be useful to them in the future; yet, often the instruction of Latin has lagged behind such shifting methodology due, in part, to the fundamental difference in instructional objectives between ancient and modern language instruction: whereas modern language instruction focuses on day-to-day communication, Latin instruction aims at competency in reading and writing. Therefore, this article will address the potential use of experiential learning in Latin instruction, suggesting methods of implementation and outlining possible obstacles. First, a brief overview of current methods of experiential learning in SLA instruction will be given, the chief value of which will be as a comparison with the situation of Latin instruction. Then, a detailed discussion of the place of experiential learning in Latin instruction will be had, outlining its potential uses and pitfalls.

Learning and Experience

‘Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.’ This maxim from Benjamin Franklin -- itself perhaps a reference to an equally famous saying of Confucius³ -- bears a basic truth about learning that educators have universally acknowledged for centuries, but only recently has the concept taken a central position in pedagogical discussions centering on the constructivist methods of active learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, and service learning. At the heart of Franklin’s idea is the seminal relationship between learning and experience: one learns by doing, by actively participating in a learning activity; one needs to experience an event in order to begin to comprehend it. However, for as much as the relationship between experience and learning is accepted as foundational, it remains a relationship the transformative process of which has yet to be fully extrapolated. Scholarship, starting most prominently with the works of John Dewey and Maria Montessori in the early 20th century and filtering through to the ideas of Kurt Hahn and Carl Rogers later in the century, has begun to unpack this relationship, positing a process predicated on the construction of meaning out of previous knowledge and the application of this constructed meaning in unfamiliar situations.

More recently, David Kolb (1984) attempted to elucidate the processes behind the theories of experience and education. For Kolb, in order to learn an individual must go through a series of steps beginning with experience: 1) concrete experience, 2) reflective observation, 3) abstract conceptualization, and 4) active experimentation (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2011, p. 164). The key aspect of this process is the focus on critical reflection; without this, an individual cannot process the experience, conceptualizing it as an idea that can be packaged for reuse at a later date. Smith and Knapp, in their recent sourcebook on experiential education, sum up the importance of reflection to learning quite succinctly, stating: ‘When experiences are reflected upon, they are usually more meaningful, understanding is expanded, and later applications are more clearly considered. In other words, when students undergo a careful process of reflection, an event in life is often transformed into a meaningful and memorable experience that can be applied more easily to similar situations in the future’ (Smith and Knapp, 2011, p. 2). And so, although the field of experiential education is extremely fluid, the closest thing there is to a standard definition of experiential education comes from the Association for Experiential Education: ‘Experiential education is a methodology and philosophy in which educators purposefully engage learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values.’²

Against this theoretical background, experiential pedagogical practices have adopted an active type
of learning in which there is a shift away from a traditional model of instruction in which the instructor stands as the focal point to a more learner-focused approach that allows learners to construct knowledge linking prior experiences to present and future applications of the learned material. Language instruction is no exception to this general trend. In fact, one could say that second-language acquisition, or SLA, classrooms were among the first to implement experiential learning in instruction (Brown, 2000, p. 52). In SLA classrooms, an experiential approach to learning encouraged learners to develop the target language skills through the experience of working together on a specific, authentic task, rather than only examining linguistic elements of the target language (Lightbrown and Spada, 2006, pp. 38-48). Learners could then actively reflect on their own past acquisition experiences in both L1 and L2 contexts, could relate them to current L2 learning, and finally could focus them onto future experiences in the L2 context (Knutson, 2003, p. 53).

Like these modern SLA classrooms, Latin language instruction has also seen a rise in the emphasis on active learning, as can be seen in the appearance of works by Richard LaFleur (1998), John Gruber-Miller (2006), and Paul Distler (2000); the foundation of journals such as Teaching Classical Languages and the Journal of Classics Teaching; the appearance of numerous conference panels on active approaches to instruction; and even the creation of the increasingly popular Twitter hashtags ‘#latinteach’ and ‘#latinlangchat’. Yet, for all of the profound and progressive growth of active learning in Latin language instruction, the field as a whole has been slower than its modern SLA counterparts to adopt experiential learning models most likely due to two major reasons: 1) the continued emphasis on the acquisition of the ability to read -- and possibly write -- Latin literature as the main objective of Latin instruction, with less emphasis placed on the communicative skills of speaking and listening; and 2) the lack of the target culture of ancient Rome in which learners can perform authentic, communicative tasks and relate them to experiences they had in the L1 context, problems inherent in the study of ‘dead’ languages such as Latin - or Ancient Greek for that matter.

This essay will address the potential use of experiential learning in Latin language instruction, suggesting methods of implementation and outlining possible obstacles. First, a brief overview of current methods of experiential learning in SLA instruction will be given, the chief value of which will be as a comparison with the situation of Latin language instruction. Then, after this overview, an example of how I attempted to implement experiential learning in my teaching will be given, along with a discussion of its challenges and benefits.

**Experiential Learning in Second-Language Acquisition Instruction**

As mentioned above, experiential learning has been used in SLA instruction for a number of years. One of the basic reasons why experiential learning has enjoyed a modicum of success is that it is conducive to communicative experiences. Moreover, it is communicative experience and social activity that form the basis of successful SLA due to the fact that language learning necessarily involves active participation through taking risks, testing hypotheses, making plans and decisions, and making judgments about one’s own progress. Experiential learning plays into such a collaborative setting by allowing learners to share experiences both prior and present, to talk through different approaches to those experiences, and to reflect upon the multiple viewpoints and applications of those experiences. Learning experiences that are challenging, communicative, and meaningful, and that provide opportunities for student ownership and participation in their own language-learning, create an environment conducive to sustaining motivation to learn the target language (Knutson, 2003, p. 56; Brown, 2000; Hussin et al., 2000).

One popular method of designing lessons that incorporate both social participation and experiential learning is Koenderman’s model of instruction, in which experience-based, project-based, and problem-based learning are combined with elements of reflection, support, and transfer. Koenderman (2000) sets up an instructional model as a series of four phases: 1) the exposure phase, 2) the participation phase, 3) the internalization phase, and 4) the dissemination phase. In the exposure phase, learners are introduced to a topic or activity and are asked to reflect upon previous experience in the topic and to relate the topic to their personal learning goals. In the participation phase, the learners engage in the activity proper, building upon their previous knowledge base. The third step, the internalization phase, is aimed at personal reflection on the learning activity and prediction about how participation in the activity may or may not affect the learner’s future behavior or worldview. Finally, in the dissemination phase, the learners apply their learning, connecting it to the world outside of the classroom. Throughout all of these phases, learners are asked to reflect critically both on the content of the activity and on the metacognitive processes of their learning. Through such examination both of the connections between prior experience, current learning and future application and of the idiosyncratic methods by which the learner constructs knowledge, it is hoped that the learner 1) creates more connections between pieces of knowledge, increasing the possibility and ease of transfer from short-term to long-term memory and 2) gains greater comprehension of and confidence in the material and the learning process itself.

Perhaps it would be instructive to show how Koenderman’s model works on the ground in SLA instruction before moving to comparison of the use of such a model in Latin instruction. As many SLA classrooms are focused on the acquisition of another language for the purpose of functioning successfully in a the target language and, perhaps, another culture or location associated with the target language, a useful method of employing experiential learning in SLA instruction is to focus...
a lesson (or series of lessons) on how to perform particular, everyday tasks in the target language. For example, let’s picture how one could present a lesson on going to the grocery store that incorporates experiential learning.

In the exposure phase, learners are introduced to the topic of going to the grocery store. The instructor shows how and when the target language is used in the situation of the grocery store and gets learners to notice patterns and phrases that they can use. Learners are asked to share methods in which grocery shopping was done in their native culture and to identify commonalities between language and the act of shopping in both the target and native contexts. In the participation phase, learners engage in practice that begins with simple repetition, semi-scripted role-plays, information-gap activities and moves to spontaneous language practice. In essence, this phase incorporates the main, authentic activities of the lesson and gives learners a type of trial run for the real world. During the internalization phase, learners reflect upon their language use and how they are progressing in language acquisition. While the instructor plays a background role, learners work together to work out answers on their own, taking responsibility for their language acquisition. Then, learners engage in one-on-one discussions with the instructor, answering questions about their own language-learning, how they feel it progressed, and how they feel they contributed to their own progress. Finally, in the dissemination phase, the learners go out of the classroom and actually take their learning into the real world – going to the grocery store, purchasing items, and communicating in the target language the entire time. After doing this, learners reflect on their experience and share those reflections with their classmates, drawing strength from commonalities and learning about their metacognitive processes from differences.

So, to review, the foundational relationship between experiential learning and SLA instruction is one based on communication and social learning. Learners consider prior experiences, participate in social activities in which they engage with the target language, reflect upon their learning in order to conceptualize both the content and the metacognitive process of language acquisition, and apply that knowledge to real world experiences.

### Experiential Learning in Latin Language Instruction

Turning away from modern language instruction, let us now consider the implementation of experiential learning in Latin language instruction. Latin language instruction presents unique difficulties for the implementation of experiential learning models such as the types used in SLA instruction. As mentioned earlier, the basic problems facing Latin instructors considering experiential learning models such as the aforementioned Koenderman model – or any other social learning models, for that matter – is that the goal of Latin instruction is not communicative in nature and that access to communicative tasks with native speakers in the target culture is impossible. Therefore, limited possibilities exist for application-based, experiential learning activities such as my example of the lesson on grocery stores.

Still, some Latin instructors have attempted to create a type of focus on communicative actions, presenting Latin as a living language that ought to be spoken, heard, written and read as one would communicate in English, French, Mandarin or Farsi. From this ideal, a new spoken Latin movement has arisen, aimed at attracting more learners to the use of instruction is a four-week unit on Latin elegy I designed and used in an informal, summer undergraduate reading class on the intermediate level. In addition to the grammatical and syntactical objectives typical of a Latin class, I expanded the objectives to include more experiential learning: 1) At the end of the class, learners will be able to identify commonalities and differences between Roman and modern conceptions of love; 2) to critique their own prior thoughts about love through the experience of the viewpoint of Roman elegy; 3) to create an elegiac poem using either the Roman or modern conception of love. The use of objectives higher on Bloom’s taxonomy (e.g., create, critique) was designed to encourage learners to think deeply about the content and their feelings about it, feelings based in prior experience. The method of instructional delivery I chose for these objectives was Koenderman’s model.

First, in the exposure phase, I used activities focused on the activation of prior knowledge and experience: 1) a session-long brainstorming activity on what learners thought love was and how one communicated it; for
this session, we used video and audio clips from popular shows and songs describing love; 2) a transition to love poetry, including analysis of various examples of modern love poetry; and 3) small group work in which learners shared prior experiences they had had regarding love and love poetry. At the end of the session, the learners had created a broad picture of the modern conception of love, a conception built on their own prior experiences.

With this background set, during the next session I introduced the topic of Roman love elegy through a brief introductory lecture. Then I guided the learners through Catullus 5 as an example, breaking learners into small groups to translate and bringing the class back together to walk through interpretations of the poem. The basic objective of this class was to introduce learners to typical forms, tropes and vocabulary of Latin elegy, Roman conceptions of love and sexuality, and the larger, more socio-political roles of elegiac poetry. As such, this session began Koenderman’s second, participation phase, and over the next two weeks, the sessions looked very much like traditional Latin classes, focusing on translation, readings from scholarship on love and sexuality, and discussions on interpretation. The goal of these weeks was to solidify learner understanding of Roman elegiac poetry and conceptions of love. At the end of the two weeks, learners completed a summative evaluation in the form of a written quiz in order to check for this understanding.

Finally, as a capstone to the class, learners were asked to compose an original elegiac poem rooted either in modern or Roman conceptions of love, an activity correlating to Koenderman’s dissemination phase. The goal of the activity was both to ensure learner comprehension of Latin grammar/syntax and elegiac style/tropes and to provide an avenue for higher-level thinking skills. By activating higher order skills, the activity required learners to invest themselves more deeply and to strengthen the connections made between content and experience in their memory, resulting in longer retention.

At the end of the unit, upon reflection, I made the following quantitative and qualitative conclusions about the implementation of experiential learning in the session:

1. Whereas the effect on grammatical and syntactical knowledge was negligible, learner retention of knowledge requiring synthesis and application was noticeably higher. Learners provided better, more thorough answers to open-ended questions on elegy.

2. Social collaboration and comfort between learners was greatly heightened. Learners formed friendships outside of sessions at a higher rate than in my traditional classes, most likely due towards the emphasis on sharing experience in a collaborative setting.

3. Learner retention of knowledge seemed to have persisted for a longer interval. Nearly a year after the sessions, I still received messages from learners regarding modern events that reminded them of particular tropes in Roman elegy and their prior experiences.

And so, to conclude, in my unit on Roman elegy, learners engaged in both experiential and social learning while the content remained based in authentic Latin texts. Prior knowledge was activated both on the logical and emotional levels and was called into use for present learning activities. Then, learners reflected on both content and learning process, finally transferring their knowledge from learning to application through composition. Through means such as this, learners in Latin language classrooms - and perhaps even those in more formal classroom settings - can be provided with the same types of learning experiences as learners in other SLA contexts. The vitality of authentic Latin is maintained and learners are able to construct their own learning through active, experiential instructional methods. Although social learning and communication in the target language is not maintained in the example of Latin elegy as it was in other SLA instruction, it need not dissuade instructors from incorporating instruction of this type into their Latin classrooms. In my example, communication in Latin is not the main goal of instruction, as it is for SLA. However, the main components of experiential learning – activation of prior knowledge and active, engaged reflection on the content and learning process – are maintained as seminal components of the lesson, providing an example for how experiential learning can be implemented in Latin language instruction.

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References


1 Confutius’ famous rendering of this concept is: ‘I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.’

2 For further information about the association, see www.aee.org.

3 This statement, in and of itself, is a gross oversimplification of the issue of constructivist pedagogy. Debates between constructivists and ‘traditionalists’ have been had for decades and continue into the present day. Currently, the discussions between the proponents of the two positions seems to center on the practicality of constructivism. Both sides agree that, in theory, constructivism is an effective pedagogical model; however, traditionalists maintain that no research has been put forth by constructivists that proves practical implementation of the model has a substantial effect on learning outcomes. The literature on this debate is massive and is beyond the scope of this essay. However, the article of Kirschners, Sweller and Clark (2006) and a response to it by Schmidt, Loyans, van Gog and Paas (2007) is a good place to start. Full references to these articles can be found in the references at the end of this essay.

4 Sometimes this sort of lesson is termed a contextualized language lesson and is broken into three steps that loosely resemble Koederman’s phases: 1) presentation, 2) practice and 3) production (Parrish, 2004, p. 55).

5 There are multiple methods of incorporating Koederman’s internalization phase into SLA instruction. One is the Silent Way, developed by Gattegno (1972), a model that promotes the idea that learners should take responsibility for their own language acquisition and should be taught not only language content, but also metacognitive methods of learning the language. Another method is Community Language Learning (CLL), developed from work by Curran (1972), which is a based in the theories of experiential learning. Vygotsky’s social learning, and Carl Rogers’ affective learning. Yet another method is Suggestopedia, developed by Lozanov (1978), which introduced the idea that students should be relaxed and open to experiencing the language, even to the point of taking on a new identity as a successful language-learner.