

The Tirones Project

by Mary Pendergraft

“There is a shortage of certified Latin teachers: Please spread the word!” This plea is the title of a recent article in *Amphora*, a publication of the Society for Classical Studies (Ancona & Durkin, 2015). Here the authors cite government statistics, reports from the placement service of the American Classical League, and personal experience to demonstrate that the demand for Latin teachers – whether or not certified – outstrips the supply. As they point out, this lack of teachers at the pre-collegiate level does not bode well for the health of our discipline.

The problem of teacher supply is greater than this, of course. Not only Latin teachers, but teachers in general, are in short supply. Here in the U.S., California alone predicted that, although schools would need 21,500 new teachers for 2015, the state would issue only 15,000 new teaching credentials (Rich, 2015). Similar problems are reported around the world (Bruneforth, Gagnon, & Wallet, 2009); for instance, in Jamaica (Bastick, 2002), South Africa (Xaba, 2003), Sweden (Lindqvist, Nordänger, & Carlsson, 2014), and of course, the U.K. (Boffey, 2015). The factors that lead to these shortages are many; an important one is the high rate of attrition of teachers early in their careers.

A recent U.S. report states that of teachers with one to three years of experience, seven percent left teaching in 2012-13 (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014); an earlier study found that fully 46% of teachers had left after five years (Ingersoll

2003). Because in general teachers become more effective with experience, students who are taught by a succession of new teachers, one replacing another, are not well served (Brill & McCartney, 2008). Once again, the reasons for leaving are complex – low pay, low prestige, changes in family situation, difficult teaching environments – a fact that suggests that more than one response would be necessary in order to remedy the problem to any large extent (McCreight, 2000). One strategy in particular, though, has shown itself to be particularly valuable in retaining new teachers, and that is a strong mentoring program (Villar and Strong, 2007; Ingersoll & Strong 2011).

The Tirones Project emerged in 2012 in order to address the attrition of novice Latin teachers, and we quickly realized that providing supportive outreach to young teachers would be our first priority. We also realized that to replicate best practices in mentoring programs was not possible for us. Highly effective programs of this sort involve school- or district-wide ongoing commitments that include in-building mentors who are provided release time to spend with their novice colleagues (Johnson, 2007).

We, in contrast, are members of the National Committee for Latin and Greek, a standing committee of the American Classical League and an open membership group that includes representatives from many regional organizations. We have no staff and a small budget. For many years, we have made available book grants to

elementary and middle school teachers (grades K-8) and grants for activities related to the National Latin Teacher Recruitment Week. New initiatives under the Tirones umbrella have included a series of free webinars presented by master teachers on a variety of topics. Initial offerings for the fall semester have been “Technology Tools for the 21st Century Latin Teacher: Teaching Latin Literature,” and “How to Make Latin Prose Easier to Read: Techniques for Simplifying Complicated Syntax.” Recordings will be posted online.¹ Because participants are not limited geographically, these sessions have the ability to connect colleagues with one another over great distances.

Tirones has also begun coordinating sessions at professional meetings. The inaugural panel of local teachers from both schools and colleges spoke at the Boulder, Colorado, meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South in April 2015. Their papers will appear shortly in CAMWS’ online journal *Teaching Classical Languages*.² In June 2015, Connecticut teachers – again, teachers at both schools and college – led a discussion during the Institute of the American Classical League at the University of Connecticut. In both cases participants stressed that mentoring can be a formal arrangement, as in the situation of supervising graduate student teaching assistants, or one that arises serendipitously. In every case the relationship between mentor and student has the potential to be

reciprocal, with each party both providing and receiving knowledge and support. In fact, it was suggested that mentoring may be better called co-mentoring to reflect this important truth.

As in the case of webinars, social media offers many opportunities for constructive engagement with a large community of colleagues who share interests and concerns. Integrating our activities into the networks that are already in place is an important task for us going forward.

In fact, a number of very different projects in a variety of fields have explored harnessing the power of the internet to support teachers: undergraduate technology mentors for faculty members (Chuang, Thompson, & Schmidt, 2003); mentoring for teachers in rural areas (Rogers, 2014); or comprehensive district-wide programs like the Beginning and Establishing Teachers Association of Queensland, Australia.³ Thus, our decision to take advantage of the possibilities provided by electronic communications is part of a growing trend.

At the same time, our conversations have sparked interest in a more formal arrangement for Latin teachers in the California Classical Association-South. It began as still another collaboration between a school teacher, Kathleen Robinson, and a university professor, Katherine Chew. They have begun enrolling volunteer mentors from the Association's membership and are developing procedures to pair them with newer colleagues who are eager to learn from their experience.

While funding and implementing state-of-the-art, face-to-face mentoring initiatives for Latin teachers is impractical for us, our experiences with Tirones makes clear that informal and long-distance interactions have value and merit. Each interaction, moreover, has the potential to spark ideas for additional ways to support one another in our teaching. And by supporting one another, we are serving the cause of classical education for our students and the students of the future.

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¹Information about NCLG is available from the webpage www.promotelatin.org

²<http://tcl.camms.org/>

³www.beta.asn.au