

Research Article

‘Caecilius Est Internet’: A Study of Year 7 Latin Beginners’ Perspectives on the use of an Online Chat function and Breakout Rooms using the *Cambridge Latin Course*

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Abstract

During the school closures in the beginning of 2021 many students and teachers found themselves making use of new remote educational technology. The use of an online chat function and breakout rooms became routine. Using observations during lessons, anonymised chat logs and a student questionnaire it is shown that there are positive outcomes for student voice and inclusion when using these features. The possibility for integration of a chat function in the physical classroom, to benefit students who are more confident in messaging than speaking, is briefly considered although a proper study of this was not possible at the time.

Key words: online learning, Latin, chat boxes, breakout rooms, student voice

Introduction

At the time of this research in early 2021, there was a lack of useful scholarship on teaching Latin in the online sphere. While some articles do exist, such as Shelton (2000) and Mead (2004), many of them are now outdated thanks to the major leaps made during the pandemic. They were written at a time when Zoom was merely a verb and the extensive offering of Google Classroom was mostly unknown.

The students concerned were a Year 7 class in a large all-girls comprehensive. According to government statistics, there are 1188 on roll. 4.6% of these were eligible for free school meals, well below the national average. The school is also in an area in the least deprived decile of the country according to the CDRC Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019. The school offers Latin at GCSE and A Level, Ancient History at GCSE, Classical Civilisation at A Level, and Greek as an after-school club. The school’s Attainment 8 score is 59.2, placing it well above the local authority and national averages of 51.1 and 46.7 respectively. It is undoubtedly in a privileged position; however, the findings are still valuable to understand the broad themes of the chat and breakout room functions in the online Latin classroom.

Each Year 7 form group studies Latin in a carousel, taking part in a short course in the language over 13 weeks before switching to another subject. The class in this research was of mixed prior attainment. None of them had studied Latin formally before, so my teaching would be their first introduction to the language.

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In the lessons students were taught using Book 1 of the *Cambridge Latin Course* (Cambridge School Classics Project, 1998). They learned some basic question words, a few words of Latin vocabulary, and the difference between the nominative and accusative. The use of different forms of communication, namely the breakout and chat box functions, will be considered alongside the implications for further online Latin tuition.

Literature review

There is a growing number of articles which deal with online education. Many of them started to appear at the end of the 2019/20 academic year under the first international COVID-19 lockdowns and continued to the time of this research. However, the articles relating to online Classics teaching are increasingly out of date as technology expands with platforms such as Google Classroom and Microsoft OneNote. Vu and Fadde (2013) considered university-level education which, while helpful, did not entirely match up to this research. Nonetheless, the information available is useful, although it shows the relative lack of information and the potential for development in this field in the future.

Background to Classics teaching online

There are a number of articles about learning Latin online, varying in age and approach to teaching. Shelton (2000) provides a useful, albeit dated, source of information. This article was written in a time before dedicated online services for remote learning such as Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams would become commonplace. The lessons Shelton taught were entirely asynchronous, whereas my own lessons were taught live. Both synchronous and asynchronous forms of online teaching, while sharing some similarities, are very different by nature and require

different considerations. In particular, the focus on the chat function and breakout rooms clearly does not occur in asynchronous learning.

However, Shelton's research does highlight some benefits which are still true today. In particular, the possibility for students to lead their own learning with online research. In the physical classroom without devices, students are limited to the information they have in their books, what they already know, and what they can ask the teacher. Considering this, nowadays many learners have laptops or phones on them with which to access this information. This is becoming less of a particular benefit of online teaching and more often the accepted norm. In the online sphere the entirety of the internet is at their fingertips (Shelton, 2000). This plays a key consideration in lesson planning as a potential positive over in-person teaching.

More recently, Lister and Seranis (2005), Mead (2004) and Walden (2019) discuss the Cambridge School Classics Project (CSCP) online tuition platform. There are a number of dissimilarities: the CSCP online programme can be an asynchronous or synchronous platform for teaching Latin, while my own lessons were purely synchronous; it caters for many age groups, while my study only concerns Year 7; and finally, the CSCP programme is optional, whereas my own class was undertaking Latin as a compulsory part of their curriculum. Lister and Seranis' (2005) study also included a teacher in the physical classroom with the students at all times, which was simply not possible at the time of research. However, these articles still provide a good resource for understanding and contextualising the subject, especially considering that they utilised the same textbook, the *Cambridge Latin Course*, and some of the same resources.

As the lessons would be delivered via video conferencing software, it was important to consider the implications of this versus other forms of online education. Walden (2019) and Mead (2004) highlight the benefits of this method for delivering lessons, noting the benefits for building a rapport with the students and how it can more closely replicate the physical classroom experience. Lister and Seranis (2005) also highlight the benefit of group work using computers, noting that by nature virtual learning can be lonely. Yet, it also brought up how computers can be a benefit for students, with 54% of boys and 50% of girls responding that it was a major attraction (Lister and Seranis, 2005, p. 13). This has implications for the future integration of the findings of this article into the physical classroom. However, it must be remembered that the use of computers in the classroom has changed greatly since 2005. For example, schools are increasingly making use of devices in classrooms, some of them buying or mandating laptops or similar. This means that teaching with computers is now not an unusual bonus but a part of everyday teaching.

Online teaching generally

In order to begin to understand the student experience during online teaching it is important to consider some older research that was conducted over the past decade. Bair and Bair's (2011) article, 'Paradoxes of Online Teaching', is particularly useful. While the groups studied were undergraduate students during a time that online teaching was an option rather than a necessity, many of the themes which it explored are still true in the secondary compulsory online classroom. In particular, the findings about the importance of 'a sense of community in the online class show the importance of communication methods (Bair and Bair, 2011, p. 2). This article particularly stresses the thin line that the online teacher has to walk

in order to achieve 'a structured and systematic, not merely social' form of community which is conducive to learning (Bair and Bair, 2011, p. 3). If synchronous online tuition is too structured and impersonal, it loses all of its benefits for spontaneity and immediate response. If it is too social, it merely becomes a chat room. This is a balance to keep. This article also found that in the online sphere, due to the ubiquity of communicative apparatuses such as the chat function, students tended to adopt a more casual tone than in the formal classroom (Bair and Bair, 2011, p. 7). These findings are in line with those found in this article.

Student voice

Lewis (2019) and Vu and Fadde (2013) provide useful insights for the implications of online teaching for student voice. Lewis discusses the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) in Classics specifically. The use of VLEs, an online platform for sharing files and collaborative working, has become widespread since the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic and continues to this day. Lewis utilised this as an optional extra, which is the case in many classrooms nowadays. However, it was a necessity during my research due to the national lockdown. Lewis found that some of the quieter students felt more willing to contribute online. In fact, one of them made the most in-depth comments on a Latin set text out of the entire class, which they would not do in-person (Lewis, 2019). This has significant implications for inclusion and student voice, where less confident students feel able to contribute.

Vu and Fadde's findings are similar (2013). Their study looked at the use of the chat function during live and distance learning with a group of graduate students, not a school setting as my own. This article found that students were able to make helpful comments without disrupting the lecturer, but also that the type of comments made may not have occurred during in-person tuition (Vu and Fadde, 2013). This shows the benefits of the chat facility for engagement with learning. Despite the difference, many of the findings aligned with my study.

More recently, a Times Educational Supplement editorial provided some useful information in the area of communication in the online sphere (TES, 27 March 2020). It highlights that digital communication may empower the less confident students, which is a key outcome of these findings. However, it also highlights the importance of establishing 'netiquette', undefined rules for interaction online, so that this new confidence does not turn into disruption. These two areas were particularly relevant for my research.

Overall, it becomes clear that while the traditional classroom setting suits some types of learners, especially more talkative and sociable ones, the online sphere may open the opportunity for others to engage. Many students will have been conversing online through social media: Ofcom reports that just over half of 5–15 year-olds use social media, rising to 87% in the 12–15 age group; similarly, 64% of 8–11 year-olds use messaging services and 91% of 12–15s (Ofcom, 2021). This method of communication is familiar to a good majority of students in a secondary school setting. The editorial also suggests the opportunity for SEND inclusion. Students who may feel uncomfortable speaking in front of the entire class are able to engage in discussion without using their voice (TES, 2020). This is in line with Lewis' (2019) findings, which were discussed earlier.

However, there are caveats. Establishing behavioural standards is important in the online classroom, even if they had already been set in the physical sphere beforehand (TES, 2020).

This is particularly evident in the chat function in my lessons, which was new to students in an educational setting. Some of them pushed the boundaries in this new space. Students even began policing behaviour themselves; informing one particular student, anonymised as Jane, that she was being disrespectful. Later, in the questionnaire at the end of the sequence of lessons, two students raised concerns that some behaviour in the chat was a concern.

Studies conducted during the pandemic

Considering the age of some articles concerning online Classics teaching, it is pertinent to look towards more recent studies which may fall outside of the subject. Of these Jeffrey and Bauer (2020) and Yates *et al.* (2020) are particularly informative. The former article explores the student experience of chemistry undergraduates in the US while the latter concerns high school students in New Zealand. Neither study is conducted in the UK, and so various external factors are different to my own research. Equally, the undergraduate experience of teaching is by nature different from secondary, although the broad themes of online tuition are similar. The New Zealand study also involved mixed-sex classes and older students, mainly in years 12 and 13. This would create different perspectives to my Year 7 all-girls class. However, many of themes explored in that article carried over into the findings of this study, as will be discussed later.

Jeffrey and Bauer's (2020) findings involved asking students to compare their experience of online teaching to previous in-person classes. This approach was not appropriate for the study of the chat and breakout room functions in the Year 7 Latin class, as the memories of this time may not be reliable first-hand accounts due to the length of the U.K. national lockdown. Jeffrey and Bauer's (2020) accounts were filled out at least two weeks after the fact. Their study found interpersonal exchanges between students become very rare in the virtual sphere. Despite this relative paucity of interaction, students in the online classroom do adopt a more casual attitude in their interactions in the chat box. The study also found that student engagement dropped significantly in online teaching (Jeffrey and Bauer, 2020). Finding ways of increasing student engagement is key to online teaching, and this informed the decision to carry out this study.

The wide scope of Yates *et al.*'s (2020) article is useful, but not easily repeatable. Their study involved a survey with a large sample size across many schools with a significant prize incentive for taking part, a new Sony PlayStation 5. However, the lack of primary observations meant that all findings were based on self-reported answers from the students, which may colour the results. One of the primary findings of this student survey was that those who preferred online collaboration had teachers who used technology to facilitate small group work (Yates *et al.*, 2020). This shows the importance of the breakout room as a means of increasing student engagement.

Research question

It is well established that students often struggle with aspects of online teaching and ameliorating this is key. Studying as to whether students prefer to communicate verbally or in the chat box, and secondarily whether students work better individually or in breakout rooms, is an important part of considering how to best deliver online tuition. This is particularly relevant in the teaching of Latin, which is naturally improved by pupil questioning and feedback.

Methodology

There are three primary sources of evidence for this research: my own observations, based on how students seemed to get on with tasks and how they responded moment-by-moment; three chatlogs which were saved from the lessons to survey how students interacted with this function; a questionnaire taken at the start of the last lesson with these students, which allows for gauging the overall opinions of their experience. All students' names have been changed.

It is important to remember the limitations of this study: it only involves one all-girls Year 7 Latin class. It is not possible to infer how different age groups or a mixed or all-boys cohort might respond to these actions. Alongside this, the policies of the school required students to have their cameras on, which may have affected engagement. Despite this, the findings point to a tendency that is found in other studies, such as that of Bair and Bair (2011) and Jeffrey and Bauer's (2020) discussion of the informal register found in online classrooms.

Planning

A scheme of work already existed for the Year 7 Latin classes: following it allowed for relative parity of experience with the other cohorts. However, this had to be adapted to the online sphere. Limitations included a lack of breakout room function during the first lessons, as it was an optional extra for the school which had not been acquired. This meant that smaller grouped tasks were impossible and exercises had to be duly adapted, making use of the chat box and verbal communication (otherwise called the 'hand-up function'). This made attempts to use the chat box as a whiteboard replacement difficult as students became more eager to use it.

Hand up function: benefits and drawbacks

In the first lesson, students were encouraged to use the raise hand function on Google Meet, with the chat as an alternative if they were not able to use a microphone. This was used as it was closer to the physical classroom experience of communication. However, very quickly I began to notice some problems with this method. Firstly, students would not always have a microphone with which to speak. Certain students were at an advantage if asked for verbal responses. This was not desirable, especially considering the possibility that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may have limited access to such resources. It may also be the case that students may be in noisy areas during the lesson, hindering their ability to answer. Finally, microphone quality was extremely variable. One student who was particularly keen to contribute, Jane, was advised not to unmute herself due to the extreme feedback from her microphone. While there were certainly benefits, students may be able to express themselves more clearly verbally than textually; it was not a clear-cut case.

Chat function: benefit of wide range of students answering

With this in mind, verbal answers were eschewed in favour of the chat box. This required reminding, alongside specifically signposting when verbal answers were required. This conveyed several benefits: firstly, a wider range of students would answer my questions in the chat as opposed to using their microphones. This implies a positive for inclusion. This is confirmed in the questionnaire answers. 23 students responded, in which five students said they regularly used the 'hand-up' function and nine said they only used it 'sometimes'. On the other hand, every

respondent said they used the chat function to some degree; 16 said they used it regularly and nine said only 'sometimes'. This also therefore has significant implications for monitoring engagement. It is possible to get a wide range of responses to questions immediately without having to allot each student a time to speak: this speeds up the process of online teaching as questions can be asked with rapid-fire responses from the students. One useful practice involved regularly asking the students to put their answers into the chat without sending the message and then to have them all send at the same time. This worked especially well for simple questions and self-assessing confidence with a topic and was utilised effectively in a lesson on Roman food where students were asked for their reactions as they watched in order to assess their engagement.

These practices did not only benefit the teacher; they also had implications for the student side of the online experience. They could ask questions discreetly without disrupting the flow of the lesson, which was logged in the chat for times set aside for answering questions. This was in line with Vu and Fadde's (2013) suggestion about the same. If the student did not want the question to be seen by the entire class, either in the chat or with the hand up function, they could also privately message or email the teacher, although this was not a subject of my study. This therefore not only has positive implications for effective content delivery, but also for ensuring that students are comfortable and confident in online classes.

These findings are borne out in the answers to the questionnaire. 18 students said that they felt more comfortable using the chat function rather than putting their hand up to speak. 18 also said that they did not wait for others to use the chat function before speaking. It should be noted that these 18 were not necessarily the same students, although there is some overlap. This is compared to nine students who consistently did not wait for others to speak before using the hand up function, a further nine who would only occasionally feel comfortable to speak before others, and five who did not feel comfortable speaking before others at all. This comparison should not be overlooked, and it demonstrates clearly there was a trend that the chat function was the best method of communication for inclusion.

The chat function can also therefore help support in building a positive relationship with the students. Fewer students were happy to speak verbally, while almost all utilised the chat function to speak. The other teacher in these lessons observed how quickly rapport was built with the class in the first lesson and this positive relationship was evidenced in the chat logs from later lessons. Walden makes this same observation in her study (Walden, 2019). Of particular note is the students' use of emojis. Students often used this to denote a particular mood or expression in the chat box, in lieu of being able to use vocal intonation. One student, Susan, was particularly proficient with their usage. For example, in the sixth lesson the students were asked what they noticed about the guests at a Roman dinner party. Susan wrote: 'the ladies had their hair back very posh'. The use of emojis here emphasises the word posh and provides the student with the ability to give a more defined delivery. While watching a video on types of Roman food, the students were asked to give their immediate responses into the chat. Susan again used emojis in this element to express her emotive response: '👀'. This gives a very visual, and perhaps more insightful, representation of her opinion.

However, this comfortability and confidence did come with drawbacks. The register that the students used in the chat dropped significantly as the sequence of lessons progressed. For example,

the same Susan at end of the sequence of lessons put: 'Byeeeeeeeeeee cya in like 4 months THANK YOU'. During the first two lessons the classes were generally quiet and formal, although as they became more comfortable their vocabulary would become more casual and behavioural issues would emerge. As the online classroom becomes the primary form of social interaction for the students, especially with classmates with whom they would not usually converse outside of schooltime, their language becomes less formal. Bair and Bair (2011) noticed a similar theme in their discussion of the undergraduate student experience. This happened despite the fact that students were aware that the chat could be read by the teacher. It could potentially also distract other students as they might spend time responding to these messages, either positively or negatively.

Potential disruption may be alleviated by firm expectation setting at the start of the online teaching, as suggested by a TES article (TES, 2020). Often behavioural expectations can be overlooked due to the setting, but they are equally important as in the physical classroom. The different form of classroom may create a mental disconnect from those expectations. However, it is also the case that some students might be quieter in this setting.

The students would sometimes police themselves. At one stage the students reprimanded another for making an inappropriate comment in the chat which initially had gone unnoticed by both teachers. This level of hyper-communication seemed to have been made possible by the chat function, where the students could talk to whomever they wanted in the class whenever they wanted; it should be closely monitored as in my opinion it was not ideal for behaviour to be managed by students themselves. In the questionnaire two students commented how they wished more appropriate language had been used in the chat. It may be best practice to only allow the use of the chat function at specific times and for specific purposes.

Breakout rooms

The ability to put students into smaller groups to complete tasks is facilitated by the 'breakout room'. This function splits students into smaller video calls with each other which can then be visited by the administrator (the teacher). This is an important part of online teaching as it is possible to recreate group tasks. Lister and Seranis (2005) highlight the possibility of loneliness and the importance of group work during online teaching. However, it must be noted that there are several drawbacks which do not exist in the physical classroom. Students are not able to read updated instructions; instead, the teacher has to individually visit each breakout room or put them back together into the main call. During the sequence of lessons taught in this research, the pupils were encouraged to go back to the teacher in the main call if they had a problem. It was important to visit each group regularly to ensure that they are on track. Pupils often encountered problems which they did not recognise, and they are unable to interact easily with the teacher when in this individualised setting.

Despite this drawback, the use of breakout rooms has significant benefits for the personalisation of teaching. Without breakout rooms, it is only possible to check individual students' work during all class discussion or if it is submitted at the end. This makes giving advice to pupils problematic: it can either be given to the whole group or individually via message or email.

The ability to use breakout rooms was only provided in the third lesson of the sequence of lessons. This was a new concept to these students in an educational setting, and so it was important to ensure

that time was spent setting expectations. For the first time during their synchronous online learning experience the students would be in control of the proceedings. The teacher(s) could not be present in every call, and so it was important to consider ways to ensure that students were working through the entire period. In the sequence of lessons, students were reminded that both teachers would be able to drop into the breakout rooms whenever they chose to encourage them to keep on task. Despite this, the unsupervised nature of breakout rooms still led to students taking the opportunity to have an informal break. The Year 7 carousel class was generally keen to make the most of the feature educationally. However, a Year 9 Ancient Civilisations class would often chat with each other and need gentle reminders to complete the classwork.

However, the student-led collaborative nature of these rooms also conveyed many benefits for the online classroom. Students continued to learn how to specialise and work as a team, soft skills which can sometimes be left undeveloped during periods of virtual tuition. In my questionnaire I found that nine students said that they helped others but did not present or write answers, seven said they wrote down answers, and a further seven said that they presented their screen for others. No students said that they did not work in breakout rooms, although this may be because they knew the teacher would be looking at the questionnaire. 14 students said they found it easier to work in breakout rooms than individually, which highlights the importance of ensuring some kind of collaborative work during online teaching.

The scale of the breakout rooms should be considered. While all-class discussions are good for teaching general concepts and quickly assessing the confidence of the entire group, this context does not suit every learner. In the questionnaire of 23 students, 22 students said that they felt comfortable contributing in breakout rooms, compared to 20 in all-class discussions. While this may seem like a negligible difference, it can mean that the use of breakout rooms is an important bridge to reach the quieter members of the group. Of the students who said they were not comfortable speaking in all-class discussions, one said that they helped others, one said that they wrote down their answers, and the other said they presented their screen. Therefore, it can be seen that students who do not feel confident contributing in larger discussions may take the lead in smaller group work. This is in line with Lewis' (2019) suggestion that the online sphere allows for students to take on different roles and authority than they might in the physical classroom or in other forms of tuition, and it shows the importance of changing lesson formats during online teaching.

The answers to the questionnaire also show the level of student engagement was high throughout, which did not align with the trend that Jeffrey and Bauer (2020) noted. Their study found that engagement dropped during online teaching, as opposed to in-person. The reason for my finding may be due to the smaller and more personal nature of the classes, or the compulsory element of turning up to these online classes compared to the more optional nature of undergraduate lecture attendance.

The high level of engagement was also borne out in observation. In the chat log from the third lesson, immediately after breakout rooms were used for the first time, the pupils were asked what they thought of them. Students responded: 'the breakout rooms are actually really fun', 'YH I RLLY LIKE IT', 'The breakout rooms are like going off into groups at school'. Students both found them enjoyable and appreciated the pedagogical benefits of their usage. At the end of the survey students were asked to add any recommendations or comments they might have about breakout rooms in the future. One student said, 'breakout rooms are really

fun'; another, 'Sharing of course is the best bit'. This highlights the importance of this space for improving the student experience.

The social benefits cannot be overstated. During the national lockdown during which this research was conducted, students could often feel lonely and these rare opportunities for less formal, relatively unsupervised, group work with their friends were clearly enjoyed. Outside of this context, it also helps to build a rapport between the students and the teacher, which can be very helpful for learning.

Future implications

Ultimately, considering the observations and answers to the questionnaire, it is clear that closer integration of the chat function and breakout rooms into lesson planning are net positives for student communication and engagement. There are also implications for integration in the physical classroom. When asked about this in the questionnaire, 14 students responded that they would like some form of chat function in in-person classes, opening up interesting new avenues for research. Of those respondents, six would not consider themselves talkative people according to question 15, 'do you consider yourself a talkative person', out of a total of ten who would not consider themselves talkative. This implies that such a feature may be able to give a voice to students who are not as comfortable contributing out loud in class as others.

In terms of assessing the success of the sequence of lessons, five out of 23 respondents rated their confidence with the language between four – five out of five, with a further 11 self-reporting a three. Having been asked to translate the sentence *Metella est in atrio*, a phrase which contains all of the key Latin concepts that they had been introduced to by that point in time, 12 gave the correct answer. four replaced *Metella* with 'mother', and all but one got the sense that *Metella*/the mother is in a room. This shows significant promise, considering the short nature of the sequence of lessons and limited scope. five students said that they would like to take more Latin later in school, 15 said 'maybe', and only three said 'no'. This is a good percentage of potential uptake considering the remote nature of the classes, utilising emerging methods of teaching.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the students' experience of the chat function and breakout rooms in the Year 7 class was largely positive. These features allowed the teacher to overcome many of the problems presented by online teaching, evidenced both in these findings and the other literature: a lack of collaborative work, communicative isolation, and a relative distance in relationship from the students.

Students seemed to be able to communicate comfortably with one another, improved by the promotion of the chat function and the use of breakout rooms. The implications of this for inclusion are important. Students who would otherwise not feel comfortable engaging were able to contribute and take on different positions in the online sphere. They also allowed for new opportunities: rapid-fire answers to questions without speaking over one another, non-disruptive contributions, and the opportunity for group work in the online sphere. The fact that students felt especially comfortable answering questions into the chat is encouraging, and that a majority said they would like an equivalent in the physical classroom merits further investigation.

There are some nascent implications for the future of in-person teaching. Even nearly 20 years ago Mead (2004) and Lister and Seranis (2006) were making the case for online integration to

overcome issues in the physical classroom, such as a lack of specialist Classics teachers available to schools. I would suggest that my findings also highlight the important of online integration not just as a replacement for physical teaching, but as a means to improve and work side-by-side with in-person tuition. While this may not be possible without all students having access to a device at all times (and that comes with its own problems), it may also come with many benefits.

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