

## **Teaching Latin Literature Using Interactive Whiteboard Technology**

**by Steve Hunt**

### **Background and rationale**

I am Head of classics in Freman College, a mixed state comprehensive school in rural Hertfordshire, about twenty miles south of Cambridge. Freman is an Upper School, and takes students in at Year 9. Latin has been taught at Freman for around thirty years, and has been zealously protected against national trends away from Latin by a succession of head teachers. Freman is unusual among state schools in the UK today in offering Latin to all its students in Year 9. Timetable allocation varies according to the particular ability band in which a student is set at the start of Year 9: suffice to say that up to the point when the students choose Latin for GCSE in Years 10 and 11, they have had differing amounts of study time according to their banding group.

This, then, is the first reason why I have used an interactive whiteboard and a translation. They enable students of different levels of exposure to Latin teaching to access original Latin texts with less difficulty than before. The experiences of students in my own school may be reflected in the experiences students have in sixth form colleges and university courses, and even those who learn using the Cambridge Online Latin Project. My method may be seen as a way of improving teaching and learning for the sort of students we find today in our classes, who have previously experienced a mixed curricular provision of Latin.

Teaching literature at A-level is difficult, partly because there are so many different objectives. There are some who might argue that Latin literature, particularly verse literature, is pretty much inaccessible to our students, and should not be under examination. However, I feel that unless we study Latin literature for all stages of examination, there really is not much purpose in learning Latin at all. The arguments for Latin lessons as a means for developing linguistic knowledge and so on might be better served by changing the language curricula that are already on offer in every school. Therefore, we have to assume that one of the most important objectives in any Latin course is the ability to understand and appreciate Latin literature in the original. And I think that Latin verse is worth study and is not so inaccessible at GCSE.

Teaching literature is not, for me, a way to try to help the students learn Latin vocabulary and syntax. That can be done imperceptibly enough through appreciation

of literature, but it is surely not the first point of call when we are discussing Horace or Livy, or any of the other set texts that the examiners demand that we read. It seems to me that there are far better ways of learning grammar and syntax; since virtually every author bends the rules which have been so carefully learnt, to use literature as a way of teaching these points is rather to learn how not to do it. I can see a point in this for those of us erudite enough to derive some extra understanding and (maybe) pleasure from this sort of activity, but it is surely not the most effective use of time or resources to do so in the early years of GCSE or A-level.

And yet I think that for many years, that is the way that I taught. It was certainly the way that I was taught myself. In my own schooling, I had to look up every word that Tacitus used which I did not know, write it down and learn it, and I also had to write down the word above and the word below, and learn them as well – an excellent way of building and learning a vocabulary list. However, with the publication of approved vocabulary lists for GCSE and A-level, and vocabulary testers available online, and various programmes checking grammatical endings and so on, it seems that such an approach is really rather out-of-date, if it ever was good practice in the first place. It seems best to use other methods for language acquisition and instead get down to understanding and enjoying literature for itself.

So how can this be achieved? Set against the understanding and enjoyment itself is the need to analyse almost every word, which means to assess its grammatical and syntactical relationship within the sentence, elucidate its meaning in the context, and find a suitable way of rendering it into English, or whatever language you are translating it into. As teachers we have to guide the students through all or most of these steps, as well as have a detailed knowledge of the historical or political or social or artistic context, and convey that rapidly to the student, as and when required.

In my sort of school, and I suspect in many others, the amount of curricular time allocated for the teaching of Latin is limited and foreshortened when compared with that allocated to other subjects. It is suggested to me every year that my timetabled allocation for Latin A-level is reduced because the number taking my subject is smaller than that taking other subjects. I have taught in previous schools in the lunchtime and after school (the so-called twilight lessons), and know how difficult it is simply to get through the text.

This then is my second reason for using the interactive whiteboard and a translation.

Within a shrunken timetable allocation the process of teaching literature needs to be

speeded up, and arranged so that students can take responsibility for their own learning off-site, at home, elsewhere, without me.

My third reason for using an interactive whiteboard and translation of the text is to enable students and teacher to work together, faster and more intensively, but within a framework which encourages discussion and exchange of ideas. Too often, I feel, the students can be mere recipients of information, with the teacher being seen as omniscient, when of course we are not. The literature is there to be enjoyed, not endured.

My reasons then are threefold. In the UK the examination board offers verse literature as a compulsory requirement for both assessment at Year 11 (GCSE) and at A-level (Years 12-13). Prose literature is an additional option at GCSE, and compulsory at A-level. There is broad agreement that students should study literature both at GCSE and A-level. The use of whiteboard technology and the use of a translation enable rapid progress with the text and also, I feel, a deeper understanding and appreciation of the author's intentions.

Inevitably, I suppose, few students choose to take Latin at AS and A-level. In the year where I started this experiment, three signed up: all girls, all good at Latin GCSE; all taking humanities and arts subjects. They are not untypical of the numbers or the types. They all stayed on till A2. This year I have five starting: they have been brought up with a similar system at GCSE.

### **The resources**

Many schools and colleges are now investing in data projectors linked to computers. In my classroom the projector is mounted to the ceiling and is simply wired into my laptop. This laptop is itself connected to the Freman College Intranet. It is not necessary to have a fully interactive whiteboard, since, to all intents and purposes, we are using the whiteboard as a display area for our texts and translation. Instead we use a wireless mouse and keyboard which can be passed around among the group being taught at their usual tables.

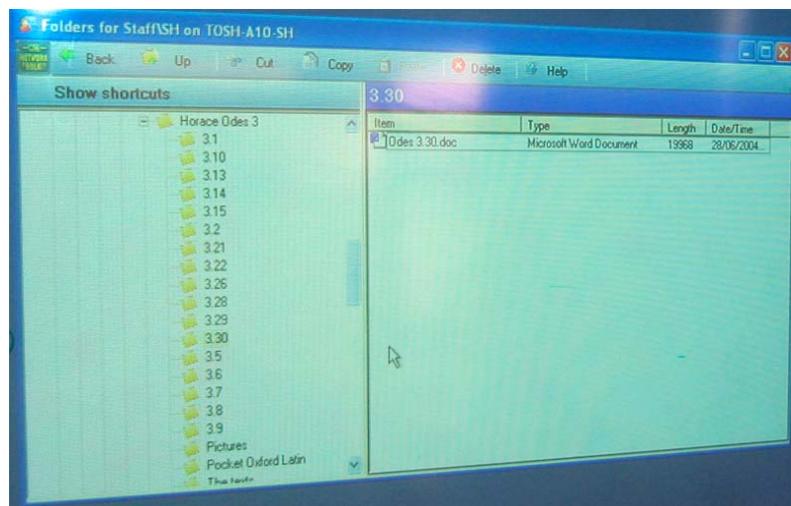
I have investigated the use of a fully interactive, touch-sensitive whiteboard. I found that the expense incurred, and the anxiety I felt about having such an item unguarded in the rough and tumble of an ordinary classroom, meant that an ordinary whiteboard sufficed. In fact a fully interactive whiteboard is simply not necessary, provided that

we have a wireless keyboard and mouse. Besides this, I found that my students often lacked the confidence to come up to the board to touch it or to prod it with the interactive pen. As one of the main purposes of using the technology itself was to encourage students to be confident in dealing with Latin texts, I felt that this would further inhibit the discussion.

The wireless mouse and keyboard work very well, to a distance of five metres from the computer, which sits on its own at the front of the classroom. It takes time, but the students soon get used to using the apparatus in front of each other and myself. It does not really matter as to who types and who clicks: often what happens is that the students get sufficiently caught up in the discussion that no one in particular takes control of any one piece of apparatus. This is how it should be.

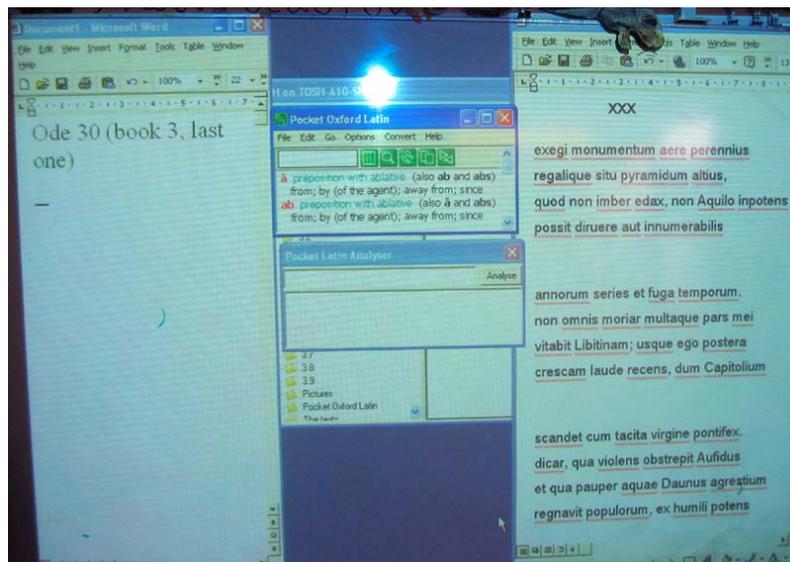
For the teacher the most tedious part of the whole process (which used to be looking up the words and making the wordlist) has been replaced by making the electronic text. There have been many discussions, including ones held as part of this conference, as to where is the best place to find electronic versions of the texts. I do not propose to go into this now, except to say that the Internet is full of them. However, it is a nuisance to check that the texts match what is in the Specifications. Perhaps there could be suggestion to the examination boards that the texts could be made available as downloads from their own sites?

I tend to divide up the passages, if they are long, into manageable lengths according to topic or episode. Or individual poems can be stored as separate files, in separate folders. My Horace *Odes* are stored on the Freman Intranet in two versions: in a Teacher area read-only folder, backed-up on disc, and as a Pupil area read-and-write folder.



I also give each student a CD-Rom of the texts for them to use at home. This enables students to work at their own pace away from the classroom if necessary.

The electronic Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary is essential for this. It is easy to use, cheap, and is one of the ways in which the students make such rapid progress. No longer do they have to look up individual words. It can be used in a number of ways, but perhaps its greatest advantage is that when the dictionary is opened on screen, all a student has to do is to click on the Latin word on the screen and the dictionary both analyses the word and links it to its definition.



Some people consider that it encourages a lazy attitude to learning vocabulary – click, and it is there. However the vocabulary which is used in literature, particularly verse literature, is often erudite or complex. As for understanding the grammatical analysis, we shall come to that later.

My students also receive a paper copy of the texts, along with a simultaneous translation, much like the old-fashioned Loeb text and translation format. This booklet is to be annotated. They are also provided with a commentary on the text and a grammar book.

There have been discussions in recent editions of the Journal of Classics Teaching (published by JACT) as to what might make the most useful combination of text, running vocabulary,



annotation space and commentary on paper. I feel I am half-way there, and if anyone can make further suggestions, I would be delighted to hear. It seems to me unnecessary to put everything onto the whiteboard. Firstly the space is not big enough for much more than the text. Secondly, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep track of which document the cursor is on with more than two or three open documents on show. Meanwhile, I feel the technology itself is not sufficiently flexible to allow all the minutiae of a discussion in class to be annotated on screen. A fully interactive whiteboard has, I know, ways of writing directly on the screen, but the problems of handwriting recognition and keeping everything clear on one screen just does not seem to me to be worth the expense and trouble. The system I have of interactive text, electronic dictionary and *Word* document on the screen, along with translation, hard copy text, commentary and grammar book on the desk, seems to be the best compromise.



It is still a lot of material for the student and the teacher to handle, but it is manageable, and everyone can do it with a little practice.

### **The process**

Let me take you through the process of a lesson. The class consists of three Year 13 students, all of whom are now in their fifth year of study of Latin. The text they are studying is Horace's *Odes*, Book 3, number 30 "*exegi monumentum*".

The first task is for the students to read aloud through the *translation* of the ode. I know that to start with a translation may be controversial, but it seems to make sense that for the students to get at least a start on the ode, they should have a general idea of what it is about.

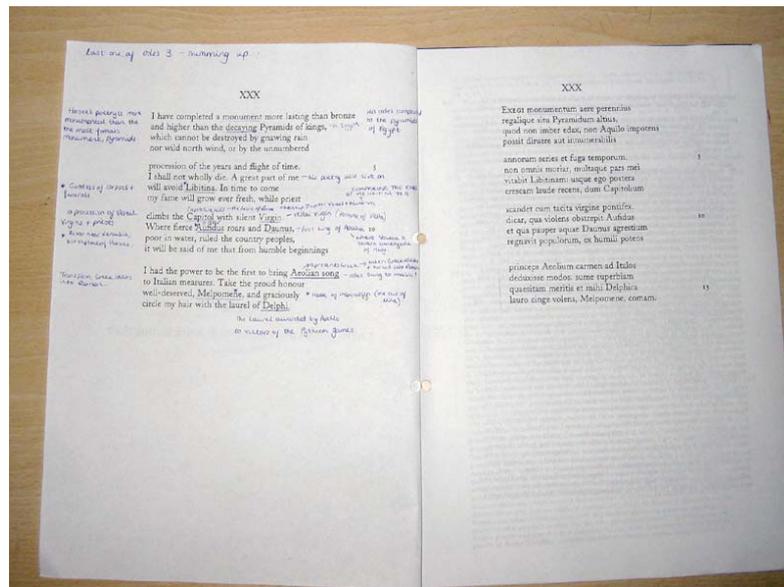
In my earlier teaching career I always used to read the Latin passages aloud at the start, until I was told by one of my students that it was not really very helpful. In fact, he said some fairly uncomplimentary things about wasting everyone's time. You will be glad to know that I did not agree with him. However, it seems more natural to read the text aloud myself to the students afterwards, when they know what the work is about, and also to encourage them to read it aloud as well, when they have a context for the piece. Reading aloud is an essential part of the process of understanding and enjoying a piece of Latin literature. It is just that it does not seem to me to be the most useful thing to do at the very start.

Back to the translation. I know that reading a translation first might seem to be a cheat's way out. But remember that I am dealing with a group of students whose knowledge of the work and the author, his purpose, the historical and social context in which it was composed, let alone the complexity of the Latin – and Horace's Latin is not easy to the average sixteen year old – make it rather a difficult exercise to go straight into the original. The whole point of this exercise is to get them familiar with the work and its message, and confident in expressing themselves, before they go on to analysing the Latin.

So the first stage then requires a read-through of the ode in translation. A discussion follows. What is the tone, the mood, the context? Is it – as a famous opera singer supposedly asked when presented with the programme of the concert – a sad song or a happy song? What are the highlights? Where are the natural breaks in the ode? What parts do the students like, or not understand? Of course, when we have studied a series of odes, we can draw comparisons with the others, or see if there are any themes which link them together. Immediately we have established an understanding of the ode.

The next step is to pick up the historical and literary references which occur. In a longer ode, it may be that the focus in the lesson may be about half of the ode, or the first few stanzas. Looking up references can be made as part of a homework or a brief session in the lesson itself. The important thing is to enable the students to be more familiar with the ode and to establish its context and meaning. Proper names,

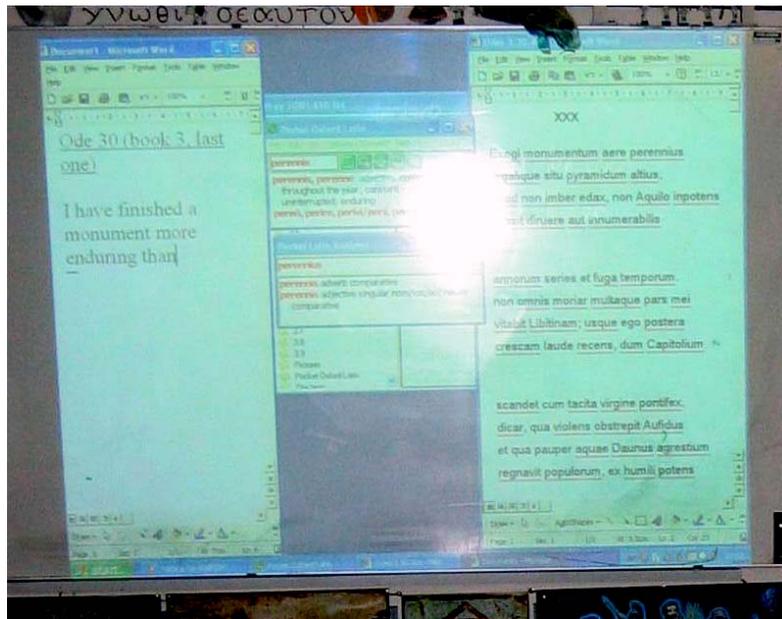
references to places and historical events can all be discussed here and made sense of. These references are annotated on the translation page.



When I look back on my own learning experience at school, the teacher was seen as the one who knew everything and who merely handed down their wisdom. Now the student is encouraged to take some responsibility, and the teacher becomes more of an advisor. The group works together using the commentaries and the teacher's knowledge and there is meant to be an exchange of ideas.

The second stage is to discuss the nature of the ode and the translation is annotated. At this point in this particular ode, Horace compares the longevity of his work to that of the Pyramids. I was surprised by the ignorance of my students at this point, since they had no real understanding of the magnitude of the claim, let alone the reasons for it, because they had no sense of scale of the objects to which Horace was comparing his work. A quick click on the Internet and a picture of the Pyramids can be revealed, enabling students better to understand the point Horace was making. But such things as that are incidental to the main purpose of the whiteboard. The well-prepared teacher may have a hard copy picture of the Pyramids ready for just this emergency. How does whiteboard technology enhance understanding of the *text itself*?

On the screen we have set up the Latin text, the electronic Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary and a blank page on which we are going to write our translation. As you can see, it is necessary to manipulate the tabs at the top of the screen to enable everything to fit on, without losing the writing over the edges of the screen.

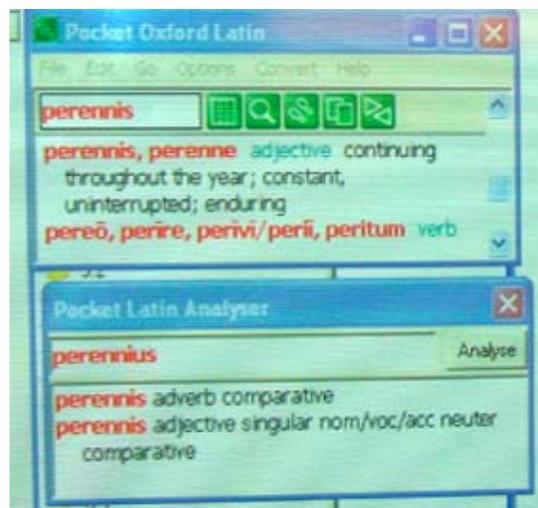


Also, as I myself am partially sighted, I have enlarged the font size for my own comfort.

What next? It seems best to take us through a few of the situations my class and I have discovered as a result of dealing with this ode.

The third stage is to make a translation of the text. We want to get as close to the original as possible, rendering it into good, readable English, which stays as faithful as possible to the Latin words and intentions of the author. But the translation itself is only one thing: I want the process of translation to help the students understand the text more deeply, and thereby remember it more effectively and enjoy it as a work of literature still worthy of reading today.

I have already mentioned the use of the electronic dictionary. Here we see it in action on a relatively straightforward word – “*perennius*”.



With most words, I find, the electronic dictionary is very helpful in identifying the right meaning. There are two problems for the students. Firstly the dictionary often gives more than one meaning of the word. No difference there from using an ordinary dictionary, I hear you say, and I agree with you. It is with our knowledge of what is right that we can guide a student towards the most appropriate meaning. However, we must also not forget that as the students have another translation at their side, they can use this too to guide their choice. The second, and perhaps more difficult problem, is that the way the dictionary presents its analysis of the word needs to be interpreted and, better, taught. This is the reason for the grammar book, kept at the side, with which the students are assumed to be more familiar, with words in tabular form and endings neatly arranged. Perhaps someone could make an addendum to the electronic dictionary which revealed the appropriate grammatical table?

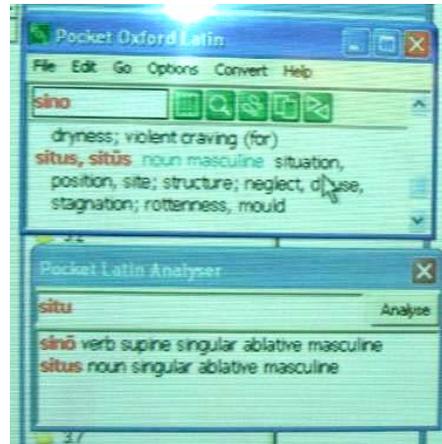
Therefore, our first line is done. We write it down on the whiteboard. It is at this point that the discussion follows. Interestingly the students nearly always reject whatever translation has been provided for them. They want to do better. They already realise that they can do better, and that the purpose of the exercise is to get closer to the Latin. They recognise that there is such a thing as a “translation for the common reader” and they become more discerning. By so doing they are straightaway thinking more deeply about the text, and this constant re-evaluation and checking assists in their appreciation of the work.

In previous lessons when I have taught set texts, it is at this point that I have relied enormously on students’ ability to note ideas fast, and remember fragments of translation, maybe writing them down for them on the board, or getting them to jot it down, and then expecting them to reassemble the words in their heads or on scraps of paper. This is no mean a feat. How many of us do that? It is too great an expectation, I feel.

Now we have the first translation on the board. But is it right? Are we happy with it? The beauty of the whiteboard is that we can now readjust the translation. The students discuss what is best. They try it out. They take control of the mouse and use the synonyms tool and built-in thesaurus. With the three electronic tools available – electronic dictionary, synonyms, thesaurus – and the translation, not to mention the teacher’s adjudication, we come up with what we feel is the right translation for us. My job is to concur, or to develop their line of thought. If necessary I can seize the

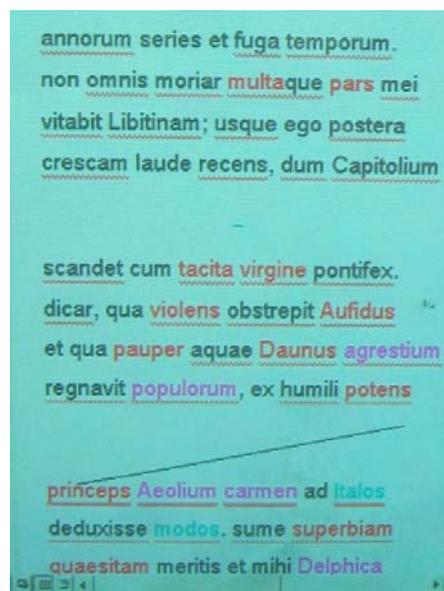
mouse and highlight what I consider to be the key words or phrases, both in English or Latin. We save it.

We go on. Next we see it in action, with that curious phrase in line 2: “*regalique situ pyramidum altius*”.



As you can see, the dictionary has indicated a variety of different interpretations for the meaning of “*situ*”. It is clear, then, that the dictionary needs to be used with some care, and the role of the teacher as an adviser is essential here. Reference again can be made to the translation – has the translator got the full idea of the word “*situ*”? And should we consider word order? Or sound effects? Or rhythm?

The use of the various drawing tools available makes these sorts of exercise easier. No longer do we have to ask pupils to look at lines 9, 10 or whatever it is, and hope that they have all found the right line, let alone the right word: we can show them. Or better we can get them to show us. In this slide we see that adjective and noun pairs have been indicated.



The teacher can do this – either in advance, or during the lesson. Alternatively, the teacher can indicate the nouns and get the students to pick out the appropriate adjectives. Or the students can make the list themselves. Or else individual words can be highlighted to show position or emphasis. Or students can pick out words which are related by theme or sound or whatever is needed. Lines can be drawn to show where natural breaks occur. Whole stanzas or parts of stanzas can be coloured in to show sequences of ideas or themes. The point is that it is the students, with your assistance, who are assessing the text, pulling it apart, pushing it about. The discussion which follows is fruitful, and the students themselves are becoming much more interactive with the text and thereby familiar with it. Notice the way that they have shown the connection between “*potens*” and “*princeps*”: this was suggested by the students themselves as a reminder of which words went where. This is a simple thing, but an indication of how even the simplest things can be most useful. You can choose whether to save all these additions to the text. In general my students prefer to annotate their own copies.



Has the translation opposite the text become redundant then? No, because the students constantly refer back to it to keep up with the general meaning and direction of the ode. There are of course disadvantages: the student may look first at the translation and use it to guess the meaning of a Latin word. This is to be guarded against, since we are using the translation and the electronic dictionary together to support each other. The purpose of having the translation there at this point is for the pupils to

peruse it and firmly to reject it. We can do better ourselves, they say, because we can see for ourselves that this one is not quite right.

Other disadvantages. My students sometimes forgot to use the materials that they had in front of them: the mouse and the keyboard. They were so unused to helping themselves at the start that they could not perhaps quite believe that I wanted them to work things out together with all the means at their disposal. I had to keep prompting them to use the mouse, for example, to check meaning, and they often needed reminding to try out new word orders in their translation by typing it down. My present A-level students are more inclined to use the interactive materials since they have been more familiar with them since GCSE. They are happy to use the mouse, and are much more familiar with using the synonyms and thesaurus tool. They have taken a greater control over their understanding of the ode and made it much more personal to them.

Those of you who are thinking that the use of the wireless mouse and keyboard poses practical problems in large classes should be reassured. I have used this method in a class of twenty two GCSE students. The students themselves nominate a typist for the group and take a keen interest in their translation. Inevitably progress is slower as there is more discussion. Alternatively small groups of students could be encouraged to use the text, translation and electronic dictionary at individual workstations. Much of the preparation of adjective and noun pairs could be set up prior to the lesson, and the use of footnotes (which appear floating over the words when used on a PC) may give help and encouragement where necessary. I have seen this work successfully with another large GCSE group of mine and it is relatively quick to set up.

During the translation phase of work, my students annotate their own texts copiously. As part of the discussion which focuses on the translation we can perform all the critical analysis that is needed on the text. When I started this method of teaching texts, I used to get the translation done first, and then go back over the text once again for critical analysis. However it seemed more useful to do the two things at once: it seems more natural to do so, and the whole point of this method of translating and rethinking our translation lends itself to discussion of the literary techniques used in the text anyway.

The final stage then is that the translation is saved and printed out for all to keep, while the students have a neatly annotated text before them (see next page).



student understanding can be assessed by getting them to highlight words, phrases or even themes. When the work is complete, the copy is saved and distributed to all.

I am convinced that this is the way forward. No more am I the teacher handing down information to be copied down: the lesson is transformed into one in which teacher and student work together to understand and appreciate Latin literature in the original.

Is it time now for the examination boards to produce their text online?