

## **Videoconferencing Latin**

**by Gill Mead**

Videconferencing Latin might seem an oxymoron – after all, what could be the connection between a dead language of limited appeal and the technologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet just as the Roman emperors used their technologically advanced road network to communicate in Latin with the farthest reaches of the empire, covering distances approaching 150 miles per day using the *cursus publicus*, so now staff at the University of Cambridge School Classics Project are using the electronic superhighways to consolidate the empire of Latin learners, potentially throughout the world! Having successfully revitalised the initial stages of learning Latin in schools through its Online Project, which facilitates the teaching of basic Latin without the need for a classics specialist in the classroom, the School Classics Project is now exploring ways of supporting pupils towards public examinations – GCSE and beyond. There may be a limit to the level at which language teaching can be taught successfully at one remove, however innovative the electronic support materials or dedicated the e-tutors. There is a real advantage in face-to-face teaching with a Latin specialist in real time so that insecurities can be voiced and problems ironed out, especially when the demands of the specification require close textual analysis, grammatical understanding, literary appreciation, contextual awareness and a supportive dialogue with the teacher. Teaching by videoconference is therefore an obvious way forward at and beyond Key Stage 4 where there is no Latin specialist in the school. The Project is now in its fifth year of teaching Latin via videoconference link, successfully taking pupils through to creditable GCSE results.

So what is the nature of the teaching and learning environment mediated through videoconference? It obviously vivifies distance learning and necessitates a different kind of relationship between tutor and student than that in a correspondence or Internet course. Let us look first at the teacher-learner relationship in an Internet course where the communication is by e-mail. This has two great advantages over videoconference and face-to-face teaching: asynchrony and what one might call a pedagogic purity. This means that there is simply an assignment, a submission of work and the marking of the submission. This is teaching and learning at a very pure

basic level. There is no background noise, there is no disturbance to the education process or compromises affected by issues of gender, ethnicity, disability, height or class. In the e-environment, soul meets existential soul – learning and teaching are potentially full of new-born, naked grace. Curiously, or all too humanly, students prefer to be clothed. They very soon develop e-personalities, as charming or as irritating as their face-to-face classroom personae. They personalise their communications with avatars and little sign-off signatures – more or less zany messages, slogans or quotes from their favourite bands:

*“For the glorious revolution”*

*“By the beard of Zeus and my grandmother’s teapot”*

*“Immigrating penguins have filled my bedroom”*

So there is a progression from pure interaction to a kind of skewed personal interface, and curiously this is accompanied quickly by a kind of spurious virtual intimacy. Internet intercourse quickly assumes a disarming familiarity. Otherwise perfectly straightforward assignments are prefaced by:

*Hey!*

*howyadoin miss*

*have fun marking these luv milly*

*did you forget to mark my first bit huh teachers these days*

and the sign off – *cya miss* – the modish spelling world’s away in tone and nuance from the more distant, “See you tomorrow Miss”, from the face to face student.

So what is the reason for this freeing of conventional teacher-pupil boundaries? It may be partly because the e-environment is second nature to our young people, whereas to the older generation it is still an environment to be negotiated. This might necessarily redefine the teacher-pupil relationship and blur the power balance. Or is it the reassertion of the purity mentioned earlier, that without the barriers of signals emitting from clothes, accents and personal habits people can just be their essential selves and meet on equal terms? Or is it that it is easier to seem familiar with people who appear to be so nice, kind, witty and intelligent? The asynchronous nature of the medium can act as a character filter. One only needs ever post remarks in keeping with one’s pleasanter character traits. So although we started with a position of purity – pure communication, pure teaching and learning, devoid of personal ticks and irritations – e-tutoring ends up as a dialogue between filtered personalities. There can

be a levelling monochrome about this interaction, a bland instant coffee flavour effect, ultimately dehumanising, or as one e-student emailed “ *Are you a real person or is it just the computer marking my work?*”

So what advantages does videoconference have in the distance learning of Latin? For the students, there is real time interaction with an obviously human Latin specialist, in a situation which mimics the normal classroom experience, perhaps mundanely so. The routine could be a snapshot of any ordinary Latin lesson in any ordinary classics classroom, the ordinary litany of commands and questions – open your books at page X, do exercise Q, etc.

But to use videoconferencing as simply a teacher substitute is to ignore the peculiar features of the medium and the opportunities it offers for creative interaction. Let us look at relationships first. Just as the teacher-pupil relationship in Internet exchange is different from normal classroom practice, so this vc relationship is also subtly different. With many established groups, it is the pupils who set up the vc kit. They positively invite the teacher into the classroom by dint of switching on and dialling in; so there is a nuanced difference in relationship. They can control sound and picture quality; this is also part of the dynamic. They can also, potentially, switch off!! They therefore have to be willing and mature collaborators, not only in the technology but also in their own learning. This modified power relationship becomes even more amorphous when you imagine what it is like for a group of large, bright 16 year olds to be listening to pearls of wisdom from an 18x18 screen! There are obvious constraints on classroom management; physical presence and movement can no longer be part of the battery of teacher skills. So the pupil-teacher relationship is subtly different.

Not only then is there a difference in relationships, but also the range of lessons that can be offered has to be creatively modified. Reading and researching lessons, where the pupils read and the teacher looks on, is patently ridiculous. If the pupils have taken the trouble to dial in they don't want the teacher sitting there passively watching them. So lessons must be interactive, dynamic, and involve much more teacher performance, perhaps even more stylised and exaggerated teacher performance than in the normal classroom. I am reminded of descriptions of gladiatorial combat. In order that the drama of contest could be seen in the top back rows of the Colosseum,

the gladiators would make exaggeratedly large stylish movements choreographed for maximum visual effect. So the teacher on the small screen deliberately exaggerates the performance to make up for the fact that he/she is proportionally so small in the classroom.

This necessarily grand, public approach means that teaching cannot be as finely nuanced as in the normal classroom. One cannot engage in discreet, private and one-to-one explanations, that boon for the timid or quietly puzzled. This is not necessarily a disadvantage. Just as the constraints of the technology foster a mature approach among the learners, this constraint too encourages an honest, accepting and supportive culture requiring an attentive and sympathetic community of learners. It requires learners to be assertive and honest about their problems and their peers to be accepting, non-judgemental partners in learning. For some, this might be a major culture shift. The current emphasis in English schools on testing and levels of attainment might seem to misplace an emphasis on winners and losers, on grade, level and position. It would seem to downgrade acknowledgement of weakness or articulation of unease. It is therefore incumbent on the teacher to manage the group dynamic so that individual development can flourish.

One also needs to foster this air of trust because, with the current state of technology, it is a very broad brush medium. The picture quality at present is such that one cannot pick up the nuances of facial expression, the glazing over of the eyes, the shift of position, the sudden avoidance of direct eye contact – all those tics and quirks to which the antennae of the classroom teacher is instinctively alive. One cannot pick up the clues that express understanding and misunderstanding. Therefore, monitoring student understanding has to be more overt and formal.

Encouraging the articulation of problems and regular monitoring of student performance means that lessons proceed at a slower pace than in the classroom. There is also another steadying factor. The pattern of normal, vocal classroom interaction (the butting-in, the starting before another has finished, the overlay of voices, the quick flashes of wit, the comments as an aside, the whispered subversive undertone – all that makes conversation and verbal exchanges vibrant and human) is not possible within the current state of vc technology.. Overlapping voices merely blur and distort.

Because of micro-delay in sound transmission, and the very slight sound distortion, speech has to be clear, precise, measured and spaced. Once again, that which seems to be a disadvantage actually encourages good classroom practice; a learning environment is not the same as a common-room environment. Students need clear instructions. They need to develop listening skills. They need to respect each others' right to speak without interruption. So the medium demands courtesy. It reinforces good classroom practice not just because listening, taking turns and not interrupting are nice and polite, but because without them the medium does not work. Also, the need to be measured and thoughtful encourages more measured and considered answers.

So we have a slower, steadier, broader-gestured, politer medium, worlds away from the *cya miss* tone of Internet intercourse. Does this mean it could be a more boring medium? There are a range of options to provide changes of direction, punctuation and pace to a lesson. The camera itself is adjustable.

One can use whiteboard to scribble on, as in a normal classroom, or switch to a linked pc so that one's written examples fill the students' screen. The document camera can be used creatively not just to show illustrations or pages from books, but to show objects. Even quite small objects; a Roman ring, or a slinger's shot appear large and detailed on the screen. One cannot pass them around the class, one cannot give the pupils the thrill of a tactile encounter, but, filling their screen, the image grabs everyone's attention and can change the dynamic of a lesson.

We began by considering the quality of the relationships that are fostered by the new technologies. Good relationships lie the heart of good teaching. What kind of relationship can be mediated via a television screen? In some ways it resonates with some of that teaching and learning purity we discussed earlier – the vc teacher is not geographically part of the pupils' school or personal lives. He/she cannot know the dynamics of their relationships outside the classroom. He/she does not have to challenge those minor infringements of school rules (uniform for example) which can be so wasteful of time and energy. Consequently one has real personalities interacting in an environment which is freer than the normal classroom. The environment demands maturity, courtesy and honesty. In addition, the power balance between teacher and pupil has been subtly realigned. All these, together with the imaginative

use of the technology, can foster a creative, mutually respectful playfulness. And playfulness allows teaching and learning to be what it should be – joyous.