

# What is the *Latin in Action* teaching method and online resource? Why and how should I use it?

## An Interview between Susanna Phillippo and CSC (Classics in the History, Classics and Archaeology Subject Centre)

### Summary of Interview

This document is a transcript of an interview with Susanna Phillippo (Newcastle University) and Eleanor OKell (CSC/University of Durham), which explores *Latin in Action* from its inception as a pedagogical strategy through its development and continued use in the classroom to its realisation as an on-line resource for teaching and learning. The teaching materials for *Latin in Action* were developed with a History, Classics and Archaeology Subject Centre (HCA) Teaching Development Grant (TDG), in response to an observed retention issue beyond *ab initio* languages arising from a lack of student progression linked to students appearing to be ‘turned off’ language-learning by learning the language. The key aim was to develop an *ab initio* course that capitalised upon the reason why students wanted to learn languages – to read texts in the original.

In this interview Susanna outlines the pedagogical underpinnings of the methodology and addresses the needs of practitioners considering adopting it (in whole or in part): first, by focusing on the practical issues involved in realising that methodology in the curriculum and the classroom and secondly by identifying some potential advantages afforded by the on-line version. On-line *Latin in Action* was developed by Tim Hill from Susanna’s materials, the on-line development and additional grammar materials developed by Cressida Ryan (Nottingham University) was funded by HCA under the JISC Distributed e-Learning programme, phase 2 (DeL2).

The interview also includes some discussion of the impact of the method on long-term student learning and ability.

The questions covered are:

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These questions have been formatted as headings, so if you have downloaded this interview transcript as an MSWord file you can go directly to your area of interest by clicking on Document Map on the View menu and then on the appropriate question. If you are reading this online through the CSC website, please click on the question above to go directly to that section of the interview. If you are reading this online through the *Latin in Action* website or have downloaded it in pdf format, please scroll down. The interview is also available in both locations to download as a sound file (.wav) if you wish to listen to it.

A more detailed report of the classroom development of *Latin in Action* can be found online at [www.heacademy.ac.uk/hca/TDG/Phillippo](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hca/TDG/Phillippo).

### Interview

**Eleanor:** Hello, Susanna, thank you very much indeed for kindly agreeing to speak to us today about *Latin in Action*. Could I start off by asking:

## How did you come up with the idea in the first place?

**Susanna:** OK, it's quite a long story in some ways, it derives out of an idea which we first had for our Greek courses [at Newcastle University], which started in the days when taking some Greek and some Latin was compulsory for all our Classical Studies students and after a couple of years of teaching this we were thinking about how we could improve [**Eleanor:** Uh, hum.] this under those circumstances. I had a conversation with a friend at Oxford and we somehow, sort of, got on to the idea of, well, given that there's only so much Greek (or indeed Latin) that you can learn in, as one of your modules in the course of a year, [**Eleanor:** Indeed!] what is it that these people need to be able to do with language and could usefully do after a year, so they've got something they can already use because it's clear you can only expect very exceptional students to get to the point where they can read texts in a year – well, not unless they're Kenneth Dover [laughs] or similar! So, we thought what they really need to be able to do is have enough language knowledge to be able, if they're reading texts primarily in translation, to at least be able to start to ask intelligent questions about them that actually relate to the original: Are there effects in the original that the translation suggests or are there more effects in the original than the translation suggests – can we pick up some of these and can we check them out? So that was how we started with the Greek and we worked with a graded series of Greek texts. First of all it's a matter of recognition, obviously. Then, we're going through gradually getting to various types of literary effect after a semester and then more after two semesters. And that seemed to work quite well. I mean, even the ones who were weaker linguistically were getting the rough idea of that because they could get the overall idea of the passage and then pick up on a little bit of it and the effects that were being created by words and there were some nice answers on bits of Herodotus and Euripides for example. [**Eleanor:** Oh, really?] Yes, in the end of the first semester assignment. So, then... [**Eleanor:** Well, you'd got something that clearly worked!] Yes, essentially. So, then, for some time we'd been thinking that it would be wonderful to transfer this to Latin. I'm not a fully qualified Latinist myself and I don't normally teach it, but the problem was that it had been very time consuming to develop the Greek so we needed more staff and to apply for project money to do it and when we did we set off with Latin I worked for that with a Senior Latin colleague and a teaching assistant who is a retired school teacher of both Greek and Latin so we developed them [the materials – the graded texts] from there and there again she could point out passages but we got things that were working very well. The first semester assignment is a bit of Cicero and a bit of Catullus – if I remember correctly. We tried a bit of *Pro Archio* the first year...

**Eleanor:** For people who want to follow this up there is a project report following the development of the *Latin in Action* materials available online through the HCA website: [www.heacademy.ac.uk/hca/TDG/Phillippo](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hca/TDG/Phillippo) Sorry, so - that was the idea. If I can ask...

## How did the use of translations alongside the text and the grammar assistance work in the classroom for the students and for you?

**Susanna:** Uh – in practical terms, if that's what you mean? [**Eleanor:** Yes.] Well, there was usually one principle parallel translation that we'd have and maybe a couple more and also the text. Often that [the principle translation], especially to start with, would be a translation that was relatively close to the Greek so not one of the freer translations, so that they had a translation that gave them a close sense of what was going on in the Latin or Greek – Latin in this case – and then either a complete translation of the whole passage with other variants or sometimes of the particular sentences we were asking about – variant translations of those. It depended on the passages and how difficult it was and how much space [on the handout and in terms of time] we had of varying types [of translation] usually, and if at all possible, and this was something we felt important to develop on the Latin side (where they tended to be more available) from different periods and in different styles.

**Eleanor:** Do you mean that depended more on the style of the original or the style of the translations?

**Susanna:** Well, what you're looking at is getting them to look at – once you're got them to do the matching up and work out that this bit of the Latin corresponds to that bit of the translation and what they actually say – those bits, you're then getting them to compare what the Latin's actually doing with what's happening in the various translations and it works at two levels.

At one level, it is, if you like, developing their linguistic and literary analysis skills in English by looking at the translations and the different ways that they do things. But it's also [at another level] primarily (from our point of view) designed as a way in to thinking about what the Latin says and why it says it the way it does – what type of effects that creates because often we used to find that students tended to take (very much in general) the approach that 'Yes, it [the translation] says that because that's what it [the original text] means' which is, OK, but there are different ways of putting it that have the same sense – things you can do with different word order or with different types of syntax or different types of vocabulary and seeing how different translations have done that seems to help, by showing what some of the alternatives might be. Seeing someone express the same thing in different ways is a way of getting at what the Latin achieves that we want: seeing what are its particular effects as opposed to... which is where some of the freer and slightly wilder translations, I think, can be very useful. There's one of the Penguin ones of the Catullus which is very free [laughs] [**Eleanor:** Wonderfully so!] Well, yes, but in fact for this sort of exercise as long as you've got some close translations to anchor them to it [the original text] some of the wilder, if I may use that word, translations are often a good way of getting the students to think about the differences and the effects and to think about the language and how it works. Because they can link them with the freer translation so as to, goodness knows, make it clear that language is being used in a certain way here to do x. And it encourages them to think that it is subtler than it appears. And if you're translating you start with the Latin and work from it.

**Eleanor:** So is that a skill that you've seen them being able to convert later on? Do they still think about that kind of thing afterwards?

**Susanna:** Some of them do, yes, I think. You know, there's always the problem of getting the students in the modular system to keep transferring that kind of thing through, but, yes, I think one has... I think that...

**Eleanor:** Just, given that it's a very hard thing to get them to think about, [**Susanna:** Yes.] particularly when you're getting them as second and third level language students – [**Susanna:** Yes, we do that.] And you're saying: 'Why did they [the author] say it this way?' and they're saying: 'Because.' and you're saying: 'Well, they could have...' So I just wondered if that was where you'd see it [the method bearing fruit]?

**Susanna:** Yes, that's a fair point. I think it's certainly encouraged them along that way and it certainly requires reinforcement at the later stages. It's one of the reasons why we don't just do this at beginners' level, we keep it up at the higher levels and in the follow-on course from that we still do some work with translations alongside the original texts and often at level two, which for us is the final year level if you start at beginners level. And at level three some of the assignments they're given on the texts that they're reading in the original there encourage them to think about these sorts of things with translations. One of the set texts we were using last year [2007-08] was the *Selections from Greek Lyric Poetry* and some work for that was with translations. One was the *Oxford Book of Greek Verse in Translation* and the West translations where they existed and they were to do a comparison of the effects in the Greek with those in the translation. So it's a way of getting them to do that systematically. So I think it's a way of keeping encouraging them as they go along.

**Eleanor:** Which you wouldn't keep doing if you weren't finding it useful for them?

**Susanna:** No.

**Eleanor:** So you are actively applying the technique in other courses in small ways if not *en bloc*?

**Susanna:** Yes, that's right. I think the students do find it a useful peg on which to hang things. Some of them have been, but many haven't, been taught to think about this much in English. I mean you're talking about 'does that word in the translation really reflect the Latin word?' which gets them to think about exactly what does the English word convey to start with and I have noticed that

even in the upper level courses that's where the students who have followed through were much better at thinking about the specific sense.

**Eleanor:** That's nice.

**Susanna:** Well, I think so.

**Eleanor:** You always get asked, 'What is the impact of this?'

**Susanna:** Well, yes. It's not as much as I think it could be.

**Eleanor:** Well, no, but evidently it helps.

**Susanna:** Yes.

**Eleanor:** At that point it's clearly very useful for them, which has the knock-on effect that it's useful for you because you have to do less of that kind of training elsewhere. But you've said it takes quite a bit of time to prepare. So, in terms of this pay-off, does that [input] balance do you think?

**Susanna:** I would say so, yes. In fact, I'd say very much so. In part the reason for having done the *Latin in Action* project and making it more widely available is that in theory other people shouldn't have to invest quite so much time because – well, you know how it is!

**Eleanor:** We are all time poor, so becoming resource rich is a wonderful, wouldn't you say?

**Susanna:** It certainly does pay off. At the very practical level it certainly vastly improved the pass rate for beginners languages because it gave them something they could take off and do which was – well the difficulty, as you know, with language stuff is that you never know where they're getting it from – but these kinds of questions genuinely do require actual literary acumen.

You'd often find that students who were not that confident on the language side could make a decent stab at this. This was particularly visible in the days when it was compulsory. You'd notice the effect, but even now when it isn't you get students who are linguistically weaker wanting to take languages and, you know, not maybe doing brilliantly in exams but getting through it.

**Eleanor:** So it helps to add a component with a complimentary set of skills that are useful.

**Susanna:** Yes.

**Eleanor:** No, that's nice. Thinking back to when you first introduced this: having said there was an effect on the pass rate, was there any knock-on effect on the retention rate? That people were more likely to keep up languages, or not? You may not have noticed...

**Susanna:** It's really hard to say because about the time that we introduced this, that was the time that beginners' language stopped being compulsory.

**Eleanor:** I see.

**Susanna:** Within a couple of years, so we had a fairly small sample to start with. Anyway, I think the first couple of years of us doing it – which were just before that change, I mean, around the time it was being decided upon really – one did notice that certainly a lot more students who wouldn't otherwise have thought about carrying on or been doubtful [about it] were encouraged to do so. We had, I remember the level one group following on from beginners that year we were doing it for the first time and also doing some other stuff, a much more mixed group than you'd normally expect and they were extremely enthusiastic and [I remember] picking up on that. And one of them, although it's difficult to pinpoint exact causes here, actually went right through with Greek and did an MA in Classics, did the teacher training course at Cambridge and went on to become a Classics teacher. ... He said he wouldn't have taken Greek if it hadn't been compulsory [in the beginning]. He was interested in the way it was being taught and he kept it up. In his MA he did a comparison of translations – of Homer, I think it was – with a language component, it was on Achilles, I think it was. So we certainly did well there! This [method] made it possible for him to do language, because he was bright but not necessarily always going to get the highest marks in pure language work, but he was very, very good at working in those sorts of terms, well, once trained.

**Eleanor:** So it's good for the kind of students who desire to learn the language when motivated by wanting to work with the text and read the text. It works for them.

**Susanna:** Yes, extremely well.

**Eleanor:** That's lovely! So, given that there's actually a reason for wanting to do this...

## What kind of advice would you give to someone who was wanting to try this technique for themselves?

**Susanna:** Right, in no particular order... um...

**Eleanor:** That's fine.

**Susanna:** You do need to explain to the students quite clearly why it's being done this way; what the point of it is. Erm... that's always a good thing to do and most of them pick it up but here it's really worth doing and not just once but reminding them too, as the course goes on, especially because the English is easier for them always and in their answers to questions they will sometimes drift into often quite intelligent comparison analyses of the different translations but forgetting that the real point of this is to get the Latin. And, occasionally, they'll even tell you that the translations are better than the Latin.

**Eleanor:** You're not serious!

**Susanna:** Oh, I am.

**Eleanor:** **NOT** what the exercise is about though!

**Susanna:** Indeed not. It's about the Latin.

**Eleanor:** So, on that point, persistence in explaining the reasoning is best and its utility and going back to [reinforce] it repeatedly is the way forward. What else is useful?

**Susanna:** Never taking anything for granted in their sort of basic sets of skills. For instance, we introduce a training item to use dictionaries intelligently, which you'd think they'd know,<sup>1</sup> um, because that's something that very much does **not** come as second nature to them. Most of them have not been taught to use an English dictionary – and one of them actually said that!

**Eleanor:** I've had that too with post A-level Latin.

**Susanna:** We had a Greek dictionary open and she said she had difficulty in finding things in an English dictionary: um... OK... um... So, also, of course, you've got to think about what dictionary you've got and explaining to them the layout, because that was one thing that we've got used to with Liddel and Scott over the years and you forget how completely arcane [**Eleanor:** Oh, yes!] it is to someone who doesn't know it and it's hard when I give them exercises to define words, some of which are more unusual than others, because I wanted them to get a range of different types of meanings so that they could understand styles. In one case some of them came up with the meaning 'poet' for the word (*phōs*) [laugh] and that was because the entries were presented as poetical forms – i.e. *poet. phaōs*.

**Eleanor:** I see – so they hadn't realised the difference between a description and a definition.

**Susanna:** That's right, but then I thought, 'Well, why would you?', unless someone had ever explained it to you.

**Eleanor:** Yes, or you're the kind of person who reads the notes in the front of the dictionary.

**Susanna:** Well, yes.

**Eleanor:** But our students aren't like that?

**Susanna:** It's just that lots of people don't and, of course, you get examples where in the dictionary they give the whole phrase in which the word appears [**Eleanor:** That's true.] and I think it was the word *gaia* or *gē* or something and it was given with the phrase 'to give earth and water to', which meant the students kept giving this whole phrase 'to give earth and water to', which, of course, was nonsense in the context, where the requisite bit was the 'earth' – not the rest of it. Not all dictionaries do that, but the Liddell and Scott certainly does.

**Eleanor:** Depending upon which size you are using... um... I think that's something that presents a difficulty particularly when you don't prescribe a dictionary – so that's something to think about too.

**Susanna:** It is. I think it's an important skill and it's not just at the level of them not knowing how to use it but it's also an issue when it comes to thinking about the range of meanings and which one to choose. It's better to think about what I loosely refer to as 'root definitions'. It's like it's easier with the layout of the prescribed Latin dictionary which we use which is the Cassel's, which

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<sup>1</sup> NB All UK students entering HE have at least a GCSE grade C in a modern European language – usually French.

starts off with what it calls a ‘root meaning’ and then translates other usages. Um... You have to get them thinking about it, not just looking at the first definition and not looking through till they find the one that matches that used in the translation either. [Eleanor: Ah!] As otherwise they say, ‘This is the best translation because it matches what it says in the dictionary’ and you say to them ‘Well, there were 150 possibilities there!’ Um... getting them to think ‘OK, what’s the best one?’ – i.e. what ideas does the word convey? what is the dictionary entry in full? how do we get from it to the translation? can the word convey more than one idea at once? which is something that is quite often the case. These are all key skills – with all languages – but particularly with Latin and Greek, and something that perhaps does not come naturally to them. I think when you are learning language you naturally think that *table* = table, *chat* = cat [laugh].

**Eleanor:** Yes! You look for things to have a one-to-one mapping, which, given that what we are trying to get students to do is to think about ‘Why does semantic range matter?’ is going to cause trouble. [Susanna: Yes.] So it’s worth thinking if this is something that it’s worth while putting the groundwork in for with how to use a dictionary... [Susanna: Yes, that’s right.] to get that out. And then the translation comparison reinforces for them why that’s important – [Susanna: Yes, that’s right] as part of a whole package.

**Susanna:** That’s right. It’s also a reason for using variant translations because you get some really good examples of where one word can convey more than one meaning, for example, there’s lots where the English translation has to choose because there isn’t an English word that carries the same range of ambiguity. There are several of the New Testament translations that are particularly good for that. [laugh] [Eleanor: Yes?] For obvious reasons! So... but... yes... I think it’s *pistis* – sorry, I keep using Greek examples, but it’s because most of this carried over from the Greek work into the Latin presentation. [laugh]

**Eleanor:** Yes, but that’s OK. I’m sure people can think of Latin examples or find them in the materials. So, we’ve had an explanation of the purpose and point – renewing dictionary use and, anything else?

**Susanna:** Tying in quite clearly the um... language/grammar skills that you are trying to teach them in the class alongside this. Reinforcing this business of OK, this idea of when you’re learning your noun table, when you’re dealing with these texts that you’ve got before you there. What you have to do is identify the form, and knowing what the dictionary form is, that’s what helps you to do it... erm... deal with texts relating to the translation. So, a certain amount, it’s tempting because one always wants to get to the really interesting stuff with the comparisons – so I’d stress a certain amount of laying the ground work to enable them to sort it out for themselves what form a particular word is and how they get back to the dictionary form that a particular word is from the word in the text, and relating that to the stuff that you’re doing elsewhere and how they construct a sentence – putting it all together – is quite important in that respect.

**Eleanor:** So thinking very carefully about what you want them to pull out from the text [Susanna: Yes.] and making sure that you are getting the grammar done.

**Susanna:** Yes, I think the last thing is to deal with the different rates and levels with which students er... will deal with this. I sometimes find in class that it’s good to get them as a group altogether and asking individuals that sort of question – going round the room – usually its best to start with the first couple of questions [from the exercise] in the class in that way rather than setting them off straight into the exercise in smaller groups because that means that if you’re – if they’re not necessarily (through reticence, or whatever) [forthcoming] – not seeing thins or not getting a sense of where they’re at, it gives you a chance to, obviously involve them, but also to give them an idea of the things that they are looking for and then that encourages them.

**Eleanor:** That also lets you check how far they are OK with the basic grammar.

**Susanna:** Yes.

**Eleanor:** And beyond that you’d recommend small group work?

**Susanna:** Oh, yes! It’s worth it, once you know the class reasonably well, trying to put together ones whose relative knowledge and speed is more or less at a level because – well, you can vary that every so often and put someone who’s got more ideas with someone who’s got less so that

they both learn from it. But at the same time the difficulty there is that you often find that... um... the person who is slightly weaker may coast, um... either through laziness or just through timidity (either is possible, I think, and problematic). So you don't want that to be happening too much. At the same time you need to not hold back the people who can do these things rather quickly. I think that's quite a good tactic: to try to get similar groups of students together.

**Eleanor:** So, if you've done that, do you find that...um...for want of a better phrase, the ones who are engaging at a higher level, do they get through the material faster or do they have longer discussions?

**Susanna:** Um...

**Eleanor:** I'm just thinking in terms of whether you need to have to think of other tasks or not?

**Susanna:** Yes, there is that. It varies. Me being me, I have never yet run out of tasks [laugh] to complete in class. I always, it's one of the things I have to work on!, I always underestimate how long things are going to take students to get through rather than overestimate. So do bear in mind that these materials are in fact geared towards the faster ones. The problem has been that the weaker ones haven't been getting through...

**Eleanor:** Enough?

**Susanna:** Well... as much as I'd like.

**Eleanor:** I see, but there is a distinction between the two.

**Susanna:** Exactly.

**Eleanor:** So, it's not a problem of not being able to get through enough, it's more to do with not covering as much as **you** would like in order to be sure they can do it for themselves?

**Susanna:** [Nods.] And occasionally just not enough. And there is always a difficulty with this and I haven't got an ideal solution. The ideal pattern is that you start [the class/session] off with some examples and then you get into groups and then go over some ideas at the end. But that's obviously quite difficult when you've got some people who've only done some or some people who've done far more. Although it's not necessarily a bad idea for students who only got through a couple of them to get some feedback on the ones they have done and then listen to the sorts of ideas they can get from the others. The difficulty there, of course, is that they might not have worked through the linguistic stuff enough to have the basis for it.

**Eleanor:** Uh huh. But as long as you make sure that they are the groups that are going first [in the plenary feedback portion of the class/session] then, in terms of feeding the material back [**Susanna:** Of course.] they're not having this feeling of 'Oh, we didn't get far enough' or 'We're getting a bit short-changed because we didn't do as much'.<sup>2</sup>

**Susanna:** Yes. Other pieces of advice – if I'm not going on too long? [**Eleanor:** No.] – is to have some kind of... um... simpler vocabulary reference or booklet to use alongside the dictionary for looking at the more basic things. One example is to look up a word like *pōein* – to stop, which doesn't have too many other different sorts of meanings: it's quicker and simpler [than using the dictionary], I mean at a certain point they should know it, but – I'm doing it again, let's think of a Latin word! Er... *lego*, that's right [**Eleanor:** Yes.] Um... which doesn't, of course mean I say! [**Eleanor:** Well...] [laugh] Actually, more the reverse, actually. But, it's to save time because you don't want them tracking through full size Lewis and Short (or Liddell and Scott) for something which, in this particular context, is simple, when there are words they could better spend time on. So having a vocab[ulary] list helps.

**Eleanor:** So, essentially, you're encouraging two-tier dictionary use in preparation?

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<sup>2</sup> These feelings, as a stimulus to increasing work rate and the strengthening the underlying knowledge and experience needed to do this, can be roused deliberately (rather than left for the individual to feel or not) by the use of 'show of hands' before the plenary feedback session to indicate whose group covered each question/translation, using the formula 'Put your hand up if your group answered the first question, and keep it up if you answered the second, third, fourth etc.'. To ensure that weaker/slower students are covering the full range of question types the strategy of using occasional mixed-ability groups, as discussed above, could be put to use with each group being set a particular question (or questions, to account for the questions' difficulty level) to discuss, answer and feed back to the group as a whole.

**Susanna:** Yes, that's right. Um... I mean, I'm always encouraging for normal language work that you use – well, we have a purpose-designed vocabulary booklet for the Greek. For the Latin I think there are probably lists as well. The back of some text books is useful as a source. I mean, *Athenaze* is not brilliant on this, *Reading Greek's* not bad, I think and then there's the actual *Reading Greek* vocabulary thing anyway.

**Eleanor:** And on the Latin side?

**Susanna:** [laugh] Actually *Reading Latin* is not bad in terms of vocabulary but it's a while since I used it! I don't know if people use *Reading Latin*?

**Eleanor:** They do.

**Susanna:** We had Jonathan Powell's *VVV* textbook [as yet unpublished] for a long time.

**Eleanor:** It [textbook used] varies from institution to institution but, um..., if you think it may be valuable to consider having a quick reference vocabulary, even if you get them [students] to prepare it in advance then...

**Susanna:** We've drawn up a parallel one for Greek, which is now immensely useful as a tool that we can use in lots of circumstances.

**Eleanor:** So the advice would be that if you think you want to do this, in order to cut down time in class flicking through books [**Susanna:** Yes.] that you may have to invest the time to do it yourself?

**Susanna:** Yes, that's right.

**Eleanor:** Or think perhaps of a strategy for using one of the faster students as reference look ups?

**Susanna:** Yes, which is quite a good strategy at various times anyway, I think, just to get things going well in class.

The other area of, well, not advice exactly, but one of the things to look out for is the homework and preparation, which is – usually these exercises take more time [than is available in class], depending on the exercise. They [the exercises] work best if you do some in class one week and then give them some to do at home which they go over the next week. So, broadly speaking, two weeks [classes/sessions] for each exercise, but it's not always that. You can sometimes go over the last bit of an exercise and start the next one in the second class, but it's not usually one week [class/session] and you're done. Giving them some to do on their own is a good idea because they're then working and thinking about it [the text/method]. The problem is, of course, getting them to do that, er... and I haven't come up with – I don't know if anybody has – a certain solution to that. There are things which you can deal with in class once that [non-preparation] has happened. Again, divide them into groups – this time of those who have and those who haven't done it – and, er... simply so that those who have done it aren't being dragged back by those who haven't, but –

**Eleanor:** I think this is always a problem with any kind of class and there are various ways round it. I've been told, quite recently, at a Teaching Ancient Languages event [Sept. 2008] that I'm just a complete dragon lady, because I make everybody in the class aware at the beginning [of the course] that they expect me to do the preparation, so I expect them to do the preparation: they would be unhappy if some people hadn't done it and were coasting so (unless there is a very good reason for someone not having done it) I will ask the class as a whole, 'Are you happy for this person to stay?' [laugh] I should explain that I've said if they are to stay they have to take a very particular role, which is to be dictionary look up and that they have to ask questions [**Susanna:** Yes...] of this passage – so they're still doing something useful, because I don't want to actually physically kick them out of the room. [**Susanna:** Well, no... have you?] Oh, yes. Well, you can do this with literary seminars because you're running several of them and they say, 'Argghhh, you're going to make me go away?' and you say, 'Yes, go and do the preparation and come back to the last seminar of the round.' [**Susanna:** Yes...] Erm... but where you haven't got an opportunity of that kind of fill in and second coverage, having something that they can do that is seen by everybody else as being a useful substitute [**Susanna:** Yes.] for the lack of preparation –

**Susanna:** Yes, that makes sense actually, I might try that one... Well, not exactly, but maybe something along those lines...

**Eleanor:** Well, yes, but it's getting your class to agree [that's key] [**Susanna:** Yes.] because sometimes they do know more than you do about an individual's circumstances and they might be happy for somebody to stop as they know they've had a particularly bad time the night before or when they intended to do their preparation or something like that [**Susanna:** They do – and so do we!] – Not that we are supposed to! [laugh]

**Susanna:** I mean, it's more important to give them the stuff to do and to think about for themselves and as it will mean you can assume a basic level and get the discussion off the ground in the net class.

**Eleanor:** Even if they just managed to read through it in advance, that's OK, as they need some familiarity with the material so they can spend their time [in class] doing more than finding out **what** it says [at a word-for-word translation level].

**Susanna:** While we are on this question of advice. Two other things I think it was I wanted to say.

One is that one of the exercises we did in Greek – it's not so explicit in the Latin, but it's worth doing – is getting them used, in the early stages, to what we call 'orientation points'. How you get used to sort of finding your way round quickly, where your equivalence is in Latin and English is for the translations. So using things like proper nouns. The non-use of capital letters at the beginning of sentences means that you can use capital letters as a navigation point, which is always useful. There are, of course, more in Greek than Latin, but there are sometimes times where words have an immediate equivalent with an English word, for example a direct link to the Latin word because it derives from it – occasion, and things like that. One of the very early ones [exercises] we do is about the Wooden Horse being dragged into Troy, and we start by picking out a few of the Latin words which I reckon they can make a reasonable guess at.

**Eleanor:** So the kind of thing that relates to what they know already and would be useful [as a skill] for unseens?

**Susanna:** Exactly, like *rotor* for wheels and um... what's the one they always like? Oh, yes, *pronuptias* – *pronuptia*, which quite a few of them have actually heard of [laugh].

**Eleanor:** Well, it [Pronuptia, the bridal shop] is a fairly large visible brand!

**Susanna:** Yes. So, that's an orientation exercise within that. So it's a good way of getting them to think that you don't necessarily have to head straight for a dictionary and look up and go through the long process of recognising every word before you've got a sense of how it fits together. If you've got, for example, something that lists a whole series of things, you can do a lot by counting. You can do that with, I think, it's the 'works of the flesh and fruits of the spirit and the creature...' in the New Testament – although it's complicated by the fact that the manuscripts have more than the English usually translates, but that in itself is valuable, as you can do that in Latin as well; say if you've got the sort of rhetorical statement that makes three statements, tricolon, or whatever it is, you can get them to think about the structure of the original that way [i.e. by counting].

The final advice is style and stylistic analysis. It doesn't come naturally to them always. Again, the best ones, or the ones who've had the best sort of training, in particular in English literature, will have some sort of idea of it, but it needs a lot of work. There's a fairly extensive list, which goes on forever [**Eleanor:** It would!] that I've drawn up. I've found that starting with it in English, talking through it in English, how it works in English, is often very, a good way, because it removes the added complication of having to worry about what the words mean and... um... and... er... Keep jumping up and down. You **cannot** repeat too many times about sound patterning – what it does and doesn't imply, in terms of meaning.

**Eleanor:** Yes, I think we've all had letter 's's being the sound of evil.

**Susanna:** Ah, yes! To which I usually reply that as that's my first initial, I am duly offended! [laugh]

**Eleanor:** I've had this in essays from classes reading in translation. In response to 'What is the atmosphere of the passage of the *Oresteia*?' – 'There are lots of 's's – it is evil and dark' [laugh]

**Susanna:** Which is why in the sheet I've drawn up, I've deliberately chosen passages with hard consonants, with sibilants in things that do not convey evil, or in fact convey quite the reverse.

**Eleanor:** It's one of those things that comes from their English literature training, which some of them may find hard to get away from and the realisation that any of them who have done A-level Class Civ [i.e. Classical Civilisation] have been encouraged by the exam boards to treat the translation they are using as if it is the original author.

**Susanna:** Yes – 'Aristophanes is not concerned with the proper use of English', as one of my students once informed me in an essay! [laugh]

**Eleanor:** This is absolutely true. [laugh] At that point, us recognising that they are coming to us with these limitations, this [Latin in Action technique] is something that helps get them round it.

**Susanna:** Yes. I think we're trying to do it by building things up gradually, giving them some of the simpler principles at the same time as recognising the difficulties of the simple principle, as often they cling to that and bring it out on every occasion! I've often regretted saying that there are prominent positions at the beginning or end of the sentence or line, of course, in the case of Latin its more complex and subtle than that as there's governing word order. Greek is often freer in that respect. But it's a good principle to start with, it's just getting them to think about it in a flexible way, encouraging that. So the basics are things like: how sound patterning can link words; how it can add emphasis to the meaning that is already there (rather than theirs!).

**Eleanor:** So, essentially, this is advice more to keep a rein on one's own enthusiasm for the ways in which translations express things and to keep your own focus, and therefore theirs, on what the original is saying?

**Susanna:** Yes, that's right. And, I think, also, again talking them through things like vocabulary choice and levels of language – concrete vs. imagistic language, as it were, or literal vs. figurative language. Because, again, that is not something which necessarily comes naturally to them.

**Eleanor:** No, and they're not terms they're familiar with either.

**Susanna:** That's right.

**Eleanor:** Given the use of 'He was literally on fire!' [laugh], news reporting has a **lot** to answer for!

**Susanna:** It does, doesn't it! I've noticed there are some straight forward examples you can find of this in, I think, it's the Cicero passages, in which he speaks of *intestinas*, which does mean 'inside', but it means 'inside' in a particular kind of way – that's why we have the word 'intestines'.

**Eleanor:** Well, yes... [laugh], I was thinking about one's insides at that point and what they might have to do with Cicero!

**Susanna:** Well, it's civil war which had been disturbing them [**Eleanor:** Oh!] Um... disturbing the internal workings in a profound and vicious way.

**Eleanor:** Which is how Virgil puts it as well.

**Susanna:** It's a common image to do with that [civil war] and I think there's also some in that Virgil Trojan Horse passage – when it climbs the walls, talking about that, well, how it's conveyed as an image compared with the literal way they put it in English. We do have fun there because one of the translations has 'mounts' – a bit unfortunate.

**Eleanor:** Oh, dear. I don't even want to think about that.

**Susanna:** Which, of course, **is** a level of imagery and is going on there because it's *specta armis*, isn't it? 'Pregnant with armed men' and... er... there you get them thinking about the importance of keeping that image because of the contrast of what normally to do with the creation of life and what's going on here with the image of death [**Eleanor:** Yes!] as well as being simply visually appropriate for that scene with the men in the hollow body. So talking about the different levels of resonance is possible there.

**Eleanor:** Yes, I hadn't thought about it at all as a sort of rape image of Troy – but then to add the unnaturalness of it through a female doing the mounting is quite something. I'd not thought of that before. But, anyway, this is getting us a bit off the point, though very enjoyably! It's becoming a bit 'in conversation with' [**Susanna:** Sorry.] – No, it was my fault. In which case, I think what you've said about the style and stylistic analysis, that would require us [i.e. practitioners adopting the *Latin in Action* method] to do a lot of thinking through of what we'd need to put together for

that. [**Susanna**: Yes.] The fact that that document is available online as part of the Latin in Action package is going to be quite useful.

So, on that point:

### **Why did you think that making Latin in Action online was a good idea?**

**Susanna**: Yes, well, I mean, primarily because... No, two things really – primarily because we think it's a good idea, it's worked really well here, so it seems a nice idea that more people know about it and use it. And, so that we can, as you've suggested at various points – there is an investment of time in this that is very considerable, and it seems solely pointless for people who want to do this sort of thing to go away and have to create the materials for themselves when they could have the basics to look at and the various types of supporting material with it, grammatical as well, the questions and starting points.

The other advantage to its being available online as downloadable documents is that it's also flexible, well the downloadable documents in particular, in that you can edit at will, add other ideas of your own or questions of your own (because nothing is ever comprehensive), or set it out in a way that will suit the structure or teaching method of a particular class.

The other thing, of course, is that if it's available online to use, and this is where the boxes [i.e. pop-up windows] come in, it's got an interface which probably partly overcomes the difficulty of getting students to do it on their own, because it's in a format which they probably find more familiar, more user-friendly. Especially when, well, one of the difficulties of this (if you think about it) is having original text, translation, parallel translations, questions floating around all over the place. Students don't – well, no-one really – like having to deal with multiple bits of paper. Um... And I remember when we were setting up hard copies the first time round that the sheets, on which we tried to fit them – typing it out on one side of A4 – awful without the boxes!

**Eleanor**: Ah, so trying not to end up with questions on the back, text on the front?

**Susanna**: Yes, I remember we needed the questions on a separate sheet, we couldn't do it back and front as that meant flipping all the time – a nightmare. It's the first advice we always give them [students] when we give them the assignment – 'It's stapled together for your convenience – now remove the staple!' [laugh] – dismantle it straightaway...

The difference with the online thing is that you've got boxes with the text, different translations and questions, and you can move them around much more easily. It's probably possible in most cases to have at least two of them visible on screen at any one time.

**Eleanor**: It depends on the size of your screen. I've got a fairly large monitor (17"), but not enormous, and I can have the original text, two translations and the questions all open [i.e. visible] at once. [**Susanna**: That's pretty good.] – By resizing the boxes. I doubt I could arrange it to fit the grammar as well [**Susanna**: No.] but you can flip between windows [or Tabs in tabbed browsing] for that [**Susanna**: And even if your screen doesn't allow it you can still flip quite quickly between text and questions, so it's not as hard as with paper. It is quite important, I think, to be able to look at the text, the translation and the questions we are talking about simultaneously.

So that's the final thing, the sheer convenience and familiarity of using it and the ease of playing around with the different bits.

**Eleanor**: And, given the size of student rooms, they all have computers, but don't always have sufficient actual space to do this with paper, but can do it with the alternative.

**Susanna**: So, I think those were the three main reasons.

**Eleanor**: As part of that and while we've been talking about the windows/boxes, we mentioned the grammar support. So what was behind the decision to provide more explicit grammar support with the online version of this?

**Susanna**: Um... in both languages when we did this it was tied fairly closely to the way in which we were teaching the other three hours of the four in the week in terms of the language levels. Both of which involved things that were not just derivable from the standard textbooks. There was a lot of extra material, particularly in Greek, that was not covered by standard textbooks. For example, working back to the dictionary form and those kind of exercises. On the Latin side we

had a purpose-designed Latin course created by Johnathan Powell when he was Professor here, so it was clear that you did need some kind of language support working alongside this... um... but what we had was very specific to our own circumstances in a variety of different ways and I wanted something that was more flexibly usable, so that people who were using different types of courses, different kinds of teaching, could use it if it was still tied to basic features of grammar. In that respect it could then be tied in and you can use the passages at different levels, especially in the early stages you're not necessarily expecting students to get all – be able to deal with all – the Latin language, whereas you could reuse the same passage at a late stage, where they were able to see something different.

**Eleanor:** Ah! So, you can introduce it in a way that means they're not afraid of the bits they can't do [**Susanna:** That's right], because they're dealing with a **real** passage.

**Susanna:** Yes, exactly. Having the grammar support means that when you get to a more advanced stage, I don't know, say when you've done the subjunctive, which is not something we'd be covering in the early stages, you can go back and say 'Here is that sentence we skipped and here are the parallel translations, there isn't a question about that necessarily there [on that handout], because we weren't focused on that at the time.' It can be used in that way.

**Eleanor:** Which is the advantage of some of the grammar being hyperlinked back into these documents, so that people can 'hunt constructions' – at least to an extent.

**Susanna:** I think that the other thing was just the continuing reinforcement that that provides of linking up between what you might call the linguistic/technical side of learning Latin and Greek and the literary side of it. That's a connection which again becomes... well, you forget how easily students separate those things out in their mind that they think about learning grammar particularly and tackling constructions in sentences as a sort of obstacle course to get through and somehow it gets lost... It's one of the reasons we started to do this in the first place even in the higher levels on the grounds that by the time the candidates had fought their way through the constructions of a particular bit of Sophocles and the fact that it was one of the greatest bits of literature ever written had passed them by completely because they'd sweated so miserably! And even, you know, doing Sophocles' *Antigone* with my level 2 students the Greek is so hard that you actually have to stop and say, I know this has been difficult, because we have sweated blood over it – but now let's think about what it is saying and doing as a text.

**Eleanor:** Saying, 'Now, let's look at what we've got and make it into a translation.'

**Susanna:** So I think keeping the link between them throughout – that you do the hard work on the grammar and then you can use it to look at these wonderful texts with these questions that encourage you to think about these texts that are doing things with the language – keeps it interesting. It reinforces – no, helps overcome that barrier or obstacle. [**Eleanor:** Yes.] You're not just translating for translation's sake: you're learning that you need to know how a subjunctive works not just to create abstruse conditional sentences but so that you can unpack a particular passage which will then you know contribute to the understanding of what Cicero or Virgil is doing.

**Eleanor:** And also when they've moved on later on it gives them a means of deciding where they want to put in half an hour's very hard work on three lines [**Susanna:** Yes.] to understand what's going on they have be able to know where to spend 'all that time'.

**Susanna:** And it allows students, of course, to work on these things more independently and means you're not dependent upon what you can cover in class. There is still a sorting out bit, with students being encouraged to go back over them [the passages/texts], work on them, which does partly overcome this problem of not necessarily everybody getting through everything in class on occasion or when there's a really good question 5 or 6 – sorry! – but there just wasn't time to do them in that particular session and you need to move on the next week, it gives the students the ability to go and do some work for themselves. Given that this is part of the assessment the more practice they get the better.

**Eleanor:** So at that point there's an advantage in letting people practice and anyone who is thinking of using this as an 'add-on' should think about using it for people who are clearly applying themselves and getting ahead in that it's something they can go and look at themselves to start

expanding [Susanna: Yes.] their skills as they go. Err... I was going to ask ‘What did you think of online *Latin in Action*?’, which you’ve been very positive about so far, which is nice, given that you provided the materials, to which was added the external online expertise courtesy of Tim Hill, who packaged it into these boxes. [Susanna: Yes, I appreciated it, it appealed to me!], but was there anything else you wanted to say about it?

**Susanna:** Um... No, I think we’ve mostly covered it. We haven’t yet had the chance to use the online stuff with our own students, obviously.<sup>3</sup> It’s kind of tricky because while I’m the person who’s developed it I’m not actually involved in teaching the Latin, but I work closely with those who do, so it’s something I’m looking forward to as I think it will probably help quite a lot. I like the set up and format. I find it gets round some of the physical problems, as we’ve already discussed, with trying to get the material across. We don’t at the moment for other reasons, but if we ever get to teach these classes in a room with a data projector it might actually be...

**Eleanor:** A way of having them [the materials] to hand – you could project it onto the whiteboard and then scribble over the top...

**Susanna:** That’s a nice idea actually. Because it does so often prove useful.

**Eleanor:** Or one of those smartboard things so that you can keep a record of it.

**Susanna:** Of course! That’s one of the things that you want to do – for discussion, you want to write the passage on the board so you can get them [the students] to think about it, but it takes a long time to write Greek and Latin on a board and it’s very hard on the arm [laughs] even harder when your wretched whiteboard has got to the stage where it’s...

**Eleanor:** It’s grey!

**Susanna:** Yeah! The sheer physical effort involved in wiping it off! This will possibly be a random observation about the online stuff I’d like, maybe, at least in theory, to see it being pushed in these directions. It’s [*Latin in Action*’s] the kind of approach that could be extended to other languages. Subjects like, now in Newcastle we’re working in a School of Historical Studies – History, Classics and Archaeology – so history students ideally need to work or are working with translated texts from foreign languages that they’re not necessarily comfortable with. Now there are limits to this as it depends on how many texts you have available of this material, but the principle of that idea [Eleanor: Oh, yes – Old English, Mediaeval French] bits of German. I do a practice exercise for our Study Skills sessions with our postgraduates where I look at the two very different standard versions of the carol Silent Night in relation to the German original which works rather well actually because it works very nicely with German and even with students who don’t know any German at all. You have to nudge them to get that *par* might mean ‘pair’...

**Eleanor:** I can see why, because they might know ‘par’ and French in mind.

**Susanna:** So you go for *har* and ‘hair’ and they ask pointedly what *par* might mean.

**Eleanor:** I think that’s the challenge with this approach – quite often – it’s thinking ‘How would I direct somebody in **this** direction rather than giving them the answer.

**Susanna:** Yes, and that’s been a challenge for me over the time of doing it. It can be quite tricky at times and I think one’s getting better, but it can be terribly hard, especially with the effects-type questions. You have to nudge them in the right direction without giving them – well, ‘leading the witness’ as it were [laughs] – and sometimes I’ll ask a question, which is terribly convoluted and then have to stop and say, ‘I’ve more or less given it to you now!’ and the class grins back at me. So that is the challenge with this. So that’s why hopefully with this stuff being online and if people are using it or would use it, you can get an exchange of ideas of what worked.

**Eleanor:** Yes. At this point we can probably point out that there is a feedback section to this but questions of content or suggestions of that type should go to Susannah, questions about technical matters to Tim Hill, feedback about the whole thing comes to me. You’ve mentioned a couple of things in there which, particularly the ability to potentially project it in the classroom but you’ve said you were hoping to introduce the online version alongside the classroom version. So:

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<sup>3</sup> The online materials were still under development at the time of the interview (October 2008).

## **How would having *Latin in Action* online change what you do in the classroom? Or how would you direct the students towards it?**

**Susanna:** I think it would... It's difficult with this being theoretical, but I think it would probably affect the way in which you set up the homework/preparation side. Quite apart from anything else, given photocopier problems, or of my own self being ready in time, if it's actually online you can sort of say, 'We will be doing this on Friday – have a look in advance and familiarise yourself with, you know, at least the first translation, so you can know what the passage is about.'

I think I probably would arguably use it as a way, for example, to get them to do some preparation in advance of when we first saw a passage, so that they're not going into it cold and reading it for the first time in class, so that could be very useful [in terms of not wasting time reading that could be used analysing and learning]. 'Read translation A, have a quick look at the Latin so you have some sort of idea where you are' and I'd perhaps add preparing language questions of matching things up in advance, too. I think that's easier with the online version.

**Eleanor:** So, [using the online version for] providing a framework [for informed classroom activity that starts straightaway]?

**Susanna:** Yes, I think it would be easier to relate the grammar topics directly into that. OK – so, the best way of using it would be to say, 'We're looking at revision of x, y, z topics, go and follow the links.' Or 'What we're looking at here are forms of first declension and second declension nouns', for example, so you can say, 'Revise the tables and see if you can spot anything in the passage they relate to.' So I think that would be one thing which one could use it for [that isn't a strong possibility currently].

**Eleanor:** Then you're using it to get them to spend time outside the classroom 'on task' but also to do some self-assessment of what their needs are beforehand? [**Susanna:** Yes, exactly!] Then you've got, 'I want you to look at it so you can spend some preparation time on the things that you know you need to know.'

**Susanna:** Yes, I suppose that it does... It helps them get used to things...

**Eleanor:** At that point, I did have a final question, which was 'Why did you think it was useful for tutors and for tutors?', but I think you've answered that fairly comprehensively [**Susanna:** laughs] on the way through... So, if there's anything else that you'd like to say before we wrap up?

**Susanna:** Not that I can think of off hand I must admit. Of course, I've spoken so little! [laugh]

**Eleanor:** Well, then, if anyone does have any particular questions about adopting this pedagogy in the classroom, please get in touch. And we would just like to thank Susanna very much indeed for sparing so much of her time to talk so entertainingly and in detail of how you might do so. Thank you very much.

**The End**