

## Forum

# Distance-learning with Seneca

Evan Dutmer

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On April 6<sup>th</sup> 2020 Steven Hunt wrote in *Ad Familiares* about the relative preparedness of Classics for distance-learning in a time of coronavirus (Hunt 2020). He wrote, ‘Classics continues to thrive online, buzzing up and down the wires, zapping through the air, and into countless homes through computer screen, laptop, ipad and smartphone.’ (Hunt 2020). Pointing to over two decades of intentional investment in an online, digital world for Classics and Classics learning in the UK and US, Hunt concludes: ‘So now, with the challenges before us of having to teach remotely using the internet, Latinists are already digital natives: students know how to find the materials, use them efficiently, and learn.’



Figure 1. A Medieval image of Plato, Aristotle and Seneca

**Author of correspondence:** Evan Dutmer. E-mail: [evan.dutmer@culver.org](mailto:evan.dutmer@culver.org)

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The flourishing of Classics online is no doubt in large part due to the tireless efforts of forward-thinking digital humanists and classicists who saw the potential of the internet as a teaching tool for classical languages and cultures, and sought out the material resources to realise their plans with visionary entrepreneurial spirit. The digital offerings of the *Cambridge Latin Course*, the texts and tools of the Perseus Digital Library, the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, University of Chicago’s Logeion lexicon: each evidences not mere survival, but excellence in Classics online.

But Hunt’s overarching questions, ‘Why are we so well placed? And what does this mean for Classics teaching in the long term?’, made me wonder whether we, as classicists and students of Classics, may have something special to draw from in the literatures of classical traditions—in this case, in the literatures of Greek and Roman antiquity—that might advantage us with respect to understanding our current educational situation.

And as I thought of it, I was drawn to the situation of *writing* itself in antiquity, in particular, in the views of ancient philosophers. I was especially struck by connections between our current distance-teaching and -learning—and the imperative to implement accessible, asynchronous learning for our dispersed students—and the function of the instructive, educative letter (Lat. *epistula*, Gr. *epistole*, ‘epistle’) in the instructional repertoire of the ancient philosophers for their dispersed followers. Later in this essay I reflect on the connections writing, teaching, and education have always afforded us, and say a word on whether the internet’s teaching capabilities may, in fact, elicit deeper similarities between teaching in antiquity and today.

For writing was, too, a technological innovation at one time (just like the internet), and one which presented unique challenges as well as exciting possibilities to prospective teachers and students. To our possible surprise, it was not without its sceptics among the philosophers of antiquity.

Most famously, Socrates himself questioned the efficacy, security, and purpose of writing in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (274c–277a), doubting the power of writing to compare with the acts of teaching and learning as practised between two living, breathing, rational persons (not one such animate person and an inanimate, indiscriminate object of imperfect signs and scribbles). Plato’s *Seventh Letter* (344c) continues the trend, remarking that the serious (*spoudaios*) person avoids writing about serious things (*spoudaia*) in any permanent form, lest the public (*anthropoi*) unwittingly come across what they really think. (Amusing to imagine what Plato might

think of contemporary politicians' tendency to deny that they said the very thing they said at some time past -recorded in all sorts of traditional and social media - not very serious behaviour, indeed!)

With some exceptions, later Hellenistic and Late Antique thinkers seem to have had fewer qualms with the written word, and, in the art of letter-writing, in particular, they became quite accomplished<sup>1</sup>. Epicurus in his *Letter to Menoecus* exhorts his addressee to live according to the Epicurean ideal—in a retirement of simple pleasures, devotion to philosophy, and in freedom from fear of death. Cicero, later, takes to letter-writing to maintain philosophical relationships with all sorts of learned persons, especially his Epicurean-inclined friend, Atticus.

Early Christianity, of course, benefitted immensely from reliable transmission of messages and teachings via epistolary means, with Paul's letters becoming crucial to the codification of Christian teachings among dispersed (sometimes underground) ecclesial communities.

But it is the *Letters* of an ancient Stoic Roman writer, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, I think, which serve as the best example of a kind of ancient distance-learning program to illustrate my argument.



Figure 2. Lucius Annaeus Seneca

These letters were the *Epistulae ad Lucilium* ('Letters to Lucilius'). Lucilius was ostensibly a fellow student of philosophy, though one earlier in his journey, who sent letters to Seneca so that he might learn according to the 'distance syllabus' of the Roman Stoic master. In the *Letters*, Seneca assumes the character of the wiser (but still understanding and humane) elder master in Stoic philosophy. He writes in the first letter to Lucilius, urging him to pay attention and commit to his continual education (all author's translations):

Free yourself for yourself, gather and save your time... Persuade yourself that what I write is true: certain moments are ripped from us, some carried off, some glide away... Therefore, Lucilius, do as you write you are doing: hold on to every hour... While life is put off, it runs by. Nothing is ours, Lucilius; only time is ours.' (Letter 1).

Seneca recommends a daily reading program to Lucilius to begin truly living, to go on to 'maximise' his time in philosophy in pursuit of wisdom and psychic balance:

So always read the tested authors, and when you want to move on to others, return to the first authors. Every day acquire some help against poverty, something against death, something against other misfortunes, too; and when you have gone through many of these writings, pick one which you'll digest thoroughly that day. I do this, too; from the many things I read, I hold on to something. (Letter 2).

Seneca assures Lucilius that this program is working for him, commenting on changes he notices in himself:

I think, Lucilius, I'm not only being improved, but that I'm being transformed. But I don't promise or even hope that there's nothing left in me that needs to be changed. I have many things which ought to be compacted, thinned out, or accentuated. And this itself is evidence that my soul has been transformed into something better, because it sees vices that it didn't know about previously. (Letter 6).



Figure 3. 15th Century illuminated copy of Seneca's first letter from the Laurentian Library

In the *Letters*, we have continual, uninterrupted access to this sort of idealised coach/teacher/sage. Seneca isn't just a teacher, he's a fellow learner, a *proficiens* (one making progress) just like Lucilius. He offers typical Stoic consolation in the face of misfortunes that Lucilius faces at a distance from Seneca (whether it be loss of friends, sickness, loneliness, feelings of emptiness), emphasising tranquillity in spirit can never result from outside circumstances, whether they be good or bad. He then, regularly and paradoxically, suggests that Lucilius and Seneca aren't so far apart after all—that they are connected through the letters and their common pursuit of wisdom and moral improvement:

But place (*locus*) contributes little toward tranquillity; it is the mind which must make all things agreeable to itself... Why are you not where you want [to be]? Send your thoughts

there... A friend should be held in spirit. This friend is never absent. Every day he can see whomever he wishes. So, study with me, eat with me, walk with me. I see you, my Lucilius, and I even hear you. I am with you so much that I wonder whether I should begin to write you notes (*codicillos*), and not letters (*epistulas*). (*Letter 40*).

Seneca urges without pressing; he coaxes without pandering; he lectures without pontificating. He asks for practice, progress, and application of his precepts from Lucilius. He asks if he's going too quickly; he then slows down. He repeats himself. He is patient, persistent, and constructive in his feedback. In essence, he is teaching effectively for Lucilius (who, it turns out, could be any of us following along). He writes in a characteristically even-tempered passage, allowing for human imperfection, practice, and goal-setting:

Philosophy teaches us to do, not to speak, and this it compels: that every person live according to their own law, that their life not be dissonant with their speech, and that the inner life itself ought to be of one colour, without disharmony, with all their actions. This is the greatest duty and the greatest proof of wisdom... 'Who will make good on this?' [you ask.] Few... For this is difficult. But I do not say that the wise person must always keep the same pace, but rather the same path. Observe yourself... For once take a rule you'll live by and measure up your whole life to this standard... What is wisdom? To always want the same things; to always not want the same things. (*Letter 20*).

The effect of all this is that we *do* make progress by reading from this amazing epistolary education program. The letters are passive until we pick them up. When we do, they demand attention, forward movement, and practice in perfection.

Seneca, I think, provides us with an excellent model for distance-learning (asynchronous progress toward our better selves) and offers us a steady, responsive guide. Seneca makes clear that *he*, too, is learning. In fact, Seneca seems to think that traditional 'information-transference' learning only hides this fact—that we move forward at our own pace, only when we are ready. In *Letter 39*, Seneca warns that Lucilius should not cram philosophical doctrines into his head via popular, topical summaries when he has failed to understand what they actually say. We are, in the end, progressing on our own terms, separate from one another. And learning only becomes knowledge when interiorised by our own curriculum, roused by our own energies:

Take up in your hands the index of philosophers; this itself will compel you to wake up, when you see how many have been labouring *for you*. You'll desire to be one of them yourself. For this is the best thing the noble soul has within itself: that it can be roused to what's honourable. (*Letter 39*).

His *Letters*, accordingly, are at the ready for whenever, wherever, and however we want to practise. They're ready as a distance curriculum for whenever we want to join in the story of moral development to our better selves, which others selflessly worked to put before us.

But I think this has broader relevance than Seneca's *Letters* and the distance lessons they contain. Classics, as a discipline, is an asynchronous learning experience. The teachers—whether it be Seneca, Plato, Euripides, Virgil, Cicero, the shipwrecks of the Mediterranean, the carbonised corpses and bread loaves of Pompeii and Herculaneum, a cache of coins found in Tunisia, lead deposits from Roman factories preserved in Greenlandic ice, the touching, delicate mummy portraits at Fayum—have already sent out their silent missives, their distance syllabuses, in all their variance, wonder, grandness, tenderness, complexity and humanity.

We stand at a distance, now as ever: for better and for worse, we learn far away from our classical teachers, separated not just by geographical, but by massive temporal, distance. That we now are separate from our students and from our teachers today has of course changed so much, and so we grieve in our adjustment - but, for all of this, perhaps we've had good practice.

The lessons we teach in Classics—across the humanities, of course—are not superficial ones, mere 'information transference'. One can't download the 'facts' of Ancient Mediterranean cultures and history and have *understood* those peoples (similarly, one can't understand the *Romans* in all their complexity solely via 'perfect' Latin grammar). Something else happens when we *study* the ancient world; the interior curriculum of each of us organises; we change how we look at things. Whether we are in-person or online, the humanities do this for us. They alight in us lifelong self-reflection, aimed at discovery and assurance of purpose and human flourishing, through ancient peoples' trying to achieve the very same thing.

Whenever we're ready to get back in to practice, Seneca stands at the ready: 'Examine yourself, and scrutinise and observe yourself in different ways; but, before all else, see to it that whether in philosophy or life itself you've made *progress* (*profeceris*).' (*Letter 36*).

***Evan Dutmer is Instructor in Latin, Ancient Mediterranean Cultures, and Ethics at the Culver Academies, a boarding school in Culver, IN, USA. He received his PhD in Ancient Philosophy at Northwestern University in September 2019. He is the recipient of the 2020 Indiana Classical Conference Teacher of the Year Award, Rising Star. Evan.Dutmer@culver.org***

Endnote: Stoic consolation is a popular topic in our current situation. As but a small sampling of what's been written, consult these two pieces written in *The Guardian* since the advent of Covid-19: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/18/remaining-calm-in-adversity-what-stoicism-can-teach-us-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic>; and <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/25/stoicism-in-a-time-of-pandemic-coronavirus-marcus-aurelius-the-meditations>

## Note

1 See Morello, R and Morrison, A D (Eds.) (2007) *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

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