



Living Latin: An Interview with Professor Terence Tunberg

by Mair Lloyd (The Open University)

Terence Tunberg is a professor of Latin Language and Literature at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. He is a world-renowned proponent of Latin speaking as a means of helping with language learning and, for more advanced students, as a way to consolidate knowledge of the language. He is the founder and convener of the Lexington Latin *Conventiculum*, a week-long total immersion seminar in active Latin that takes place each July. Mair Lloyd, a PhD student at the Open University, first met Prof Tunberg when she attended the 2014 *Conventiculum* and that experience became central to her PhD researching the communicative approach to Latin teaching through a sociocultural perspective on Latin learning. This interview was recorded shortly after she and Prof Tunberg took part in a panel on Living Latin at the Classical Association conference in Edinburgh, in April 2016. A link to recordings of the four panel papers can be found at the end of this article. The fourth recording shows Prof Tunberg demonstrating some of the techniques he uses in his teaching at the *Conventiculum*.

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panel at the 2016 Classical Association Conference in Edinburgh.

ML: The Lexington *Conventiculum* is world renowned as a Latin learning event. Can you explain for our readers when and where it takes place and how they would be able to participate?

TT: It takes place on the grounds of the University of Kentucky, Lexington, toward the end of July each year. Anyone wanting to attend should contact me before 1st May, or earlier, as places fill up quickly. The idea of the event is to propagate the custom of speaking Latin for various purposes, for whatever purposes the people who take part want to do it and there are many different purposes. People are interested in developing an active dimension to their knowledge of Latin (first and foremost) to deepen their knowledge of Latin as a language. Many believe this will help them become more sensitive and instinctive readers of Latin. Others think that developing an active dimension to their knowledge of Latin will increase the range of teaching strategies they can use in the classroom. Yet others have personal or religious reasons for cultivating this dimension of Latinity. This was started 20 years ago, and it is just a huge success and a lot of fun.

ML: Yes, I agree totally with that. It was an immensely enjoyable experience. Do you have any information on costs for registration and for accommodation this year?

TT: This year, the entry fee is \$120. We use that to cover some running costs and for the initial buffet dinner, but we are completely non-profit. Attendees will have to cover their accommodation costs, their food and their travel to and from Lexington, and that is all. There is student housing on the university campus in a number of lovely residences, many of which are new, even since you were there. There is a flat-rate cost. For a person who wants to occupy a whole suite, that is two bedrooms and a bathroom, that is \$65 a night. Many people, however, choose to share the suite and occupy just the private bedrooms, and that costs \$35 per night, which is very little.

ML: So what level of Latin is required for people who come to the *Conventiculum*?

TT: We only have a week together and that is too short of a time for us to get into the business of teaching basic language structures, so we have simply chosen our audience to be people who have a passive knowledge of Latin, however rusty here and there. People who can make their way through a text, perhaps often using a dictionary, but people who have covered the main structures and morphology and want to add an active dimension, and I think we can add that in the space of 6 or 7 days. We can do that, and it stays with people. Of course, it is nice for them to practise speaking somewhere else when they leave, but we find people who don't do that still come back and they're at a different level

from when they first came. A residue of the experience stays in your mind. We certainly encourage people to go out and practise because we are trying to do something seditious here. We're trying to overturn the way people appreciate Latin so we want people to take it away and start groups and clubs and all that, but whatever the case, it does add an active dimension for most people.

ML: So when people come to the *Conventiculum*, they need to have a basic level of grammar and a bit of reading behind them?

TT: Correct, even if not much reading.

ML: And no speaking?

TT: No, no speaking is necessary. Absolutely not. It's our job to add that.

ML: What made you start the *Conventiculum*?

TT: Well, when I was a doctoral student in the 1980s, I started studying, as well as the Classical authors, the later ones who used the language as a language of the learned. These people all had Latin even though some of them never used any other language, they all had Latin plus their native language, and I just thought it would be exciting if I could replicate that knowledge in myself. I started asking people 'Where does anybody today speak it?'. I found that there were indeed seminars in Europe, especially in Germany, where enthusiastic teachers did this, and so, before I finished my dissertation, I joined them and from then on, I was always interested in speaking Latin. Then about 15 years later, I had a guest professorship at Leuven in Belgium and I belonged to a Latin-speaking circle there, and I thought 'Now I've just got tenure back in the University of Kentucky, so I don't run the risk of losing my job. When I go back I am going to start something like this back in America', and that is how it happened.

ML: So where exactly was it that you went in Germany?

TT: Well the seminars that I did in Germany, they were *Ludi Latini Freisingenses*, at Freising in Germany. This was before the Belgium experience. The leader was Valahfridus (Wilfried) Stroh who is a brilliant Latinist and is active in Latin speaking today.

ML: And was the experience there similar to Lexington? Did you try to replicate it?

TT: It wasn't too dissimilar. My other sources of inspiration came from reading humanist dialogues designed as models for young speakers of Latin, and from some of the ideas on Latin eloquence promulgated by Erasmus and Comenius. In Lexington, we've innovated a bit and added some activities of our own and we are always adding activities, always inventing new things to do. For example, we have started using riddles, first of all to make people guess them, and then come up with their own and put them to other people. There are all sorts of little things we keep adding to make the programme varied.

ML: Could you say a little bit more about what the basic programme is like. How does that work day to day?

TT: Usually, in the morning sessions, people who have never had any experience of speaking are separated from those who have had experience, and this is completely self-determined. On the first day, I pass around a list of names and the people who want to be with the beginners put a 'T' beside their name, which stands for *Tiro*. The people who want to be with the more experienced speakers put 'P', which stands for *Peritior*. Every morning, the *Tirones*, away from the *Peritiores*, do things where they practise expressions that are important for everyday use, such as salutations, talking about the weather, domestic things. Now these expressions are all available in Latin texts. They are just not often in the authors that students read to begin with. We have many sessions like that and they prepare *Tirones* for speaking with each other and with the more advanced students in and out of class. We do dictation and we do 'repeat after me', which I did in the demonstration lesson at the Classical Association Conference. These exercises help students become familiar with the sounds of Latin. An important part of the skill of Latin conversation is not just being able to come up with the words yourself, but to understand other people when they speak to you. You also have to understand a rather wide variety of accents or sounds because everybody brings a bit of their native language sound with them. They can't help that. However accurate they

want to be with vowels, it's just inevitable. A little bit of hearing other people gets rid of the initial awkwardness very quickly, we have found. Different traditional systems of pronunciation (such as the so-called ecclesiastical Latin and the 'restored' approach) differ mostly in the way consonants sound. If people train themselves to treat long vowels and diphthongs as long, and to try to observe the correct placement of accent, people using different pronunciation systems can get used to each other's sounds rather quickly. The initial barriers to understanding occasioned by differing pronunciations need not last long - in my experience.

While the *Tirones* are doing their morning sessions, the more experienced speakers either explain texts in Latin or they begin to compose a play. This playwriting is something we have done in every *Conventiculum* for a long time now, though we didn't do it at the very beginning. Every year we choose a theme passage which everybody, experienced and non-experienced, has to read. The *Peritiores* are divided into groups and they must compose a play about that passage and the passage is known to everybody, because everybody has read it during the *Conventiculum*. This makes the content of the plays more accessible, especially for the *Tirones*. The fun is to see how each group, and there are four or five or sometimes six groups, how each group of *Peritiores* makes a very different play out of the same concept. Writing and performing a play is a terrific exercise because you have to talk about the lines, you have to discuss what parts you will create, what characters. You have to do some composition because you have to write the script out. We don't ask that anybody memorises their part, but each has to write out their own parts. Then the rest of the group reviews everything and they suggest ways of correcting or improving on dialogue. The performance of the plays is the climax at the end of the *Conventiculum*. Everyone comes together to see all the plays and to bring the gathering to a close.

Also during *Conventiculum* afternoons, there are mixed sessions where the experienced and the inexperienced speakers are together. We think that it helps the inexperienced to be with the experienced for part of the day. They may say less but they get access to a lot of

input by being present. Those sessions may revolve around explaining texts, or sometimes we do riddles or we play games. There is a game we have, for example, called *Vas Vocabulorum*. This involves one player holding and concealing a word they pulled out of a basket and giving clues, and other people who have to guess what it is. We also go for outings. Sometimes if we have somebody who wants to tell us about something we all sit around and listen to the talk. We have had guest speakers on a wide variety of topics, ranging from versification to methods of teaching. One of our participants once gave us a fascinating presentation about the animals of Australia!

ML: So what takes place in the *Conventiculum* is an evolving approach?

TT: It is. It is based on what seems to work.

ML: How do you go about evolving it? Are you basing development on any theories or on experience?

TT: Well, it is rather *ad hoc*. I work with my Latin undergraduate and graduate students here in Lexington throughout the year and we do extra sessions every week where we have the opportunity to try activities out. From among these, I sometimes find things to try in the seminar. I get feedback from my students and from people at the seminar about what they like and don't like and about what works for them. When we find something that works well, it becomes a permanent feature.

ML: So it's a piece of continuous research and teaching, finding out what works?

TT: It is indeed.

ML: You've mentioned what goes on in the teaching session, but Latin is also the only language used between participants outside class. How important are those times where participants interact informally in Latin?

TT: Very important. I think it is highly important for people to learn to communicate their personal thoughts, uninfluenced by pre-arranged programmes and set exercises.

ML: And what do you think about correcting people when they make mistakes in speaking?

TT: We very rarely correct people. It is more important for people to gain confidence in communication and learn not to fear errors. Of course correctness in expression is always our goal, especially in a classical language where the norms of usage (I believe) are more fixed in canonical texts than is the case in the still-evolving national languages. But we all strive for this goal of correctness, and there is no need for 'language police' to make overt corrections to help us reach this goal. The more experienced speakers will constantly model the desired patterns. Most of the people trying their hand at this will want (of their own accord) to advance in this direction. Finally, many of our conversations revolve around exemplary texts, in which the desired linguistic patterns are repeatedly illustrated.

ML: I think you have painted a clear picture of the Lexington *Conventiculum*. Could you tell me briefly about the seminar at Dickinson?

TT: The Dickenson seminar in Pennsylvania is much like the Lexington *Conventiculum*. Some of our colleagues at that university have some funding for enrichment for Latin teachers and that lets them put on two types of activity in the summer. One is a conventional seminar where they read a text and translate into English. This year they are reading something early mediaeval - Bede - but most of the time it's an ancient text. The other, which takes part around the first week in July is something which is rather like a clone of the Lexington experience. The participant costs work a little bit differently, but are still very low and what people do is very similar to what I just described in Lexington. I lead the Dickenson seminar myself too, with my colleague Prof Milena Minkova.

ML: And now on to the Graduate Certificate in Latin Studies – that is relatively new, isn't it?

TT: Well actually it has existed since about 2001 because already by that time the summer seminars became famous and we wanted to do something similar during the academic year and so I started doing some courses taught through the medium of Latin, provided of course the students were prepared for it. Then we got the idea that we could have a whole curriculum of Latin courses taught this

way where Latin is truly the vehicular language, the communicative language in which the course is run. It's not the complete MA in Classics, but it is a way, for those who want to, of doing some of the Latin course credit towards the two-year MA. Students still need Greek if they want the MA. Some people come just for the certificate though and it is a true stand-alone diploma offered by the university. We found this avenue ideal for delivering through the medium of Latin because such certificates are offered for curricula that are parts of recognised disciplines but can either take an interdisciplinary or novel approach to teaching. The Latin Studies certificate took a lot of development, but it was finally approved. If the certificate is done as a stand-alone qualification, it can be finished in just a year, that is if it isn't done as part of the MA. The rub there is that, so far, we have not been able to engineer things so that people who are not candidates for the MA get financial support. If they do the certificate as part of the MA there may be funding available so most students do the MA too.

ML: Does that graduate certificate entitle you to teach in the USA?

TT: Well it's certainly a good criterion to teach in America. There is a teacher credential which they call 'certification' which is offered by faculties of education which is not subject-specific but it deals with things like child psychology, curriculum design and that sort of thing. There are public, and by that I mean state schools, that want all of their teachers to be certified in that way. The number of schools is so large though that there are many private institutions, that is institutions not funded by the state, where they accept someone with a BA. Our certificate could entitle them to a slightly better salary because they are even better qualified than a BA.

ML: I see. And does that graduate certificate require prior knowledge of Latin?

TT: Yes, because it is for graduates and we expect applicants to have a BA in Classics or a related discipline.

ML: So ideally they would have studied both Latin and Greek?

TT: Correct.

ML: And those courses and the MA funding are open to international students too aren't they?

TT: Absolutely, and I would like to have more.

ML: We've talked about your teaching approach and your courses. Now tell me what do you think are the benefits of that approach? Why is it you have adopted that and what do you think the pay-off is?

TT: I think the pay-off is that people who do it our way know Latin better and it's not as difficult for them to navigate through texts. I would never assert that there is anyone who would not find any passages difficult, because there are always passages that are rather difficult and that puzzle people for centuries, but I think, by and large, for the average text, that people who have used spoken Latin are on a more intimate basis with it. I think that this is the most important advantage for someone who has experienced this approach to Latin, whether they want to be a researcher or a teacher or anything else. I would put in second place, but still important, the fact that a teacher with such a command of Latin has a wider range of strategies that they can employ in the classroom because they can use spoken activities as well.

ML: So could you tell me about what speaking Latin has done for you? In particular, I am interested in your reading experience now. How do you find it reading ancient texts?

TT: Well I am always reading texts and I've probably been about the same level for a long, long time, but when I first got into this many, many years ago, I do think my reading ability grew by leaps and bounds. I read Latin texts like I read a French text or even some English texts because I don't even think about what goes with what as you might when beginning reading. For a long time I have not done that.

ML: So can you become completely absorbed in a Latin text as you can in a text in your own language?

TT: I believe that.

ML: Depending on the difficulty?

TT: Exactly. I believe that. Yes I do.

ML: Well that's amazing and that's a great thing to aspire to for anybody.

TT: Well I think that's the main goal, and if we care about it for any reason, whatever we want to do with it, we would like to do it better I would think.

ML: Yes. And I suppose our ultimate aim is reading and pleasure from reading?

TT: It is. I would never dream about Latin becoming the language of, say, the European Union. There were people who were actually involved in the revival of active Latin after the Second World War. There was a Frenchman, Prof Jean Capelle, who put on a huge Active Latin conference in Avignon in 1956, and the many priests and many professors there thought that Latin really would be a practical suggestion for the true European language. I think there is a certain justification for that suggestion, because Latin is truly the language that has the longest tradition, and most European nations had contact with it. It is nobody's native language so it doesn't advantage any particular nationality, which I think is good, but obviously it was not practical, it was elitist and I don't think that that it is even something we need to hope about. We just want to know it better. One thing I think that goes with it is that there is a continuous tradition from antiquity itself right through the middle ages and the early modern period of publishing in Latin. Think of all the commentaries in the Teubner texts and even the odd article still to this day you find written in the Latin language, and I don't see any harm in keeping that custom alive. Why not use the target language to talk about the texts written in it? The one who writes such a thing is killing several birds with one stone, I think. They're increasing – or the Latin is *acuo* – they are sharpening their own command of the language. They are writing not for one nation. All those who study Lucretius better know Latin to begin with! So I think that's not an impossible goal.

ML: Yes indeed and again that would increase your facility with the language.

TT: Oh absolutely!

ML: So, it seems to me that the people within easy distance of Lexington and Dickenson are very fortunate to be able to get to your Latin seminars. What advice would you have for anybody who wanted to organise a *Conventiculum* somewhere else? What would they need to do?

TT: Well they might want to come and visit me and I would be willing to give advice. They might want to take part in a *Conventiculum* and maybe adapt for their own purposes what they found was going on here. It wouldn't take too many people: one would simply need a determined and dedicated group to keep things moving.

ML: Let's look at something a little less ambitious. What advice would you give to a teacher at any level who wanted to incorporate some aspects of your approach within their teaching?

TT: Start doing it! Find some students who might even like to do it for fun out of class. But do things in class and do some of the things that we do for the *Tirones*. They'll work in a class. They're useful!

ML: So it would be a good idea to visit and to take part and then to take some of those practices home?

TT: I think so. I think it's why a lot of people do it. They also do it to get better at Latin and sometimes they like to think up their own activities. Both of those reasons.

ML: Below this article we will have a link to a video that shows some of your teaching techniques so teachers can look at that and consider trying out what you do there. Now, the seminars and the graduate certificate in Latin Studies, they both need a working knowledge of Latin, but do you think that spoken Latin might have a role to play in *ab initio* courses?

TT: I do. I believe that an active dimension in teaching which involves plenty of language activity, and a lot of input learning in the classroom environment could only be beneficial for learners. I know there are people that say from the beginning we should do total immersion, but I don't think that will be good for the number of people taking Latin, because it will exclude too many people, too quickly. I think that the teacher in the very beginning should have ready recourse to the native language to explain things, but that they should do things in Latin too, so I think spoken Latin and spoken exercises have a place *ab initio*.

ML: And have you tried using active Latin with beginners yourself?

TT: I have done it myself and I never practise total immersion when I do it

that way. I have done some of the things we do at the *Conventiculum* like those in the demonstration video. I have also done things like practising some phrases, for example, giving things to people and then asking them to give them back to me and then asking someone else to say what I just did. This automatically gets students practising changing the personal endings of verbs. Those kinds of things.

ML: Do you have any plans for developing your approach or your courses in the future?

TT: I would like to find more helpers now because inevitably I am going to wind down eventually, and I would like to see what we have been doing going on with some of the people who have been helping me up till now. We'll see.

ML: Earlier in our talk, you mentioned sedition and your pre-tenure worries

about losing your job. Do you still perceive active use of Latin as something revolutionary?

TT: Yes I do. The majority of other classicists still look at this with suspicion and maybe a bit of ridicule. Even now my colleagues at my own institution regard this as eccentric, and definitely a kind of 'extra activity' (at best), which must always take second place to the serious work in 'real' classics. This work in real classics must involve translation from Latin into the national tongue – and preferably not too much attention to the linguistic vehicle in which all this is transmitted. However, we are continually demonstrating the value of adding an active dimension to Latin learning through our seminars and our graduate certificate in Latin Studies. We would welcome more classicists coming along to see how they can enrich their relationship with Latin.

ML: Thank you very much for talking with me. I hope this interview adds to understanding of the opportunities you are offering and that many of our readers will consider experiencing living Latin for themselves.

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Links to further information:

The Lexington *Conventiculum*:
<https://mcl.as.uky.edu/conversational-latin-seminar-2016-english>

The Dickinson *Conventiculum*:
<http://scca.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/Conventiculum-latinum-at-dickinson.html>

Graduate Teaching Certificate:
<http://scca.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/Conventiculum-latinum-at-dickinson.html>

Edinburgh Living Latin Panel:
<https://edtechphd.wordpress.com/2016/04/18/living-latin-at-ca-16-panel-recordings/>