

Pat Story (1931–2025)

by Steven Hunt



Elizabeth Pat Story was well-known to Classics teachers as the one who ‘made’ the Cambridge Latin Course – the UK’s best-selling resource for teaching Latin for beginners (and widely used in the USA too). It is with deepest sadness that we announce that she has died.

Pat first came to Cambridge, to Hughes Hall, as a PGCE Classics student in 1953. She took a full part in the course and the wider life of the university before going off to teach at a girls’ grammar school. She told me that, after a few years’ teaching these academically successful children, using the traditional grammar-translation courses typical of the period, she felt that not only were most of the students themselves bored by it all, but that she was as bored as they were. She longed for something better. We have to remember that this was at a time when the idea of learning Latin as an essential precursor to university – particularly Oxford and Cambridge – was beginning to be questioned; the so-called benefits of the ‘mental gymnastics’ of the traditional courses were becoming hard to justify; and the reorganisation of the school system into mixed-attainment, socially diverse comprehensive schools was becoming a reality. How would Latin, with its elitist cultural baggage survive?

By 1967 Pat was working at the Oxford Department of Education on a Latin Methods Course (a precursor to the PGCE) and at a conference organised for Latin teachers there told them (according to Martin Forrest) ‘the hard facts of life’. She soon caught the eye of the Cambridge School Classics Project (CSCP) team and returned to Hughes Hall in 1967 to work on the new Latin course as an Evaluation Officer. She said that this was ‘the most interesting thing I’d ever done’ and set out plans to carry out a large-scale evaluation of the programme. CSCP did not just produce the Cambridge Latin Course (CLC) – they evaluated the materials every step of the way with scores of ordinary teachers in schools across the UK. After trials, the original stage pamphlets were discarded; the weird ‘form a’ and ‘form b’ were dropped for the traditional ‘nominative’ and ‘accusative’; the excessive gradient of difficulty was smoothed; and extra material written to plug the gaps. Each story was edited and re-edited, both in the light of it being read and re-read by the CSCP team, but, more importantly, in the experience of teachers trying it out in the classroom. Pat wryly told me that a lot of the original stories written for the CLC ended up on the cutting room floor. Members of the CSCP team had to be thick-skinned.

Pat was a great organiser and CSCP needed organising at this and various other points in its long life. She was witty, kind, and also very clever and had an amazing eye for detail. These qualities made for an excellent team member while working on the course and she carried the others along. Pat understood the underlying methodology very well, and she knew the intricate details of the continuous storyline like the back of her hand. These two qualities, along with her experience as a teacher and as a teacher trainer, meant that she was a formidable proponent of the course, its methodology, and its practice. Pat herself was appointed Deputy Director of CSCP in 1976 and then Director in 1987. As a mark of her knowledge and skills, she was also appointed to a Lectureship in the Faculty of Education responsible for the training of Classics teachers on the PGCE. Many teachers of a certain age today remember her classes with fondness and she retained something of the ‘superstar’ status whenever she appeared at a Classics teachers’ meeting. She was, however, characteristically modest, and wore this well.

Pat made a number of very particular contributions to the CLC. First was a set of attainment tests with each one aligned to the principles of the methodology. These light-touch assessments could be taken at various points during the course and were designed to provide diagnostic feedback for the teacher and for the students a sense of achievement – especially to incentivise those who perhaps were thinking that they might not continue with Latin as well as reward those who were. These attainment tests are still used and several hundred thousand have been issued over the years since their introduction. The second was the Independent Learning Manual, which could be given to students who, for whatever reason, were not able to attend school. This provided them with a step-by-step guide to the course, with questions and activities to help self-learners or those who needed to catch up after, for example, a stay in hospital or abroad. Many teachers found the Independent Learning Manual helpful when considering approaches to the teaching the material. While both these products sound standard, it is only because they have become standardised in the minds of so many teachers. At the time they were truly innovative and served to enhance the provision of resources of the CLC in ways in which no other course had attempted before.

What made the CLC work so well was Pat and the CSCP team's deep understanding of how ordinary students (not just the high-flyers) learn in the classroom and what motivates them, something gained through experience as a teacher and as a course evaluator over many years. When she retired in 1991, Pat continued to support CSCP, helping with the development of the UK 4th edition CLC and taking an interest in the 5th, often providing a venue at home for meetings. She gave talks to my own PGCE student teachers not all that long ago and regularly attended the CSCP annual conferences – a modest superstar in the midst of the delegates.

Her attention turned increasingly towards Hughes Hall, where she became a Fellow, Senior Tutor and Vice President. In these roles she helped to guide Hughes Hall from being a female-only college to a mixed one. But she always took care to meet the new PGCE students who had chosen to stay there and encouraged them on what is a challenging course of study – something she knew for herself.



In her later years I got to know Pat well. She was a keen collector of pottery, especially Wemyss Ware, and her house was perfectly looked after and stocked with fine furniture. She was especially fond of her garden, which she had a gardener maintain when she could not do it herself. She had a fine collection of fuchsias and one of those lawns you could only dream about. Pat was always punctual, always ready, a tray of tea and biscuits at the side, and we chatted for hours about the development of the course, Latin teaching more generally, and the state of Classics in schools today.

She had a keen sense of what was the right thing to do and she was a strong judge of character. Over a long career, she made a very significant impact on the teaching of Classics in the UK and further afield.

She will be much missed.