

# QUI DOCET DISCIT

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Years ago, when I was a young university student living far from home, I signed up for a beginner's Latin class. I remember my stomach knotting itself into a bag of pretzels while I waited for the course to start. At the time, I had certain beliefs about my learning abilities, (by "beliefs", I mean "fears").

A quick glance at my old report cards would show I was an average student in every subject save one: English. Combine that singular skill with an aptitude for daydreaming, a tendency to angst out over assignments, and a mild case of generalized anxiety—et voilà: a scholar-in-training is born.

Flashback sequence: I grew up in a home with a mother who thought it was unhealthy to read too much. If my mom had been completely in charge of my life's trajectory, I would have kept up with the crochet and embroidery lessons but lost science and geography. She wasn't fond of education and hadn't particularly enjoyed school in post-WWII Italy. This ambivalence led to odd behaviour where she would frequently invite me to skip school and stay home. I caved to her suggestions even though the only class I really disliked was gym due to the purgatory of ParticipACTION. Fortunately, teachers in my formative years changed everything. A world of possibilities flashed and forever cracked open that shell of limited options my mom insisted was our lot. My grade 8 guidance counsellor encouraged me to pursue higher education. She was adamant, especially after I argued (at fourteen) that it was unlikely I was smart enough to gain entrance to university.

My first year was a bleak experience. As the first girl with the opportunity to study past grade five, I compounded the pressure. I struggled to achieve decent marks, felt intensely isolated, and worried I would let down my entire family. I barely passed creative writing—the program I was in school for, the one my folks thought of as basket-weaving. Italian class undermined my fluency in Neapolitan and caused a flair-up of peasant-ancestry pride. My history prof informed our class that half performed dismally on a test by asking us to look first to the person seated to our right, then to the person on our left.

"Congratulations," he said. "One of you has failed."

This reinforcement of my feelings of ignorance was chipping away at my shaky self-esteem and doing serious damage to my small ego. Getting up and getting to class grew harder and harder. And like the old saying goes, absence makes the grades sink lower.

The days blurred into a long series of disappointments.

I went home. I spent the summer between first and second year working down at Harbourfront scooping up cigarette butts and witnessing a massive Shriner convention descend on Toronto. Little known fact but watching elderly men in fezzes attempt to drive tiny cars past the reflective pool gives one the perspective to try again.

I registered for the Latin class as an act of hope. The first week was overwhelming. The first month—also not promising.

Frustrated, I persisted. Confused, I continued. Haggard, I held on.

There came a day when I really should have dropped the class to lose it from my official transcript, but I stayed the course like a Pompeiiian ignoring the rumblings of Vesuvius. A week later, the instructor—avoiding all the raised hands—called on me to conjugate a verb and I could not.

I wish the story ended there at the moment of my imperfect failure.

His voice oozed sarcasm as he taunted my inability to answer his simple request. “You don’t know?”

Of course, I took the high road, cursed him with malocchio—yes, it’s a thing—and responded, “No, I don’t.”

I left class and never went back, putting in an appearance only at the final exam. For a long time after, I’d dream I was wandering the hallways and searching for the examination room, ready to fight back the only way I knew how, by showing up and trying again.

Tempus fugit: The first time I sat down to plan a syllabus, surrounded by textbooks and outcomes, I kept a mental list of favourite teachers and their strategies of engagement. I thought about my best learning experiences and my worst: The horribili! The horribili! I wrote out the saying, “who teaches, learns” and tacked it above my desk. That instructor taught me a lesson I never forgot. Nescience was my starting place. Continuous learning is the finish line. In between the two points, there are countless opportunities to be kind. Each of those fleeting, fortuitous moments will make the journey worthwhile.