Mass literacy, as illustrated by the Florentine Catasto of 1427, was the product of a highly developed education system and syllabus. The first stage of the Italian school curriculum consisted of learning to read; this skill was always acquired through the medium of the Latin language. For pupils who continued to study Latin (grammar was a synonym for Latin), the next step was learning the parts of speech and memorizing the varying forms (morphology) of nouns, verbs, adjectives and participles (regarded, unlike today, as a separate element during antiquity, the middle ages and the Renaissance). Immediately after morphology, pupils were introduced to reading elementary Latin texts, and, at about the same time, they began learning how to write. The next stage for Latin pupils was studying syntax and learning how to write their own phrases, sentences and short compositions; this level was accompanied by reading more Latin texts. At the end of the Latin syllabus, pupils were composing their own letters and reading more advanced texts, including the classical authors. At this final stage, Latin stylistics, taught by reference to simplified rhetorical treatises, were introduced. An alternative syllabus focused on elementary arithmetic, known as the abaco (abbaco), involving not the instrument for calculation now known as the abacus (by the turn of the thirteenth century, abacus was a synonym for arithmetic), but rather consisting of a course, beginning with elementary arithmetic and culminating in basic commercial knowledge (such as the monetary system) and skills (occasionally for example, double-entry bookkeeping); the abacus was taught entirely in the vernacular, and always followed elementary reading. Often it

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was an alternative to the Latin curriculum: pupils, having learnt how to read through the medium of Latin, immediately progressed to the vernacular abacus syllabus; many children never learned Latin as such, simply acquiring the skills of reading on the basis of Latin texts and thereafter either leaving formal education or passing to a vernacular abacus school. Sometimes, on the other hand, the abacus was learnt in addition to more advanced Latin learning, either before or after the study of grammar. Pupils normally learned how to write after getting the knack of elementary reading, sometimes while studying the abacus curriculum but before more advanced work in grammar (Latin).

The Shape of the Curriculum

Elementary reading

The first textbooks were usually called tabula or carta, salterium and donatus. Tabula or carta was a sheet of parchment or paper which began with the alphabet and concluded with syllables to sound out; it was fixed on a wooden board and took its name either from the parchment or paper (carta) or from the board (tabula). The next stage was reading words and phrases, accomplished on the basis of the salterium, which, in later medieval Italian education, rarely meant the psalter: psalms had been replaced by common prayers and devotional texts, a process which was completed by the fifteenth century. The final stages of elementary education in medieval and Renaissance Europe were presided over by Donatus. But it has long been recognized that in Italy during the high and late middle ages the principal textbook in elementary schools was not Aelius Donatus’s Ars minor (4th c. A.D.) but the manual spuriously attributed to Donatus which Sabbadini christened Ianua after the first word of its verse prologue and which, as a parsing grammar focusing