

Classical Education: The Oldest Ideas for the Youngest Minds

"It ought to be the oldest things that are taught to the youngest children, the assured and experienced truths that are put first to the baby." G.K. Chesterton

by Jason Caros

In Book I of *Laws*, Plato described the purpose of education this way: "...if you ask what is the good of education in general, the answer is easy: that education makes good men, and that good men act nobly." The sage continued by pointing out how students prepared to live virtuous lives pursue the ideal of responsible citizenship. In this powerful dialogue Plato summed up what can be described as "educating for liberty," or preparing young men and women to live in a free society. The founding fathers of our nation, including George Washington in both his second inaugural and farewell addresses, clearly tied a well-educated and virtuous population to the success of the republic. It was the classical model of education the founders had in mind when they considered a means for keeping our constitutional republic and preserving the union. It is in the end a method of education that prepares students for more than simply college or work by utilizing lost tools of learning to cultivate wise and virtuous men and women.

What exactly is a classical education? In a nutshell it is the same course of study that propelled Western Civilization upward in its civic institutions, personal liberty, philanthropy, economic enterprise, technological innovation, and relative safety and security. Rooted in an approach that goes back to ancient Greece and Rome and developed over a long period of time in the West, it is a way of educating that provides students with the tools of learning necessary to be well-formed human beings who know who they are and understand the world around them. These tools help students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to live virtuous and happy lives. The classical curriculum accomplishes this by teaching students at the points of their physiological strengths and by respecting a proper hierarchy of knowledge. It places its historical, literary, and artistic focus on what are referred to as "The Classics." It offers purposeful study of mathematics and the natural sciences, and maintains a focus on teaching students Latin and Greek (or Greek root words).

The Hierarchy of Knowledge

Over the last few generations, education in America has moved away from its classical roots toward a more utilitarian and less academic model. Knowledge has been disparaged in favor of process, structure and self-discipline have been replaced with an emphasis on "social development," and so called critical thinking and 21st century skills have been elevated in order to prepare children for a global workforce. The results speak for themselves. A majority of high school students across the nation cannot understand much of what they read, and our youth lack a common body of knowledge, and an ethos, commensurate with responsible citizenship. While there are some good things happening in both public and private schools around the country, and there certainly are some effective educators working in these schools, the overarching education model and philosophy are severely flawed. One of the grave errors of modern schooling pertains to an approach, or lack of an approach, to the hierarchy of knowledge. In other words, many American educators have not been operating under the assumptions that

“all learning is built upon previous learning” and “thinking requires knowledge.” As a result, their students lack the academic knowledge necessary to think critically.

Research from the last 30 years in the cognitive sciences has shown the types of skills teachers want for students, such as analyzing, interpreting, and the rest, require extensive background knowledge, something any ancient Greek grammarian would have known. This knowledge building must begin in earnest when children are young. By ordering learning according to the actual development of children, classical schools provide great benefits to their students. Following the educational philosophy described in 1947 by Dorothy Sayers in her essay “The Lost Tools of Learning,” a classical curriculum utilizes a method of learning known metaphorically as the trivium,¹ or the “three ways” of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. This hierarchical approach to education takes advantage of students' developmental strengths. In the grammar mode children learn the foundational knowledge they need in all content and skill areas (the grammar of the English language, Mathematics, History, Science, Visual Arts, etc.) before they begin to interact with concepts at more complex levels. It is important to note how this emphasis on the grammar of each discipline of learning is not restricted to elementary students. Young children spend more of their time in this knowledge building endeavor but whenever students learn something new they must understand its grammar. In the case of younger learners, they learn a great deal of content, sometimes through songs and jingles, in areas that include rules of English grammar, math and science facts, key men and women and their contributions, history timelines, musical compositions, etc. This is part of the foundation building that will prepare them for more advanced learning, but what's more is this is what elementary level children are built for. They have a high capacity to memorize information and develop skills quickly (adults have a harder time learning new domain knowledge). This is what is meant by taking advantage of students' physiological strengths. Children are not only interested in learning but they are like little sponges soaking up knowledge. Parents of children who are classically educated know their children are well prepared from the start.

At a classical school, dialectic, or logic, is what young learners are introduced to, and middle grade students begin to experience in a more formal way. Here they continue to build their knowledge base, but are also taught rules of logic and the art of proper reasoning and inquiry via courses in logic and/or Euclidean Geometry (an inheritance we have going back to ancient Greece and Rome). Instruction in this area is often neglected. Instead, the focus is placed on what is commonly referred to as “critical thinking,” which is only a morsel of a true dialectical experience. In a classical environment students are ready for proper logic instruction for two reasons. The first reason is physiological, their minds have developed and are ready for more advanced thought; students in this age group ask and want answers to all kinds of complex questions. Second, the ground has been prepared for them in their early years where a knowledge foundation has been built in each of the academic disciplines. The second point is crucial. In a classical school students gain the necessary academic knowledge,

¹ The use of trivium here is loosely tied to the ancient or medieval understanding of the word. Historically, *Grammar* referred to the mastery of language, *Logic* to the learning of the structure and understanding of language, and *Rhetoric* to eloquent and persuasive expression. Together they made up the linguistic arts.

the foundation, in the elementary and into the middle grades and they are ready to operate at more complex levels. In other words, in order to really think logically, to explore information in meaningful ways, children need to “know” things - thinking effectively requires factual knowledge. This is where all the important knowledge children gain in the elementary grades comes in handy. Today, many schools fall short in this endeavor. They do not place a proper emphasis on the foundational knowledge in all content areas to enable students to be successful in the upper grades. The result is a knowledge deficit that hinders students’ ability to think at complex levels, and turns out to be the main reason many students struggle with reading comprehension – see the paper entitled [*The Missing Link in Reading Comprehension and Academic Achievement*](#). In a classical environment, in virtually every subject, content will be taught dialectically. Beyond studying logic, students argue, discuss and debate history, literature, math, and natural science where teachers encourage dialogue and use a Socratic method of instruction.

Classical education emphasizes eloquent communication of ideas based on evidence, sound judgment, and proper form. This relates to another important element of the trivium known as rhetoric. Rhetoric begins to take shape in the early grades as students learn the grammar of writing and speaking. Students are introduced to a variety of forms of both narrative and expository texts (e.g. fables, narratives, proverbs, encomiums, etc.) and are then taught how to emulate good writing in various categories, and in multiple content areas such as history, literature, and natural science. As they progress, students begin to write and speak about topics on higher levels, and finally reach a state of advanced composition and oratory. Rhetoric, then, is the art of training students to take a position on a topic, and through oral or written form, present a strong case convincing their readers or listeners of the truth of their arguments. For example, if a student in history class was asked to determine whether President Harry Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan was warranted, he could write an advanced essay, or deliver a speech on the question through the use of factual examples, proper reasoning, and an effective and eloquent oral or written form. There are certain skills and methods, in addition to a strong knowledge base, and sound judgment, required to effectively complete this type of activity. Sadly, most high school students are NOT capable of operating at an advanced rhetorical level when, in fact, they should be able to do so in their core areas of study. It is a travesty that many students do not know the fundamentals about our nation’s history and Founding principles, but cannot, even in cases when they do have the knowledge, articulate and defend those principles.

The trivium metaphor provides an important model for how children learn, specific to a proper hierarchy of knowledge, but it does not provide the full measure of classical learning. The Founders of this nation, who wrote at length on education, emphasized instruction focused on training the mind in a broad range of disciplines such as language and literature, mathematics, natural science, history, government, music, and fine arts, to promote the learning and character necessary for self-governing citizens in a republic. The trivium provides form for the acquisition of this essential knowledge.

A Prelude to The Classics

One of the hallmarks of a classical education is the focus of the history, literature, and fine arts studied. The emphasis is decidedly Western, since after all, we live in the West

and our culture's roots and predominate influences are Western. This doesn't mean Far Eastern or other civilizations aren't studied but the core is Western. What exactly is the Western inheritance alluded to here? Essentially, it is the patrimony associated with five historical cities – Jerusalem (faith and morality), Athens (arts and intellectual endeavors), Rome (jurisprudence and republicanism), London (rule of law and free enterprise), and Philadelphia (the tree of liberty). Students in classical schools learn about the patrimony from these historical civilizations and understand how and why we are who we are as a people, and where we may be heading. In the area of literature the word “classic” does not refer only to works from ancient or medieval times, as things classical are not necessarily time bound. Students may read stories by C.S. Lewis who wrote in the 20th century, novels by Louisa May Alcott in the 19th century, or fables by Aesop in the 6th century B.C., but works by all three are considered children’s classics. All are nobly written, but the designation of classic in this sense has more to do with the nature of the product rather than mere age. In literature for instance, there is a certain essential quality - the stories deal forcefully with lessons pertaining to human nature and the themes transcend time. Books of the Bible, works from ancient Greek and Roman authors, Shakespeare, and many other writers throughout history illustrate the virtue and vice evident in human nature and teach important life lessons to help mold character and inform decision-making. Great books richly express goodness, truth, and beauty, three pillars of classical education, and stir the moral imagination. Unfortunately, many educators have lost awareness of the importance of great literature and overemphasize literary devices, contemporary multi-cultural themes, and in some cases, nihilistic works, making the study of literature rather sterile and ultimately unedifying. Nevertheless, reading classics is essential to a truly good education, as is discovering the beauty inherent in great art and music, and studying history and the science of government via primary sources such as *The Federalist Papers*. [History is one of our greatest teachers](#) and provides, along with great literature, a necessary map of human character. History, properly conceived, and good literature, both help us to promote good character and citizenship, and help to preserve and transmit civilization.

Connecting the Dots

Learning at a classical school includes reading original historical documents and classic texts, and students experience the beauty and form of the fine arts. It is also marked by instruction that is well-rounded and complementary. One of the sad realities about education in modern times is the manner in which many students learn content in isolation – natural science is devoid of history, history is taught without literature, music, and art, and math is just about numbers. Students should be able to connect the dots and understand the interrelation among various areas of knowledge. In this model of learning, history serves as a type of organizing outline. For instance, students studying astronomy should go beyond merely knowing what is in the heavens, but also understand how ideas can have latent and far reaching consequences here on earth. History books describe the Copernican Revolution of the 16th century, but Copernicus considered himself no revolutionary. He was instead a restorer of 2,000 year old ancient wisdom – that is, the wisdom of ancient Greeks such as Aristarchus and Pythagoras. In this important scientific account, Nicolaus Copernicus, a Polish astronomer who lived during the Renaissance, read ancient Greek texts, possible only because of the rebirth of the classical Greek language during the Renaissance, and initiated a scientific,

mathematical, and philosophical paradigm. When a revolution in ideas or practice is accomplished today, when a new standard is brought to light it is called a Copernican Shift or Metaphor. Students should be able to see this type of relationship between natural science and history, and see the links among other areas of knowledge. A classical education provides opportunities for students to connect the dots.

Geometry Will Draw the Soul Towards Truth

Strong mathematics instruction is also at the heart of classical education but not for the reasons some educators use to describe the importance of math to students. A typical modern response to the question about the purpose of learning mathematics goes something like this: “math is important because we use it every day – when we go grocery shopping, when we measure ingredients for recipes, when we work on finances, when we build bridges, when we write computer code...” All these examples of the usefulness of mathematics are real. Mathematics, like science, is quite practical. There is, however, more to math than everyday utility. The main reason to learn math, from a classical perspective, was described in Plato’s *Republic* over 2,000 years ago, *it draws the soul towards truth*. To this end, students learning mathematics at a classical school, especially in upper grades, are asked to arrive at answers to problems using a step-by-step logical approach. Geometry, for instance, is a course that is based on “proofs.” Math problems should not be solved by students who simply apply memorized algorithms or formulae, although memorizing them is important, but through logical steps that enable students to think through and prove answers to their teachers and arrive at truths. In this regard, mathematics complements the other areas of learning in a classical curriculum where the goal is to promote the good, the true, and the beautiful.

Latin and Greek All Around Us

For centuries anyone who had an education in the West truly associated with excellence was schooled in Latin and Greek to some degree. Why this is not the case today is occasion for another venue, but thankfully classical schools are bringing the study of these languages back. More than 75% of the words in the English language are derived from Greek and Latin and many of the ideas that propelled Western Civilization during the last few hundred years were originally written in Greek and Latin (consider the use of Greek in the Bible). Most of the people we refer to today as “The Founders” of this country read ancient texts, including the Bible, in their original languages as they were being schooled, and as they were consulting one another about what type of government best suited this land and people (i.e. Greek and Roman historical, philosophical, and legal texts). The bottom line is this - if you have a foundation in Greek and Latin you will have a better command of the English language and have an avenue of knowledge open to you many do not. Additionally, since Spanish and all other Romance languages (French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian) are derived from Latin, the person who learns Latin will have an easier time learning other languages such as Spanish. The College Board, the organization known for the SAT college entrance exam and Advanced Placement tests, used to keep data on how students who studied Latin performed on the SAT verbal portion of their exam versus students who studied other languages. The College Board found Latin students performed significantly higher on the SAT. This makes sense...

Human Flourishing

College and career readiness and *21st century skills* have been K-12 education catch phrases for much of this last generation. What do they have in common? Besides the inability to live up to their names, they both aim to prepare students for work in order to benefit them financially. Importantly, they both also mean to prepare students for the workforce in order to benefit business and/or government interests. In other words, with a view to daily sustenance they have a material concern as well as a pecuniary end that, in essence, sees students as economic commodities. While job preparation is important, and many people will receive one type of job training or another at some point in their lives, education's main benefit should be something greater—human flourishing. Classical education's telos, in contrast to a limited economic motive, is to ennoble the hearts and minds of young men and women so they understand what it means to be human, they make sense of the complex world around them, and they live well and contribute well to the common good. Ironically, classically educated students are more than ready for college and future job training because of their vigorous formative experiences, knowledge, and the universal tools of learning they carry forward. Classical education puts first things first and the fruits follow.

A Classical Education for Today's Students

Classical education is one of the great legacies of Western Civilization, however, for the better part of the last century and into the 21st century, students in this country have been denied their educational inheritance. Why this is the case is the result of decades of some misguided education reforms rooted in romantic ideals. Education has taken an academic detour. Fortunately, there is a better road ahead. As C.S. Lewis once wrote, "If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road..." Paradoxically, while classical schools provide the most time-tested methods of educating students, they are today, among the most cutting-edge schools in America. With a focus on a hierarchical approach to learning, a knowledge-rich and integrated curriculum consisting of the classical liberal arts, and a focus on promoting strong character and learning necessary for self-governing citizens in a republic, classical schools provide a refreshing education alternative. Classical education is growing in the United States, and institutions of higher learning including Hillsdale College, preserve and promote the very best of classical liberal arts education. There is hope our nation will again see a time when its children experience the benefits of a classical education rather than the remnant most students receive today. Classical schools, such as *Founders Classical Academy*, will prepare students for college and the workforce, but will go well beyond those ends. They aim to recover lost tools of learning in order to cultivate wise and virtuous men and women.

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