

Equipping a Generation

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Imagine a school specifically focused to train students in the field of carpentry. Each day, when the young boys and girls come to class, they are presented with and discuss a new wooden creation. One day it might be something practical like a stool, and another day it could be something more entertaining like a spinning top. Whatever it is, the students come home after school and store it away in their closets. Although their collections increase, they are never given the tools or the opportunity to create an item with their own hands. What kind of carpenters would they be?

It is apparent that this school has an illogical method of education because these students never use the tools in the carpenter's shop and are therefore unprepared for a future career as carpenters. Even though it seems impractical, a similar situation is occurring in classrooms all across America. Students come out of schools with heads full of knowledge, oblivious as to what to do with it. This problem is not new or even solely American. In 1947, Dorothy Sayers, an author and respected Oxford scholar, gave a speech recognizing the same issue occurring in the British school systems. In response, she proposed a solution that would bring about a revival of the lost "tools of learning" (99). Her proposal became foundational to an American school movement of classical education. Because this system seeks to equip students with the tools of learning, the classical method adequately prepares students for the future in a way that differs from the pragmatic progressivism of today. It is an effective method

because it coincides with the developmental stages of learning* and maintains an historical rootedness in the classics. It is also philosophically different in purpose from the current system and remains relevant to the needs of the global world, thereby further adding to its merit. All four of these aspects of classical education reinforce its benefits to the students of modern day America.

The construction of the classical method into three stages of learning based on a child's development is evidence of its value as an educational system. Sayers' proposal incorporates the Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric stages (sometimes called the Trivium) in order to maximize the learning capabilities of students at different ages. The Grammar stage seeks to provide foundational knowledge to elementary level students, first in language and then in other core disciplines, such as history, science, and mathematics. Sayers explains that it is a stage in which "one enjoys the mere accumulation of things" (93). Young children tend to be good at memorizing and enjoy it more than older students. The elementary age students can learn through rhymes, songs, and recitation (Sayers 93). The goal of these methods is to encourage the retention of information that will be necessary in future education. Through retention, the Grammar stage lays the foundation for the next step in the classical process, the Dialectic stage.

* At the time of Sayers' speech, no specific theory explaining cognitive development existed. In the 1960s, Jean Piaget, a Swiss developmental psychologist, introduced four stages of learning that are generally accepted. These include the sensorimotor stage, from birth to two years of age, the preoperational stage, from two to seven, the concrete operational stage, from seven to eleven, and the formal operational stage, from eleven on. In this paper, the explanation of the developmental stages is based on experience, rather than scientific theory, although characteristics of the Grammar-aged student coincide with the concrete operational stage and the Dialectic student with the formal operational stage (King 116-117). The Rhetoric stage is not addressed by Piaget, but can be reasonably accepted based on experience.

The middle-school aged Dialectic student is “characterized by contradicting” (Sayers 93). He or she has reached a point where taking in information is not enough. The Dialectic stage accounts for a student’s shift in processing and starts to incorporate logic as a focus for examining all subjects. The curriculum of the Dialectic stage incorporates “syntax and analysis.” A student will read “essays, argument and criticism” and “try his own hand at writing this kind of thing” (Sayers 95). This stage of learning coincides with a student’s natural tendencies to question and argue. It provides him or her with tools to direct those tendencies into a constructive learning process that will be beneficial both inside and outside the classroom.

Once these tools of critical analysis have been sharpened, the student reaches the third and final Rhetoric stage. This part of the system coincides with the time in a student’s life during which he “yearns to express” himself and “specializes in being misunderstood.” A student of Rhetoric is “reaching out towards a synthesis of what [he] already knows” (Sayers 93). The culmination of the student’s education is the Rhetoric stage, a time in which “things once learned by rote will be seen in new contexts” because “when the use of the tools has been well and truly learned, it is available for any study whatsoever” (Sayers 98). The art of eloquent speech is a central focus of this stage and students learn to present their knowledge of a variety of subjects and to make connections among them.

By the end of the classical process, a student is sufficiently prepared for the future because he or she has learned more than just fragmented pieces of information. This method equips students with tools such as logic and expression that can be applied to multiple disciplines. Classical education is not merely the study of a specific subject, but rather a method for dealing with multiple subjects. Author Peter J. Leithart discusses this point in an

Intercollegiate Review article entitled “The New Classical Schooling.” He writes that although in medieval times the parts of the Trivium were mainly applied to language, “Sayers treated them more metaphorically, claiming that every subject has its grammar, logic, and rhetoric” (Leithart 5). If every subject contains its own grammar, logic, and rhetoric, there are no limitations to the application of such an education, making it a valuable method of instruction.

In addition to the Trivium construction, the ability of the classical system to prepare students adequately relates to the method’s adherence to the classics. Stringfellow Barr, once president of St. John’s College, upholds the value of reading classic texts in his essay “Liberal Education: A Common Adventure.” He observes that Americans do not read at the highest level they could, a situation that he proposes could be altered with the proper introduction of classical literature. To Barr, classics become classic “because they communicate with great skill ideas about matters that human experience has taught us are important” (454). In light of all that has been written in the history of humanity, there is a reason that the works of Homer, Plato, and Shakespeare have lasted. If these works of classical literature are as important as history suggests, then no student should receive an education without experiencing them.

Opponents of the classical method argue that such classics are intended solely for the intellectual elite. Teachers of mainstream classes wait to introduce them until students seem ready to examine these works, if that time ever comes. Barr opposes this idea, saying that such books “can be read on many levels” and are “‘to chew on’, not to master” (457-458). Because they communicate lasting ideas, these books can be incorporated in many levels of education. Students will glean different thoughts at different ages. The goal is not total comprehension but rather the sharpening of “intellectual teeth” (Barr 458). Students immersed in the classics

will have the opportunity to think about certain subjects in different ways, expanding their minds, and gaining a fuller view of the world even if the students are not at an advanced level. They will become “familiar with the great questions, including those which perhaps no man has answered” (Barr 459). In this way, they experience what Leithart calls “initiation into a cultural heritage, induction into the ongoing conversation of Western civilization” (5). Participating in this conversation through reading the classics, students stretch their minds and implement the tools of learning that are so central to the classical model.

The value of the classical system lies not only in its Trivium construction and classical roots, but also in its supporting philosophy. Classical education differs from modern American education, or progressivism, at the fundamental level because it is based on an opposing purpose. Leithart observes that “today's classical education is attempting to repudiate not only mid-twentieth-century pedagogical corruptions, but also a long-standing American prejudice in favor of pragmatism” (10). The theories of John Dewey and John Locke that have shaped American education view the purpose of school and of knowledge as a means to an end, whether that is a good job, a healthy economy, or an intelligent community (Leithart 10). It is a widely accepted opinion in America that students go to school in order to get into college in order to get good jobs in order to support their families. To many, education functions as solely a means of job preparation.

Classical education challenges this view, seeing education as an end in and of itself. John Henry Newman, an Oxford academic and clergyman, expresses the distinction between these two schools of thought in his book *The Idea of a University*. In his view, there are “two methods of education; the end of the one is to be philosophical, of the other to be mechanical;

the one rises towards general ideas, the other is exhausted upon what is particular and external” (Newman 138). According to this comparison, classical education is primarily philosophical. Its aim is to exercise the minds of students and to teach them how to think and make connections among multiple disciplines. In rising toward “general ideas,” the intent of classical education is to foster lifelong learning. Education does not end after graduation. It is not a process that is fulfilled by the acquisition of a good job or academic accomplishments but is rather an ongoing part of life. Mortimer J. Adler, an American philosopher and proponent of educational reform in the twentieth century, sees the two views as internal and external. Education is either “an interior transformation of a person’s mind and character” or “something externally added to a person, as his clothing and other accoutrements” (Adler 277). Classical education exists to achieve internal transformation through the Trivium rather than to add knowledge externally. The result is a student equipped with the tools to learn and therefore better prepared to interact with society as a well-informed, contributing citizen.

Even though the classical system is not designed with the external purpose of job preparation, it indirectly prepares students for the world of work because it is so comprehensive. Acquiring practical skills and job preparation are not the goals of the system; it is simply a matter of the results. For this reason, classical education remains relevant even though it is historically rooted and fundamentally philosophical. Globally minded author Thomas Friedman unintentionally points to the classical model in his discussion of skills that will empower “people to innovate and do value-added work” on the global platform (343). The solutions and knowledge skills he proposes are similar to the intellectual skills that are sharpened with the classical education system. He places value in learning how to learn, a

fundamentally classical approach. Friedman also proposes teaching “navigation skills” or how to “separate the noise, the filth, and the lies from the facts, the wisdom, and the real sources of knowledge” (310). In terms of the classical Trivium, these goals fit directly into the aims of the Dialectic stage, which teaches reason through the exercise of logic. He also stresses “encouraging young people to think horizontally and to connect disparate dots” (Friedman 316). This view of education relates to the Rhetoric stage, involving the synthesis of all the learned material. This connection between Friedman’s ideas and the classical system provides evidence that it is indirectly relevant to modern-day Americans, despite the popular notion that disciplines such as Rhetoric are obsolete.

Rhetoric in particular has lost support over the years because it is seen as unnecessary. This view is ultimately incorrect. Alistair Miller writes in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* that in the classical tradition, Rhetoric is “the art of making judgments about practical, political and human matters” (196). It promotes the “command of language” in order to foster “the ability to think clearly and to construct a coherent argument” (Miller 198). A time will never come when such practices are outdated. In a world that maintains a constant flow of words from television to billboards to websites, it is beneficial to be able to understand and control the art of language, argument, and eloquence.

If the relevance of classical education is realized, it may even be integrated into some American public schools. Carl Springer, a Professor of Classical Studies, writes that “the relentless pressure on schools and universities to quantify and measure education’s success” may cause “even more to pursue the idea of an education that seeks to establish precisely those qualities of intellect and character that will prepare students for a lifetime of thoughtful

citizenship and service to others” (628). While not seeking utility, classical education has become exactly what America needs. Essentially, it encourages the fostering of well-rounded students who can in turn be successful in the work force and contribute to society, as is the goal of a pragmatic system. In replacing practicality with the pursuit of higher learning, the classical system remains applicable to the job-related problems of today. These problems, as Thomas Friedman points out, will not go away unless the proper skills are fostered in American schools (336). Such skills, those that involve making connections and adapting to a changing environment, are inherent to the classical education system.

Many American schools emphasize the collection of knowledge without the tools to use that knowledge, just as in the hypothetical carpentry school. The lack of preparation should not go unnoticed by parents, teachers, or policy makers. Dorothy Sayers warns that “we let our young men and women go out unarmed, in a day when armor was never so necessary” (93). This modern age is characterized by a constant flow of ideas, philosophies, and perspectives. People are subject to “an incessant battery of words, words, words” without the knowledge of “how to ward them off or blunt their edge or fling them back” (Sayers 93). A student equipped with the foundation of the Grammar stage, the logic of the Dialectic stage, and the eloquence of Rhetoric stage will be able to succeed in this age of relentless communication. A school system based on classical ideas will result in a generation of thoughtful, analytical people, ready to face any challenges and to take advantage of any opportunities the future brings.

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