

What is Classical Education? Structure and Pedagogy

“Classical Christian Education” refers to a model of education that was codified in Medieval Christendom and remained the main educational model in the west until the twentieth century. In the following article, I will examine two elements of the Classical Educational model: structure and pedagogy.

Structure of Classical Education

The structure of what we now refer to as “Classical Education” was not formalized until the Middle Ages. The Christian world of the Medieval period codified into seven liberal arts, what they believed to be “classical,” classical not only in the sense of having Classical Greek and Roman roots, but also classical in the sense of being universal; the Medievals believed the model to correspond to universal human experience.

The Classical model of education was based on the Seven Liberal Arts: Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric—known as the *Trivium* or “three-fold way”—and Arithmetic, Music, Geometry, and Astronomy—known as the *Quadrivium* or “four-fold way.” For our purposes, we will concern ourselves only with the *Trivium*, which covers elementary through high school ages and the first three liberal arts: Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric.

Grammar, for the Medievals, referred to the study of language, in their case, Latin. School boys were expected to commit to memory the grammar and vocabulary of the Latin language during this stage, and to master “syntax, etymology, prosody, and the explanation of allusions” (Lewis, “Seven Liberal Arts” 187). As Dorothy Sayers puts it in her presentation, “The Lost Tools of Learning” presented at Oxford University in 1947, in the Grammar stage, the student “learned a language; not just how to order a meal in a foreign language, but the structure of a language, and hence of the language itself—what it was, how it was put together, and how it worked.”

The contemporary proponent of the *Trivium* usually has a somewhat broader understanding of the Grammar stage; he not only admits girls as well as boys to the classroom, but also admits the study of other “grammars” to the course of study. “During this age,” says Dorothy Sayers, “we must, of course, exercise the mind on other things besides Latin grammar. Observation and memory are the faculties most lively at this period” (“Lost Tools”). Young grammar students are expected to commit to memory the grammar of English or other languages, the grammar or rules of mathematics—such as the multiplication tables, the grammar of history—dates, people, cultures, and events, and the grammar of other subjects as well. This model of elementary school is not radically different from other so-called “traditional” educational forms.

The Dialectic or Logic stage, however, takes a “sharp divergence from modern standards” (Sayers). “Having learned from grammar how to talk,” writes C. S. Lewis describing the *Trivium*, “we must learn from Dialectic how to talk sense, to argue, to prove and disprove” (“Seven Liberal Arts” 188). In Medieval minds, it was in this stage that the student “learned how to use a language; how to define his terms and make accurate statements; how to construct an argument and how to detect fallacies in argument” (Sayers, “Lost Tools”). Again in this stage, the contemporary Classical educator, uses a variety of subjects on which to practice the Dialectic art and does not confine the study to the Latin language. As memory and observation

are stressed in the Grammar stage, so logic, disputation, and discursive reason are stressed in the Dialectic stage, and these tools can be worked on a variety of subjects.

Rhetoric, the final stage of the *Trivium*, was intended by the Medieval scholar to teach the student “to express himself in language—how to say what he had to say elegantly and persuasively” (Sayers, “Lost Tools”). In short, rhetoric deals with structure and style, and, for the Medieval man, primarily literary structure and style, especially that of poetry (Lewis, “Seven Liberal Arts” 190). For the modern classicist, the stage of Rhetoric, like the first two stages, is not confined to any one subject, but conveys a skill of expression that exercises over all subjects from math to theology to music to visual arts.

One of the most compelling arguments in defense of the *Trivium* is that it corresponds to natural patterns of child development. Dorothy Sayers explains that a school-age child develops in three stages as it were perfectly fitted to the *Trivium*. In the first stage, which Sayers calls “the poll-parrot,” the child loves to learn and repeat facts and sounds; they are not much interested in nor responsive to reason. This can be seen in the gleeful repetition of even meaningless sounds such as “eeny-meeny-miney-mo” in the youngest child.

As the child reaches the junior high years, parents may observe that the child is no longer satisfied with mimetic repetition and begins to be “disposed to pertness and interminable argument”—sure signs of stage two. “The Pert” loves to question and argue and discover why things are the way they are. They want things explained to them in a way very different from the poll-parrot. They are ready for the learning of logic and discursive reasoning.

In the third stage of development, which corresponds more or less to the high school years, the student yearns for self-expression. Sayers refers to this as “The Poetic” stage. Students at this stage complain of being “misunderstood,” and they want to define themselves uniquely. This is the perfect time to train them to be eloquent, accurate, and clear as they express themselves.

In summary, the formalized *Trivium* of the Medieval scholars consists in three steps: (1) learning words, (2) “making sense” with words, and finally (3) “making sense” eloquently; and these are seen to “cut with the grain” of child development. The *Trivium* is not structured around subjects as we normally think of them (English, History, Science, Math, etc.), but rather around stages of learning, or tools of learning. In the Grammar stage the student acquires the raw materials of learning—memorized information about the reality in which he lives. In the Dialectic stage, the student acquires the tool of reason with which he can organize and synthesize the raw materials previously acquired. Finally, in the Rhetoric stage, the student acquires the tools of expression actualizing the two previous skills in purposeful and meaningful communication. These are the ends of any true education: acquiring truth, mastering sound reasoning, and successfully communicating.

Pedagogy of Classical Education

The pedagogy or method of educating used in the various stages of the *Trivium*, by necessity, is diverse. For example, a very different method will be used to, say, help a child memorize her multiplication tables, than that used to help her develop an argument, or, again, to help her refine the style of a poetic composition. There is no set pedagogy for the Classical *Trivium* as a whole; in fact, limiting the educational model to only one methodology would be ineffectual at best. A diversity of methods is required to accomplish the diversity of ends Classical Education holds in mind. In the Grammar stage, for example, there are many ways to get the job of memorization done including lectures, readings, drills, dictation, tests, charts, flash

cards, chants, songs, and a wealth of additional multi-sensory options. It is in the Dialectic and Rhetoric stages that pedagogies shift drastically from “traditional” modern education.

Socratic Dialogue is introduced, appropriately, in the Dialectic stage and carried through the Rhetoric stage. Although it is not the only pedagogy used in either stage, it is the least familiar to those educated in “traditional” American classrooms. Taking its name from Socrates, the tutor of Plato, Socratic Dialogue consists in asking the student questions to lead him to an apprehension of truth. The dialogue is intended to serve as a forum for analyzing “the way things are,” namely, reality, and for refining critical thinking to get a hold of truth—a concept almost entirely lost on our contemporary society. The Medieval scholars found, as have contemporary Classical educators, that a line of thoughtful questions was one of the most effective ways to get at the reality they sought.

A careful reader of the gospels will note that Jesus frequently used this method when teaching and especially when answering the Jewish leaders. Take for example, the passage in Matthew 22:15-22:

Then the Pharisees went and plotted together. . . . And they sent their disciples to Him . . . saying, “Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?” But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, “Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax.” And they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said to Him, “Caesar’s” Then He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.” And hearing this, they were amazed.

The Son of God used a pointed line of questioning to bring the listeners, willingly or unwillingly, to a true conclusion that they could not reasonably deny. This is the same aim of Classical, Socratic educators who, although imperfect in their task, rely on Christ as the perfect model in all things. Discursive reasoning and eloquent articulation cannot be learned without challenging and questioning the student’s ideas and arguments.

Conclusion

In summary, the *Trivium* is at the core of Classical Education. What is the educational aim of the *Trivium*? To teach students to (a) memorize the basic facts, (b) learn how the facts fit together to form a coherent whole, and (c) to learn how to present the facts in a winsome and convincing way. It is important to recall that the structure can be adapted to many kinds of facts, from the multiplication table, to the history of America, to the story of Jesus and our salvation. Classical Education teaches students to think well and to love God with all of their being, including their mind.

Second, the different stages of the *Trivium* go hand in hand with the development of the student. Classical Education is not a distant and unattainable theory designed to make current teachers feel guilty for not using it. Rather, it is a kind of education designed (and time tested) to develop the student’s knowledge and love of truth, goodness, and beauty. As the educational needs of the student change, the structure of our educational model should, too. Classical Education is well suited to this task.

Third, the pedagogy of Classical Education is comprised of several different methods including Socratic Dialogue. Socratic Dialogue is only introduced in force in the second and third stage of the *Trivium*, and the final purpose of the dialogue is to guide the student to truth. As we employ this pedagogy, we know that this will ultimately lead us to a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ because he is the Truth.

Lastly, and most importantly, we know that the main ideas behind Classical Education are biblical. Jesus himself employed techniques similar to Socratic Dialogue in his teaching ministry. The apostle Paul used rhetoric and logic to reason with people in Athens about the truth of Christianity (Acts 17:16-34). The goal of Christian Classical Education is also biblical. What is the goal of Christian Classical Education? The goal is to produce students who have a solid intellectual understanding of the Truth, have passionate hearts to love the Truth, and have the ability to express this understanding and love to a needy world.

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Dr. Reynolds, founder and director of the Torrey Honors Institute at Biola address homeschool parents and gives a vivid description of the need for Classical education in the Christian homeschooling community.