



The Benefits of a Classical Education

Since the end of the Second World War, and especially since the mid-1960s, America has been deluged with seemingly endless stories of the failure of its educational system. Testing reveals that there exists a significant percentage of high-school graduates who cannot identify the Pacific Ocean on an unlabeled map of the world, who do not know that Abraham Lincoln served as president of the United States *after* George Washington, who confuse the American Civil War with World War I, and who believe that Christopher Columbus discovered the New World in the 18th century, which examples are typical of the horror stories repeated year after year. Ever fewer young people, even those who have graduated from colleges and universities, are properly able to express themselves verbally or in writing. In response, liberal educators have come up with various nostrums that were supposed to turn things around by means of revolutionary new teaching methods. Not surprisingly, they have all failed. Characteristically, politicians have sought solutions by throwing taxpayers' money at the problem and by further centralizing control in Washington, which, if anything, have only made matters worse.



So, what can be done to insure that our children and young people receive a genuine education that will serve them well for the remainder of their lives? Let us now delve into the past to discover how our ancestors were educated.

The great Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt gave praise to the ancient Greeks by commenting that “all subsequent objective perception of the world is only elaboration on the framework the Greeks began. We see with the eyes of the Greeks and use their phrases when we speak.” European culture and civilization, of which our own country is a part, are rooted in ancient Greece. Their educational methodology, though more than 2,500 years old, is still as relevant now as it was in the time of Plato and is known as classical education.

First, let us consider the objectives of classical education. The first objective is to transmit to our progeny, that is, to future generations, the knowledge, culture, and traditions preserved and passed on to us by our forebears. This is in contrast to so-called progressive education, which focuses on the flaws of the past (e.g., slavery) while ignoring the progress (e.g., the Declaration of Independence and the



Constitution and the elimination, in America, of an institution that had existed throughout human history).

Second, classical education aims to provide students with the tools that will enable them to become their own teachers throughout their lifetimes. A vast, inexhaustible world of learning is opened and, furthermore, the student is equipped to discern between that which is wholesome — contributing therefore to the uplifting of the mind — and that which is corrupting or debilitating. In other words, the student will be able to think critically and independently. Progressive-minded teachers in government education, of course, despite claiming to support diversity, propagandize instead on behalf of a humanist, statist doctrine.

Third, classical education is, by its very nature, broad-based. The renowned Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset and the American philosopher and historian Richard M. Weaver both decried the excessive specialization that, in modern education, produces men and women who are educated in one field only, and who are, in other fields, largely ignorant. Weaver referred to this as the “fragmentation” of knowledge. Classical education produced scholars who, he wrote, “stood at the center of things because [they] had mastered principles,” whereas “progressive education” produces people who have “acquired only facts and skills” and who are thus unable to achieve a general synthesis, that is, to integrate data from various fields into a cohesive whole.

In early Colonial America, students were taught to read both Greek and Latin with fluency. Of what value was that in the 17th or 18th century? To mention only one of many things, our ancestors were able to read the ancients in the original languages and were thus able to identify errors in judgment with respect to early experiments in self-governance. As Jacob Burckhardt put it regarding the Greeks, we must “study the Greeks; if we ignore them we are simply accepting our own decline.” That is true also of the Romans, so that we may understand how and why the Roman Republic was gradually transmuted into the Roman Empire, with a once-mighty senate that became a mere shadow of its former self, a powerless agency of a government ruled by an all-powerful emperor.

Now, let us explore the components of classical education. Of what does it consist? First, we must understand that the methodology of the Greeks was refined by the Romans and, later, when Christianity became the religion of Europe, further refined by medieval thinkers. The *trivium* was the foundation of classical education. The Latin word “*trivium*” refers to “the three paths,” which are grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Grammar teaches us how to read and how to understand what we are reading, and it teaches us the rules for writing intelligibly, according to the rules of a particular language. Logic teaches us how to think, how to reason analytically, so that we are not misled by fallacious arguments. As Aristotle said, “Some reasonings are genuine, while others seem to be so but are not” despite that there is “a certain likeness between the genuine and the sham.” The study of logic enables us to distinguish between the two. Rhetoric teaches us how to express ourselves, to convey information accurately and, most especially, to be persuasive in discussions. Aristotle put it in the following words: “Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.” And so, the *trivium* arms the student with a thoroughgoing understanding of his language, the ability to reason critically, and the ability to express thoughts convincingly.

The next step in the process of classical education is called the *quadrivium*. This word refers to arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Arithmetic obviously deals with basic mathematics. Geometry deals with the measurement of various shapes, the relation to one another of points, lines, and surfaces, and the properties of space. The definition of music in ancient times is rather different



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from what we call music today. The word “music” derives from the Greek “*mousike*,” which, according to the myths of the ancients, comprised all of the arts of the nine Muses, including literature, all forms of art, and the sciences. Somewhat later, the term came to encompass specifically the arts of poetry and music. In contemporary terminology, music is the art and science of combining and organizing the sounds of human voices or musical instruments, using melody, harmony, rhythm, and timbre, to create structurally complete and expressive compositions. Astronomy, again obviously, is the study of the heavenly bodies: the sun, moon, planets, and stars, a field in which the ancients were surprisingly advanced. Beyond the *quadrivium*, students went on to study philosophy and, after the rise of Christianity, theology. That final phase of formal education was quite demanding, yet by means of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, students had been thoroughly prepared.

Throughout the Greco-Roman age, education was conducted in relatively small schools or under private tutors. With the collapse of the Roman Empire in Western Europe, monasteries became oases of learning in a world where civilized life had all but disappeared. Historian Professor C.W. Previt -Orton of Cambridge University calls the time “an eclipse of civilization” during which civilized law, security, public works, and intercommunication failed and in which “literacy almost vanished outside the Church.” Hence, monastery schools became the only centers of learning.

The idea of the all-inclusive university first appeared in Constantinople in 425 A.D., during the reign of Theodosius II. It was known as the *Pandidakterion* and, like the universities that came later in the West, was comprehensive in its many schools, having 31 chairs and teaching in both Latin and Greek. That city retained its reputation as a center of learning, despite the many vicissitudes through which it passed, until its conquest by the Turks in 1453. In both the East and West, the classical system was carefully preserved, producing countless scholars who enriched the civilized world by their efforts, painstakingly rediscovering and then preserving the wisdom of earlier ages.

Beginning late in the 19th century, critics of classical education claimed that its methodology was “elitist,” with its emphasis on Latin, Greek, and other subjects that a majority of young people would never need in their lives. What these critics ignore is that not all students are created equally. Some are brighter and more motivated, some less so. Yet, one of the purposes of this mode of education is that, whatever the future may bring to the individual student, it disciplines the mind and prepares it to receive all other types of learning throughout life. At the same time, it produces a body of highly trained men and women equipped with the knowledge to love truth, to discern truth from falsehood, and to uplift society with ever more wondrous works of individual creativity. Neither Washington Irving, Edgar Allen Poe, nor Charles Dickens was a university graduate, but the rigorous traditional education they received early in life prepared them to produce works of literature that have endured and will continue to be read with pleasure hundreds of years from now.

The classical system is still alive and well in many educational institutions in our country and abroad. Its fundamentals are unchanged. Students are taught the basics through memorization, a way of learning that was of great importance in ancient times, since before the invention of printing, books were not readily available. It is still of prime importance since it is the method by which crucial information is permanently stored in the mind and which, for the young especially, is enjoyable and relatively easy.

The *trivium* is still the foundation in modern institutions of classical learning. The grammar stage is the first in the learning process, involving the absorbing of data that includes not only language skills (phonics, spelling, grammatical rules, and so forth), but also information in other areas of knowledge: data about the world, past and present, about nature, about the difference between right and wrong.



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The logic stage is next, in which the student is taught to organize the data he has learned and to analyze facts from history, geography, and science. Students so educated have no difficulty finding the Pacific Ocean, Japan, Europe, or any other place on a map of the world. The beginning of higher mathematics is generally taught during this stage. During this phase also, the student develops a sense of the concept of time, so that he is able to grasp, for instance, that Columbus discovered the New World in the last decade of the 15th century, that the War for American Independence was fought in the 18th century, that Abraham Lincoln lived in the 19th century, and that Theodore Roosevelt was president in the early years of the 20th century. The final stage, rhetoric, teaches the student to write and speak beautifully and convincingly, to develop a style that is unique to that student. Here the student can reach into the great fund of knowledge that he has acquired through his diligence as a scholar, and enlarge it, continuing to teach himself and others.

The classical system is ideal for homeschooling, and a number of institutions offer programs that educate children and young people from kindergarten through the 12th grade. An excellent example is [FreedomProject Education](#), which offers a superb, Christian-based homeschooling program through the use of the Internet.

Socrates said, "The only true wisdom is in knowing that you know nothing." What he meant is that the truly educated man is humbled by an understanding that whatever knowledge his education has conferred upon him, that knowledge is always limited, since learning is a quest that is never finished, never complete, but continues until the very end of one's life.

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