

Ten Pedagogical Essentials of Classical Christian Education

Our “movement” of schools, the revival of classical Christian education (CCE), has been around for about 30 years. Our schools are maturing in their thinking about what actually defines true classical Christian education. In the early years the focus was almost exclusively on the Trivium –Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric. We viewed CCE as a new way (or a rediscovered old way) to organize learning –facts/rules early and abstract reasoning later –a pedagogy that was consistent with the cognitive development of children. This view was and is absolutely correct. Dorothy Sayers and Douglas Wilson were onto something when they took the first three arts of the seven medieval liberal arts and applied them to how we understand subjects and students. Subjects naturally have their grammar, logic, and rhetoric. And children naturally learn in a developmental progression consistent with the grammar, logic, and rhetoric of subjects.

But I have often wondered if we are not guilty of something akin to putting new wine into old wineskins. Have we simply reorganized and restructured our John Dewey progressivist approach to fit a Trivium outline? I wonder if we have not just taken our old (new) views of education shaped by modernity and poured it into the new (old) wineskins of the Trivium.

We all struggle to shake off the approaches that were ingrained in us in our own education. We tend to teach the way we were taught. If we are not careful our default teaching mode will not be classical, but rather progressive –a child-centered infotainment dog & pony show or dry lectures, lifeless worksheets, pointless busy work, dumbed-down multiple choice exams. We look for and expect classical results---wise, winsome, virtuous, and articulate students who love learning, but we sometimes end up with some other sort of student perhaps because we’ve not consistently applied classical methods/approaches. We move our students on down the road –to the next station of the assembly line –they pass the tests and get the needed grades –but we may not see lasting fruit from our teaching.

But there is hope. There is an effective way to educate our children. Classical education provides us with not just a curriculum, content, and Trivium framework, but it also gives the pedagogical means and methods to rightly teach the curriculum and content. Dr. Christopher Perrin (*Classical Academic Press, 2014-2015 Catalog, p. 18*) articulates ten excellent and essential pedagogical principles from the classical tradition. These introductory comments and the list below are adapted and expanded from his article.

- 1. Festina lente:** Make haste slowly. Take the time to master each step along the way before rushing to the next lesson. Certainly the teacher needs to cover a certain amount of content over the course of the year to have the students prepared for the next level. And certainly the teacher cannot bog down the entire class because one or two students have not mastered the content. But

the teacher must also show patience with students and exercise wisdom about when to move forward. The true goal is learning, not covering a prescribed number of pages in the textbook.

- 2. Multum non multa:** It is better to master a few things than cursorily cover content that will soon be forgotten. Deep is better than wide. Getting a few things truly into the students' minds is better than superficially touching on many things. It is better to invest time on a history timeline or some basic set of facts such that the students get it fixed in their long-term memory than to spend weeks on detail or minutiae that will soon be forgotten or doesn't need to be remembered.
- 3. Repetitio mater memoriae:** Repetition is the mother of memory (or *repetitio mater studiorum* –repetition is the mother of learning). Lively, regular review and repetition gets information into a student's long-term memory. Chants and drills –repeat-repeat-repeat by rhyme, rhythm, and repetition makes learning permanent. Don't ever let your students forget. In some sense all testing should be cumulative.
- 4. Learning is Embodied:** The form is just as important as the content. The rhythms, practices, traditions, and routines we create in the classroom and hallways are just as important for learning as our in-front-of-the-class lesson presentation. Your posture and tone --the student's posture and tone –the way you line up when leaving the classroom –your routine for turning in assignments –all play a very important role in education. The forms form habits –either good habits or bad habits. Have a vision for how you want your class to function and look and then take the steps to get there.
- 5. Songs, chants, and jingles:** The most important content/skill we wish to create should be taught or reinforced with a song, chant, or jingle. Find them online or make them up yourself. These will look different from 1st grade to 6th grade to 10th grade, but they are always effective. "Jingles" may not appeal to Rhetoric school students, but memory devices (mnemonic or rhymes) and repetition continue to be effective.
- 6. Wonder and curiosity:** We should seek to impart a love for truth, goodness, and beauty by regularly modeling our love for that which is lovely. A passion for learning is caught, not taught. A love of reading, excitement about science, fascination with history, a zeal for grammar should ooze out of your pores. (Keith Henderson –placement of the decimal point.)
- 7. Educational virtues:** We should cultivate virtues of love, humility, diligence, constancy, and temperance in the lives of our students. Be intentional about shaping the hearts of your students. Your words, your countenance, tone, aid in this. How you motivate and encourage shapes this. The standards you set and how you implement those standards play a role.

- 8. Scholé, contemplation, leisure:** We should provide adequate time for reflection, contemplation, and discussion of profound and important ideas. We must allow time for thinking. Learning should be like proper eating –take a bite –put your fork down –chew thoroughly –then swallow –with time for digestion in between meals. Teaching by gorging produces mental indigestion. In ancient times the word we use for scholar/school was the word for leisure –freedom from labor/physical tasks so that you had freedom to think/contemplate. Our reading encourages this in some ways (Tell your students to enjoy/digest their reading, not to gulp it down.). In the classroom when you teach, ask lots of questions and then allow the students time to think and answer before you move on. Ask questions that don't require obvious answers, especially for older students. Ask questions that force them to think and allow time for thinking – have "scholé discussions" –leisurely discussions that demand time for thinking.
- 9. Docendo, discimus:** By teaching, we learn. This applies on a number of levels. The teacher must learn first what is to be taught. The teacher truly learns something when they are forced to teach it to others. And the students should be given opportunity to teach other students. This can be as simple as having them restate the lesson/concept/fact to the other students or in the form having students teach other students.
- 10. Optimus magister bonus liber est:** The great books contain enduring wisdom and excellence that make them masters that can/will master us as we return to them time and again. When we expose students to the best in literature we are shaping their hearts and minds, their souls with the best.