

What is Classical Education and How is it Unique?

(adapted from a talk to MCA by John Agresto, used by permission)

The first question I ask myself is a personal question, "Why is it that I never really know what I know until I teach it?" I have eight years of grade school, four years of high school, four years of college, and I don't want to tell you how many years of graduate school - twenty one or two cross-eyed years of education, but I only understood (as best I understand it) a subject like politics, philosophy, or Latin when I taught it.

Why?

Passive Learning Is Ineffective

What was all that education doing? When I was sitting there, I thought I was learning. So why did I not learn a subject until I taught it?

It is what most of you have experienced most of your life. Let's call it passive learning. It is where you sit there in a class, listening, writing things down, and repeating what you "learned". And I dare say that it didn't always stick! I even know that there were times when I knew something, relayed it to someone, and then forgot it. It was gone to the extent that when they asked me to repeat it a week later, I didn't even remember it anymore. I had never had a grasp of it.

Active Learning Is Real Learning

But active learning involves explaining what you have read, arguing about what you have studied, listening to other people, then trying to make distinctions between what you have heard, what you have thought, and what you really want to say. Then it's getting to the principal of what it is that you think you know and trying to answer questions such as: Why do I think that? Why did I read it that way? Why do I understand it that way? Then we start to know, to really know, what we are talking about. Then we really understand what we studied, what we've read, or what we've heard.

And I think that it is only in those small classes, where we can sit down with others who have read the same material or listened to the same talk, seen the same work of art or listened to the same piece of music, and start talking about it, saying "No, I don't see it quite that way," or "That's exactly right, why didn't I see it, can we say it again?" Only in that way, I think, have I ever learned anything hard and fast.

It is almost the difference between reading about parenting and being a parent. You know it once you have done it, whereas you didn't know it after reading about it.

Truth Matters

We may say, then, that it is important for the student to learn how to make arguments and how to weigh arguments, and that immediately coming to the right conclusion is not important. Would we then be saying that skills are more important than content, that skills are more important than substance, that learning how to do something is more important than what you do?

To a large degree, skills are not what we aim at. I remember my friend, Bill Bennett, (it was mentioned previously that I spent time with the National Endowment for the Humanities), getting very frustrated with someone saying that the only purpose for a humanities education is to learn certain skills, to speak well, or whatever. He used the example of a mother addressing another mother and saying, “My Johnny is going to become a surgeon” and the other mother replying, “Oh, wonderful! Think of how well he will use a knife!”.

No! The skill of the surgeon is not for the sake of the skill, but the skill of the surgeon is to save lives. We know that skills have ends. But thinking in and of itself is good. And I wouldn't be so oppressive of our kids, to say, “Wait a minute; I think you got that wrong,” when what they made was a decent enough argument that they were proud of.

I have to admit that I said that thinking is for Truth. Even more, thinking about important things is more important than thinking about any old thing.

You have heard people say in your life, I am sure, “Well, it doesn't matter what they read, so long as they read.” I don't think so, no. No, reading works of value is more valuable than reading junk. It is almost self evident.

Kids Should Read and Study the Great Books

Therefore, what should kids read?

Answer: If it is important for them to read better than worse. If they can't read everything; (you wouldn't even want them to read everything, it would be a waste of time) what should kids read? They should read the best books!

If textbooks are a dead end, and we know that second-rate books are a waste of time, therefore you should say “Let's send them to a school where they will read Shakespeare, Homer, the Bible, Dickens, James Madison, and Plutarch,” a school like Midland Classical.

Notice what we have done when we have constructed a curriculum like that. We've built up the skills of reading. We've built up the skills of thinking. We have given them something to read and something to think about. I think that if you put together a Great Books education, you have satisfied the skills part, and the content part of a good, pre-collegiate education.

Difficult Texts Allow Tutors to Lead Students to Real Learning

But you may say, “Mr. Agresto, the Great Books are hard.”

Answer: yes, what is your point?

Seriously, there is absolutely nothing wrong, and everything right with stretching, and grappling, and saying, “I just don't get it, but I will, I'll get it some day. I just don't get it yet.” That's really great. And indeed a good tutor, in class, can lead the most difficult texts to fruitful discussion.

Let me give what I think is the most difficult sentence fragment in all of Western civilization: For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...

I think that is the most difficult half sentence to understand in all of Western civilization. Should kids not read it? It's hard. But think of what they will gain out of grappling with that! Why would a father give his son for a ransom, when usually you give a ransom for your son? Isn't that strange that God does the opposite thing that you would think a person would do?

Or, tell me, can you talk about why this is love? I don't get it. Does God love the world more than His Son? For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. What would that possibly mean? That He would love the world, that means me, more than... that can't be true! Could we talk about it? Why should God love us? Why on earth should He love us more than His Son? We don't understand this. We have to grapple with it.

Why did God want the just man sacrificed for the unjust? Usually you would say, "No, we protect the just. We don't sacrifice the just for the unjust. We don't sacrifice the good for the sake of the wicked." Shouldn't that be the other way around?

Or, the hardest question. Most cultures sacrifice people to God. Here is a culture, here is a religion, here is a theology where God sacrifices Himself for people. God dies for people! I don't understand this. The whole world doesn't understand it.

So do you see why it is important to grapple? Yes, these are hard texts. But if your kids are talking like that in class, wouldn't you be happy?

I think that is exactly what we mean by getting our kids to think, to learn, to express themselves, to reason, to try to make distinctions, to try to become as rationally judgmental as we want them to be, where they will come to sound judgments about things that they can then defend.

It's really active learning. It's engaged learning. Because we are using Great Books, it's learning on the most important, even the most crucial topics.

Which Books are the Great Books?

In choosing which books to study, we have to ask ourselves, "What are the things to know, and what books will help us know those things best?" Great Books aim at knowing the answers to the world's most important questions. They are questions that you think about, and you must know your kids think about. In fact, kids think about them more than we do. What is justice? What is friendship? What is truth? What is love? What is beauty? And then more sophisticated questions.: How does language work? How do the heavens work? Does God really exist? Does God care? Why is this country a democracy and do I like that?

Those are the kinds of important questions that, while not repeated in Great Books, are given forceful answers in Great Books. And very often answers that disagree from one book to the next. So you are really engaging your mind, and in fact your whole body and soul, in a great debate on these issues.

Learn From Rather Than About Things

Notice that important questions are not questions like when Aristotle lived, who the transcendentalists were, or who influenced Tolstoy. Those are academic questions. Those are not important questions. They are merely historical questions, merely academic questions. Most of

education out there is where you learn about things, where you learn about books, or about Shakespeare. What you want in an engaged, classical, liberal education is where you learn from great books, where you learn from great authors, from Shakespeare. It's totally useless to learn about Shakespeare. Suppose you found that he got a date wrong, what difference would it make? Suppose you found that he got married the year before, what difference would it make?

But it makes a difference if you know what King Lear is talking about! I have a quote that I like from C.S. Lewis, from the Screwtape Letters: "When a learned man is presented with any statement from an ancient author, the one question he never asks is whether it is true. To regard the ancient writer as a possible source of knowledge, to anticipate that what he said could possibly modify your thoughts and behavior, this would be rejected as unutterably simple-minded."

Well, to be honest, what this school aims to do is to accomplish that very simple-minded thing. What can we learn from our ancient authors? What can we learn from the Bible; not just learn about the bible, but from it? What can we learn from Shakespeare? What can we learn from Plutarch? What can we learn from James Madison?

What About Science and Math?

You might say, "This sounds like a humanities education, not a science or math education." I don't think so. I think the best part of science and math education is a student seeing what is behind the numbers and what is behind the formulas. It's grappling with "What is really going on here? Why do intelligent people really take this seriously?" It's not, in a sense, whether the answers are important, but what are the questions that science is trying to answer, or that mathematics is trying to answer?

For instance, we should not only ask, "How do we categorize objects into genus and species", but also "Why is the world so orderly that we can so organize it"? Now that is interesting question. Why is the world orderly, that it breaks down into things like family, genus, species, and varieties? Why should it be that way? What makes for the regularity of the world? That is a question that you should ask in science class.

Or, why is it that we can translate numbers into words, but we can't translate music, which is a kind of mathematics, into words? Why is music the only non-translatable language we hold in common? You can translate everything else into another language, but you can't translate music into any other language. Why not? I would love to spend a week just talking with kids about that.

Also, what is calculus? What does it do and why should we care? Why did the ancients think that the moon was more interesting than the sun, and why were they right? There are millions of interesting questions out there. Thoughtful questions in science. But if you see it as merely as memorizing formula, you will not like it, and you will not get much out of it.

The Importance of Writing

How important is writing? I have to tell you that I think writing is almost, if not as, important as discussion. Just as, I think, we don't know our own minds until we talk things out, I don't think we really know our own minds, sometimes, until we write things out.

Ever notice how you get in your head, “I know exactly what I’m going to say, I know exactly what I mean. I have got this argument down pat.” Then, when you try to write it out, you find out how hard it is to get it straight? Writing is really the keeper of thought in some ways. It is not just communication from me to you and you to me, it's communication from yourself back to your mind, saying, “Let’s get this straight.” You will not get it “straight” just by thinking about it. You will get it straight by talking and listening, or you will get it straight by writing. I think writing is infinitely valuable in schools.

The Question of Truth

Finally, there is a big question... something that I cannot answer, but the board and the tutors and the parents have to answer. That is: “How can there be a Christian liberal education?” Don’t think that is an easy question. It is not. It is a very difficult question. It is a very serious question. Liberal education searches for the Truth, while religion begins with the knowledge of the Truth. And the search, made upon that knowledge, can seem corrupting, or at least discomfoting to faith.

Comments from the MCA Board and Staff

John Agresto is a former president of St. John's College, arguably the leading Great Books based institution of higher education in the country. He has also served as a director of the National Endowment for the Humanities and is president of John Agresto & Associates, an educational consulting firm for schools and colleges. Mr. Agresto has been a friend and mentor to MCA, and has granted permission for us to utilize this speech, for which we express our great appreciation.

Mr. Agresto's admonition to the Board regarding answering his final question, "How can there be a Christian liberal education?", is one we take very seriously. As noted elsewhere in this brochure, we do not regard the MCA mission to be primarily to guide students to arrive at their own opinion of what constitutes truth from their study of secular literature. Rather, we view MCA primarily as an instrument to help students grow in their personal knowledge and relationship of the person who is the embodiment of Truth, Jesus Christ.

The board and staff are aware that there is risk entailed in exposing students to, and even causing students to study, non-Christian ideas. However, ignorance is no sure defense against erroneous thinking. Rather, we strive to continually equip students to “...pull down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ”. Through this approach, and integrating intellectual knowledge with daily experience gained from a broad range of MCA activities - including sports, mission trips, music, drama, and service projects - it is our intention and desire for MCA to assist parents to produce graduates of high character, with outstanding thinking and learning skills that prepare them not only to excel in any university program they might choose, but in the whole of their lives.