

Classical Education at Imago

An address given by Linny Dey, co-founder of The Imago School

To help people understand something about the education offered at Imago we began, about six years ago, to refer to ourselves as a classical school. For the first 13 years of our existence we did not use this term to describe ourselves, and yet, I think it is important to say that over these nineteen years our philosophy of education has not significantly changed. So why this change in terminology?

I think it is true to say that when Imago began we were wary of using labels of any kind to describe ourselves. We very deliberately chose not to call ourselves "The Imago Christian School", not because we were in any way ashamed of the Christian world-view that is the basis for our understanding of education, but because we did not want people jumping to conclusions about who and what we were based on their own understanding of what a Christian school is. We wanted the chance to explain ourselves to people apart from the possible confusion that might arise from preconceived ideas.

Before Imago began we read an essay by Dorothy Sayers called "The Lost Tools of Learning" which had a lot to do with the shaping of our views about education. In this essay Sayers talks about classical education and about what was lost when this method and understanding of education was given up in modern times. While we set out to recapture some of what had been lost as she described it, it did not occur to us at that time to refer to ourselves as a classical school.

Then several years ago we became aware of a group of schools that had been founded with the very same purpose who were using the term "classical" to describe themselves. We have since become affiliated with this group and have begun to use the term to help people understand who we are.

With that as introduction, I would like to focus tonight on one of the distinctive features of classical schooling called the Trivium. In Classical times the Trivium referred to the first three arts to be mastered, or the first three steps in education. The three steps or stages for learning are Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric. It is important to understand that these are not three subjects. Modern education has trained us to think of education exclusively in terms of subjects, but classical education teaches the art of learning before any subjects as such are introduced. The Trivium is not content; it is a method for approaching learning. We use it first to master language, and then go on to use it in the mastery of all other areas of knowledge. Notice that the terms Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric are taken from the study of language. To learn a language we begin with Grammar, the structure, the vocabulary, the rules. Then we learn the Logic of the language, how to think in the language, how to put it together to make ourselves understood. After this we are ready for the Rhetoric stage in which we learn to express our ideas beautifully, persuasively, and with some originality.

But, again, the Trivium is not just the study of language; every subject has its Trivium. The grammar of any subject is the facts, the basic bits and pieces of the subject. The Grammar of history, for instance, is names, dates, and events. Logic is how the facts fit together or relate to each other; in history this is not mere chronology, but causes and results of the events.

Rhetoric involves the application in a personal way of what one has learned. Thus the Trivium describes how we learn: Grammar first, then Logic, and finally Rhetoric. First knowledge, then understanding, and finally creative application

To quote one writer on classical education, "The Trivium is not an attribute of classical education because it embodies an archaic principle of organizing knowledge; it is classical because it is a universal paradigm of learning."

This paradigm is taken for granted in the study of such things as medicine and music. In medical school one begins with the Grammar of anatomy and physiology. Then one moves on to Logic, how this knowledge of the human body can lead to a correct diagnosis. And finally the intern is ready for the Rhetoric of arriving at his own diagnoses and recommendations for treatment. The Grammar of music involves names for notes, fingerings, and scales. These must be mastered before pieces can be played and then given individual interpretations.

It is unfortunate that this paradigm is not taken for granted in the educating of the young in modern times. Grammar was first to go when the purpose of education changed from the mastery of a body of knowledge to the development of the person. John Dewey and his followers downplayed the role of the intellect in education. "Dewey abandoned any claim to know what was good, true and beautiful. He wanted students to learn rational and scientific methods so that they would be equipped to acquire what was useful to them, according to their own interests."

From time to time since then people have decided that something was missing in education and have tried to make reforms, but these reforms have usually focused on only one aspect of the Trivium. The "back-to-the-basics" movement and the more recent push for cultural literacy have emphasized the Grammar stage, facts, knowledge, but often they go no further. On the other hand, the "critical thinking" movement stresses reasoning and decision-making without giving students anything to think about. Overriding all of this often is a heavy emphasis on the Rhetoric stage at all levels of education; it is believed that children must learn to share their feelings and express their opinions, and their creativity must be protected at all costs from such stifling things as learning to spell.

What we learn from classical education is that real learning does not take place unless all stages of the Trivium are involved and involved in a certain order: Grammar first, Logic second, Rhetoric last. Dorothy Sayers made the interesting observation that this order fits the mental development of young students. She invented alliterative names for what she saw as three stages of development. She called the youngest students "Poll-parrots" because of their facility for memorization and their enjoyment of repetition which makes the learning of facts easy for them. The grammar stage of the Trivium is well suited to the Poll-parrot stage of development. At the age of 12 or 13 children reach what Sayers called the "Pert" stage so named for the tendency to turn whatever they hear on its head, question it and argue about it. This is the perfect age for learning Logic, she says, for they might as well learn to argue correctly. It is not just a course in formal logic which characterizes this stage, but in all subjects teachers use discussion, debates, and role-playing to encourage an understanding of ideas. The final stage which comes in the middle or late teens is called the "Poetic" stage during which these starry-eyed emerging adults are anxious to develop their own style. These traits go well with the Rhetoric stage of learning in which they have a chance to learn to express their ideas clearly and to be taken seriously.

Of course at all levels of education all three aspects of the Trivium are involved to some degree. It is the balance of the three which changes dramatically as one moves from 1st grade through

12th grade. The early grades are heavily weighted toward learning the grammar of language and mathematics, but even first graders who are learning to write proper sentences which begin with capital letters and end with punctuation marks have the chance to write little stories. There is lots of grammar left to learn in 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade, but there are also history projects and oral reports sometimes in costume! While by 11th and 12th grade the balance has shifted to emphasize Logic and Rhetoric, there is still grammar to be learned when, for instance, new subjects such as Calculus or Chemistry with whole new vocabularies are introduced.

Let me end with one illustration of how our use of the Trivium affects the teaching of history in 2nd grade as compared with how history is taught in 7th grade. Both grades study American history but the emphasis in 2nd grade is on the grammar of American history whereas much more of the logic of American history is dealt with in 7th grade. Second graders memorize names such as George Washington, the "Father of our country", and Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence. Seventh graders are assigned to be George Washington and Thomas Jefferson or one of the other leaders of our country during its first decade under the Constitution and to debate with each other their idea about government, Federalists versus Democratic-Republicans. Most students at this age love to role-play and having fun to learn to express the ideas in this way helps them to understand them.

In closing, it is the Trivium which enables our students to acquire information, grasp it intellectually, and use it purposefully and creatively. It is this approach to learning which we use toward the end of bringing students to know and understand truth, goodness, and beauty in the world God has made.