Classical Education in History

However, throughout history education meant “the pursuit of knowledge and the exercise of the mind in the cause of judgment.” Grammar has been the first study of children from antiquity, and the term “grammar school,” commonly used in the past, still means a child’s first school. In the classical world, a child’s first school was where he learned the grammar of Greek and Latin, the foundation upon which all other education was built. Aristotle, who lived at roughly the same time as Alexander the Great, compiled the system of formal Logic in use today and wrote a treatise on Rhetoric used in universities for millennia. The occupation of rhetorician, or public-speaker, was a lofty one in Roman society, with Cicero being the most reknown. Quintilian (can't find), who was influenced by Cicero, was a famous teacher of rhetoric in Rome and wrote Institutio Oratoria, a work detailing the instruction of children and the training of orators; it was likewise used for centuries.

During the Middle Ages the mastery of the Seven Liberal Arts became solidly fixed as the sole educational curriculum, with no question as to its authority, little experimentation with its processes, and few new works added to the ancient texts used in schools. Everyone knew that seven was the number of perfection anyway, so nothing was added or taken away. These seven liberal arts are explained in the old couplet quoted by C.S. Lewis in The Discarded Image:

Gram loquitur, Dia verba docet, Rhet verba colorat, Mus canit, Ar numerat, Geo ponderat, Ast colit astra.

Which, translated, means:

Grammar talks, Dialectic teaches words, Rhetoric colors words, Music sings, Arithmetic numbers, Geometry weighs, Astronomy tends the stars.

The first three -- Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric -- formed the trivium, the three-fold way. The remaining four -- Music, Arithmetic, Geometry, and Astronomy -- formed the quadrivium, the four-fold way. The trivium was first mastered as a foundation to further study in the quadrivium. The medieval quadrivium was the fore-runner of our university, and is the reason today that earning an undergraduate degree still requires a four-year course of study.

In looking at the medieval concept of the trivium, then, C.S. Lewis states that “Grammar talks” means that Grammar teaches us Latin, which was the “living Esperanto of the western world and great works were still being written in it. It was the language par excellence, so that the very word Latin came to mean language.” (Greek was not studied during the Middle Ages, for the most part. All the Greek texts had been translated into Latin.) The phrase “Dialectic teaches words,” really means that “having learned from grammar how to talk, we must learn from Dialectic how to talk sense, to argue, to prove and disprove.” “Rhetoric colors words” -- it gives what we have to say, built by grammar and dialectic, ”structure and style.”

During the Renaissance, and the revival of all things classical, several changes were brought about in education, most notably due to the influence of Desiderius Erasmus (can't find). He encouraged the learning of Greek as well as of Latin, so that the New Testament could be read in its original language. With the invention of the printing press, more school books and instruction books for teachers became
available. Erasmus himself wrote several on the teaching of rhetoric. The tumultous years of the Reformation followed, which brought a fresh emphasis on Biblical study and exegesis. The classical emphasis on language study was brought to the New World by the Puritan colonists, who determined that every child be able to read the Bible, and every pastor be a scholar of Latin and Greek (grammar), able to determine truth from error in their doctrine (dialectic), and able to eloquently expound on the Scriptures (rhetoric). Thus the training in the trivium, underpinned by a Biblical worldview, remained the standard of academic excellence.

The classical concept of the trivium in education survived as the sole educational model for two millenia because it worked -- it consistently produced educated men, given to "the pursuit of knowledge and the exercise of the mind in the cause of judgment."

Encyclopaedia Britannica on the History of Education
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