

## CLASSICAL PEDAGOGY

Classical education involved three modes of instruction, used in the gymnasium by the *gymnastae* or coaches; in the Lyceum by Aristotle (or perhaps better, in his written works, or by Pericles in his famous *Funeral Oration*); or by Socrates as recorded in the *Dialogues* by his student Plato. The three modes thus represented are: coaching, lecturing, and Socratic questioning and discussion, respectively.

In addition, there are three kinds of learning: the acquisition of organized knowledge; development of the skills or tools of learning (utilized in the *trivium* and *quadrivium*); and an enlarged understanding of ideas and values or morals.

In general, learning the skills or learning tools of the liberal arts (*trivium*: reading, writing, speaking, listening; *mathematical and scientific*: calculating, problem solving, measuring, observing and estimating) are best conveyed by coaching.

Didactic instruction, which best conveys organized knowledge to the students, is principally done via lectures and textbooks. The subjects in which didactic instruction is the dominant mode of instruction are typically about mathematics and the natural sciences, history, geography, social studies, and simply reading.

Finally, the Socratic method of questioning and discussion is generally the most fruitful means of enlarging students' (and teachers') understanding of ideas and values or morals. Such discussions need appropriate, rich material, which we may describe as great works of literature and art.<sup>i</sup>

Each discipline taught or learned, is done so best by the mode of instruction and learning most appropriate to it—a common sense conclusion. However, all three modes of instruction are utilized in some degree in all courses. For example, all subjects involve some questions and answers, some lectures (however short or long), some discussion, some reading, *etc.*

Classical education, as noted above, utilized all three modes of teaching. Just as there was one glaring omission in the *content* or *material* of modern education as contrasted with classical education—the study of the *Great Books* of the past, to the present. Likewise, there is a glaring omission in *pedagogy*—the near exclusion of the *Socratic* method of questions and discussion. The two are related. Coaching is also generally neglected, as it usually requires a one-on-one approach, or one-to-five or the like, which is difficult to schedule in most schools.

As the study of the great books of the past by the great sages, scholars and saints were gradually replaced by commercial textbooks written by much lesser luminaries for publishing houses, often to conform to the requirements of school boards in major States, there became less reason to utilize the Socratic method. Textbooks do not lend themselves to discussion. They tend to be factoid-based – simply isolated information, and if organized at all, only chronologically, with little if any discussion of the deeper issues, ideas and themes implicit in the bare facts presented. They are memory-based, and as such are usually quickly forgotten. Hence the “*cramming*” phenomena for

factoid tests, which if taken even a week later would result in significantly lower test scores, much less a year later. What is memorized is quickly forgotten; what is understood is never forgotten.

To align curricula with classical education would especially necessitate two related, significant changes in most high schools: a serious program of study of the greatest books of Western civilization, including great works up to the present, *accompanied* by use of the Socratic method of questioning and discussion of the works.

## ACTIVE LEARNING

*“All genuine learning is active, not passive. It involves the use of the mind, not just the memory. It is a process of discovery, in which the student is the main agent, not the teacher.”<sup>ii</sup>*

Learning from Great Books is greatly facilitated when the reader also engages in a dialectic (from the ancient Greek *dia* – “one with another”) exchange—a live conversation (in person or now online) —with other readers of the same excellent books, probing and discussing the great ideas contained in them and carrying them a few steps farther. This method of learning is often referred to as the Socratic method after the ancient Athenian philosopher Socrates, who initiated its use as a deliberate way to obtain understanding and wisdom with the aid of other minds at work on the same idea.

This same “questioning” method was used by Christ, who often answered questions with questions, parables and stories that left the hearers wondering, questioning, and thinking. He already knew the answers, as Socrates often did. The goal was not merely indoctrination of the memory with information, facts, and knowledge, but mind- and life-changing, critical thinking, leading to understanding and ultimately, wisdom.

Let us look at an example of the questioning approach to learning in the Gospel account of the rich young man who approached Our Lord with a question:

*“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

And Jesus said to him, *“Why do you call me good. No one is good but God alone.”*

The most natural way to read the first part of this saying is that Jesus wants the rich man to make clear what he means. In other words, Jesus wants to elicit from the man what he thinks about Jesus. The diverging interpretations of this saying continue to demonstrate the openness of Jesus’ words. He does not make a statement about Himself but provokes the audience to make their own judgement.<sup>iii</sup>

This is an extremely important insight: Jesus does not go around shoving the mystery of his divinity down people’s throats. He wants them to freely come to believe in him. He wants them to freely arrive at their own conclusions about who he is and how they are going to respond to him. And in the case of the rich young man, Jesus poses a question that is meant to lead the young man to follow out the implications of his own words. If Jesus is “good,” and God alone is “good,” then who exactly

is Jesus? That is the question.<sup>iv</sup> This is not a didactic or lecture approach, it is Socratic questioning. Socrates' approach to lesser ideas and truths, three centuries earlier, is identical.

Intellectual activity requires the interest and concentration of the mind, on sense experience, to begin the process of abstraction, leading to intellectual knowledge. Without this, only indoctrination occurs, not critical thinking. Classical pedagogy recognized this.

## THE HUMAN INTELLECT

To explain the classical pedagogy, we do not need etymological definitions such as were critical to understand classical education, rather we need to understand the human mind as it relates to becoming educated – learning. This requires an adequate conception of intellect. The teaching of Aristotle on intellect, as developed by St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas, has become, in its main features the common doctrine of Catholic philosophers. For our purposes, we shall state it in very brief outline.

The mind of each person is individual, spiritual, and one – a unity. However, it has two functions or powers – an active function (*intellectus agens* – agent intellect), and a passive function (*intellectus possibilis* – possible intellect).

Everything in the cosmic universe is composed of matter and form. The process of knowledge is concerned with the separation of form from matter, as it is the form that is received in the knower – not the matter. So, for example, in seeing a dog, one receives the form of a dog in the mind in an immaterial manner, not the material dog itself. But the form is received in the mind encompassed in the material appearances that make it *this* dog (size, shape, color, motion, etc.).

There is a part of the mind which acts to make sense of the information we receive from our senses the active intellect. It operates on the object presented by the senses (e.g., the appearance of the dog) rendering it intelligible. The function of the active intellect is an abstractive operation on the data supplied by the sense faculties, to form the intelligible species (*species intelligibiles*) in the possible intellect (*intellectus possibilis*).

The active intellect disengages the form of the thing (in this example “*dogness*” or canine mammal) from the individualized matter—from the individual dog one sees—the agent or active intellect “*abstracts*” the essence or nature of the thing presented by the senses to the mind, and reveals its essence stripped of every character that marks or identifies it as this individual dog.

Intellectual knowledge differs from sense knowledge, in that it knows a thing universalized—in its essential form—not as an individual.<sup>v</sup>

Aristotle says that the passive intellect receives the intelligible forms of things, but that the active intellect is required to make the potential knowledge into actual knowledge, in the same way that light makes potential colors into actual colors. Aristotle means that the passive intellect can potentially become (*i.e.*, receive) anything by receiving that thing's intelligible form.

The possible intellect thus actuated, knows what is intelligible in the object. The act of cognition is the concept (or *verbum mentale*), by which is apprehended the universal nature or essence of the object prescinded from its individualizing conditions.

In this process intellect appears in a double character. On the one hand it exhibits itself as an active agent, in that it operates on the object presented by the senses, rendering it intelligible. On the other hand, as subject of the intellectual representation or form, it manifests passivity, modifiability, and susceptibility to the reception of different forms.

It is often the case that something is understood better when contrasted with a contrary. In the text below, St. John of the Cross discusses knowledge gained without use of the senses or the active intellect – but received straight from God, directly into the passive intellect.

*In contemplation, God teaches the soul very quietly and secretly, without it knowing how, without the sound of words, and without the help of any bodily or spiritual faculty, in silence and quietude, in darkness to all sensory and natural things. Some spiritual persons call this contemplation knowing by unknowing. For this knowledge is not produced by the intellect that philosophers call the agent intellect, which works on the forms, phantasies, and apprehensions of the corporal [sense] faculties, rather it is produced in the possible or passive intellect. This possible intellect, without the reception of these forms, and so on, receives passively only substantial knowledge, which is divested of images and given without any work or active function of the intellect.<sup>vi</sup>*

Of course, we cannot impart knowledge directly into the passive intellect as God can – it must first be received from the senses, as sounds, sights, smells, tastes or touches, then the agent intellect must abstract the nature of the thing, stripped of the sense data, and deliver an intelligible form to the passive intellect.

How then does one engage one's own mind and the minds of others in intellectual pursuits? The necessary reading of the Great Books, before any discussion, closely resembles a lecture. We all know the lectures tend to put people to sleep – certainly not always, but often, because the intellect is not engaged, or drifts in and out of engagement.

Discussions do the opposite precisely because the participants are engaged – the agent intellect is at work, they are not merely passive recipients; they are also aided by the comments and the back and forth of the other participants, sharing ideas, also actively engaged in the dialogue. Two minds are better than one, 20 are generally better than two. To participate intelligently, one must pay attention, think the idea through, draw conclusions, articulate them, speak and listen. None of this is necessary in listening to a lecture or watching television or the Internet. Yes, occasional intellectual activity may result, but often it is only the memory that is engaged, simply recording what is experienced, neither the active nor the passive intellect are much involved.

Socratic discussions usually involve a moderator or leader, ideally two, to keep the discussion on topic, varied, to offer different perspectives and ideas, to try and draw all the participants in, to ask interesting questions, to model such discussion for students, and to learn themselves, not to be founts of answers.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> The modes of teaching and learning are charted and set forth in greater detail by Dr. Mortimer J. Adler in his three Paideia books. *The Paideia Proposal*. p. 23. *Paideia Problems and Possibilities*, p. 18. *The Paideia Program – An Educational Syllabus*. pp. 15-47,

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, Adler

<sup>iii</sup> (Mark 10:17-22) Grindheim, *God's Equal*, 187 (emphasis added). See also John M. McDermott, “Didn’t Jesus Know He Was God?” (Mark 10:17-22),” Irish Theological Quarterly 73 (2008):319-20.

<sup>iv</sup> The Case for Jesus, Brant Pitre, Image, NY (2016) p. 151

<sup>v</sup> From *Thomistic Psychology: A Philosophical Analysis of the Nature of Man*, by Robert E. Brennan, O.P.; Macmillan Co., 1941.

<sup>vi</sup> *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross: The Spiritual Canticle*, p. 627 ICS Publications, Washington D.C. 1991 translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.X.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (the “other person” is St. Teresa of Avila, see *Life* 18,14. CF. 14 & 15. 14 and note 9.

