

GLAD YOU ASKED

MODES OF LEARNING: GRAMMAR, DIALECTIC AND RHETORIC

The grammar mode first involves the acquisition of language which includes reading, writing and the function of words. Human beings may not be the only living organisms that communicate, but it is likely that humans are the only specie that use words as symbols of reality. "Only human beings have the power of intellectual abstraction; therefore, only human beings can form a general or universal concept" (Joseph, 23).

When a young student encounters words, his first task is to decode them so that they are apprehended in the process reading. Immediately words are the blocks of thought, the things we think with, and the student can learn that any word bears a relationship to reality, which Aristotle classified into ten categories of being: substance, quantity, quality, relation, action, passion, duration (time), location, posture, and habiliment. Words, then, structure our understanding of reality, and thus, grammatical skills are paramount in classical pedagogy because through them a student comes to understand the kinds of relationships that are possible.

Second, the grammar mode not only implies learning a language, but refers to the process of fact acquisition. Viewed this way, we can talk about about Latin grammar, or the grammar of any language, but we can extend the method to contemplate other subjects, such as a "grammar" of mathematics, of art, or of history. The way a student approaches a subject begins in the grammatical mode, which Sayers referred to as a "tool of learning." Appealing to the innate mental powers of young children, she advocated for example that Latin should not only be taught, but that it should be taught early, because learning "amo, amas, amat" presents no more difficulty to a child than learning "eenie, meeny, miny, mo."

Learning an inflected language such as Latin introduces a student to word relationships in a form-based, rule-based system. A student who could translate more than rudimentary Latin by middle school would be engaging in a foreign language, not necessarily for the purpose of speaking, but for the purpose of listening.

In translation he could hear voices from across the ages, and the act of translating is the act of thought itself. Language acquisition, coupled with the pedagogies of observation and memory, summarize the grammatical method, which is the way a student acquires recorded fact, and is introduced to ultimate reality. "As human civilization advances, the proportion of abstract substantives in the language increases" (Joseph, 49).

Early classical pedagogy relies heavily on the collection of materials: language, poetry, legends, myth, proverbs, fables, etc., but when we move to the dialectic mode we include disputation and logic. Aristotle lit the way, of course, with the first formal text, but the skill required to form an argument, write an essay, and above all, spot unsubstantiated inference, is expected of every student. If the grammatical mode is a tool for acquiring recorded fact, logic is the tool for testing the validity of "facts." And, just as every subject has its own "grammar," so also does it have its own dialectic. Arithmetic is highly grammatical; algebra is highly dialectical.

Sayers maintained however, that the dialectic stage corresponded more or less to the middle school child. She referred to it as the "pert" stage, "which... is only too familiar to all who have to do with children: it is characterized by contradicting, answering-back, liking to 'catch people out' (especially one's elders) and the propounding of conundrums (especially the kind with a nasty verbal catch in them). Its nuisance-value is extremely high. It usually sets in about the eighth grade" (Sayers).

Sayers thought that, if one were to teach to the grain, formal logic should be introduced at precisely the time young students demonstrated a love of argument. "It will doubtless be objected that to encourage young persons at the pert age to browbeat, correct, and argue with their leaders will render them perfectly intolerable. My answer is that children of that age are intolerable anyhow, and that their natural argumentativeness may just as well be channeled to good purpose as allowed to run away into the sands" (Sayers).

Finally, the scope of classical pedagogy extends

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to the mode of rhetoric, which Aristotle defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. Relying upon the grammatical mode, and closely tied to the dialectic, rhetoric represented the culmination of knowledge, analysis, and articulation – written or spoken. Thus, grammar and dialectic contemplate acquisition and testing of recorded fact, rhetoric contemplated the expression of fact in manifold contexts.

Liberal education is distinguished from utilitarian or vocational education insofar as it is “intransitive” (Joseph). That is to say, the learner is the thing shaped in the process of education. In contrast, a vocational education trains the learner in a skill, perhaps a very high skill, in which the student produces a service or a good external to himself. Carpentry, plumbing, welding, and even law and medicine can be classed as utilitarian training because they represent skills that can be acquired and conveyed to others. The “product” of a liberal education is neither a thing or good that can be priced as a commodity and conveyed in the market. Rather, the product of a liberal education is the student himself.

Liberal education is therefore concerned with bringing the student into contact with the forms of reality be they mathematical, philosophical, theological, or metaphysical, etc. In fact, following both Plato and Aristotle, “the first premise of classical education is that there is an “Ideal Type” toward which education aspires. the Ideal Type’s ancient, prescriptive pattern of truth – which served Christian and Jew, Roman and Greek – remain the most durable and the most comprehensive” (Hicks, 8). In spite of variations and outright differences, the classical tradition in pagan and Christian contexts shared a commitment to normative aspects of knowledge as opposed to operational aspects, emphasizing and advocating a concern for those things that ought to be done, as opposed to the modern notion of what can be done (Hicks, 11). In other words, the arc of the educational endeavor was bent toward the formation of the person, rather than to the cultivation of marketable skill.

Normative knowledge, collected over time, forms a tradition, and a tradition over time undergirds a civilization. Educators in the Western tradition saw

their task therefore as transmitting that culture. As we shall point out below, the strongest twentieth century challenge to the liberal arts tradition was Progressivism, and its objections may be understood as a reaction both to the norms of the Western tradition, but also to the pedagogies implicit in the trivium.

Public education in the United States until the late nineteenth century was largely informed by the liberal arts paradigm. Even the regimen of the utilitarian pursuits took its definition from its larger context of the liberal arts. It is important to note, however, that both liberal and utilitarian streams historically remain part of this tradition, and should not be falsely dichotomized. In other words, historically speaking, the modes of education that do not by strict definition meet the standard of the liberal, medieval syllabus, nevertheless should be distinguished from the later pragmatic and progressive movements that displaced them in the twentieth century.

This is evident from the disciplines that were historically included in the catalog of utilitarian arts, a point that comes into clarity if we offer sharper definitions. Vocational education is concerned with what the Greeks called *tekhne*, which suggests the acquisition of knowledge or skill (technology) to develop power to act upon matter, to exert change in the natural order, to create or control, or to produce or to modify. The fine arts, which originally included such disciplines as architecture, were of this latter class, because they pursued outcomes of an external nature; that is, the end product was considered an external good, albeit one that required a high degree of skill. On the one hand, music theory, in the most stringent of liberal studies, would be studied as a sister to mathematics, and thus would take its place in the liberal curriculum; on the other hand, performative musical arts would be regarded as an external endeavor and would thus be referred to the *seivle* arts (Joseph). Such distinctions would likely fail to gain much traction from a contemporary point of view, which points to the necessity of further distinctions which arise in the late nineteenth century and educational reform movements.

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