



AKADEMIA

AD FUTURUM PER FONTES

The classical education ideal: a practical reflection

A public lecture by Cornelia Brace on 7 September 2023 at the Faculty of Education

Good morning

My name is Nel Brace, my given name is actually Cornelia, but my English husband initially struggled terribly with the pronunciation, so before meeting Simon it was Cornelia and after meeting Simon it is Nel. The English influence is now strong, and I apologise upfront for the way I am going to mix my languages in today's discussion.

I am the mother of five children between the ages of fourteen and six and I am homeschooling them. The fact that I was asked to talk about classical education today at the only tertiary education institution in our country with a classical foundation makes me wonder if, like Latin is a dead language, classical education might be a dead education philosophy.

The good news is that a language is only declared dead if there is no indigenous use thereof, and so a few exceptional residents of the Vatican City saved Latin. Perhaps the fact that Professor Goosen and a fistful of home schoolers somewhere in South Africa are pursuing a classical education means that the philosophy is still, even just barely, breathing.

What would make us want to be so thick-headed as to cling to an unknown, ancient and seemingly impractical view of education? In my case the answer is simple: The souls of my children. Prof. Goosen's is perhaps nobler, the soul of a nation.

In my presentation this morning I am firstly going to tell you our story so that you may understand why we started to take the classical route. Thereafter I will explain how we currently understand and follow the classical education. Please understand from the outset that we ourselves still have a lot to learn, that we definitely do not yet fully understand what we are dealing with and that I do not have the answers to all your questions. I might have leave you with more questions than you have started with.

I start the story with my own educational path. My school career was like a textbook. Learning was easy to me and the formal school system with its competitive academic approach fitted my conscientious and driven personality like a glove. I completed matric with six As in 1996 and could have earned more if my school in the countryside offered more subjects. Every single quarter my name headed the academic top ten list. Apart from academics, I was also versatile and I enjoyed sports and cultural extracurricular activities. One could truly say that I was a prime example of a successful outcome of the South African school system. Further undergraduate studies was a difficult decision for an eighteen-year-old who "could do everything." Pragmatic salary considerations determined my initial choice but my soul could not get to grips with the living style that would follow by implication. So, I finally ended up at the Faculty of Education on Stellenbosch and completed the HED with subject didactics in English and Mathematics. No part of my studies was really "difficult". I passed everything with flying colours with minimal effort.

And yet there was a restlessness in my soul. Hashtag "well-educated" surely must have applied to me? I had ticked all the boxes and jumped through all the hoops. After my HED, like many other education students with study debt, I turned to the teacher crisis in the UK and went to earn pounds for ungrateful work in British public schools. My mindset and the principles of my HED fit in well with the British system, and I fulfilled my role as a teacher thoroughly and faithfully. But, with the exposure to a wider world, the restlessness grew in my soul. What exactly was this feeling, this restlessness? I would describe it as that fear being in a room full of well-read people and that anybody might at any moment ask for my input or opinion on a matter about which I actually have no clue. A hidden inability to take part in important and meaningful conversations in a constructive way because I did not have the insight or even the basic vocabulary. A realisation that my studies may have prepared me to fulfil my role as an educational employee, but not to be able to participate in the great educational conversation as a fully-fledged member of society. One of the first books I read about classical education described this situation: "I was schooled, but I was never educated."

Through our further studies at a seminary where classical, Thomistic metaphysics, epistemology, formal logic and virtue studies were the order of the day, Simon and I discovered a world of questions and answers within the Christian tradition and its predecessors that breathed life into the dusty corners of our minds. With the birth of our children, the choice of an educational philosophy becomes deeply personal. Our desire was, and still is, to educate our children so that they can participate fully in the great academic conversation. We wanted to prevent the shortcomings of our own education in their lives. In the USA, where we lived at the time, there was already a boom in classical education, especially among home schoolers. We recognised in the classical curricula, that we experienced around us, the essential elements for the education of our children, partly as a result of our own academic experience but largely as a result of our mere human nature. Our understanding was limited and we realised in the meantime that the waters were much deeper than we had ever realised, but we then fearlessly dived in and started swimming. In the meantime, we realised that our educational ideal had actually fallen



short and that a classical education offered so much more than we expected. Here I bring glory to our Creator for his provision. Sometimes He even provides what we don't even realise we need. So where does our story stand now?

We are currently homeschooling our five children with what is our best attempt at a classical education. We use an American programme called Classical Conversations (CC) as a broad framework. CC is not the only or best classical curriculum available for home schoolers, but it fulfilled our initial need for a bite-sized resource. Sometimes it feels like we are repairing and adjusting the plane mid-flight, but we fly. There is a special satisfaction in the privilege of being part of our children's educational journey in this way, and in the process some of the gaps in our own education are also filled. We are deeply grateful.

So what exactly is a classical education? Just to acknowledge, the next part of my presentation leans heavily on the work of Andrew Kern and Dr Gene Veith from the Center for Independent Research on Classical Education (CirCE) in the USA.

The definition of a classical education is the cultivation of wisdom and virtues by feeding the soul with the true, good and beautiful. This is done through the seven liberal arts as well as the four sciences. How does this compare to your definition of education?

Perhaps a few further definitions are in order here. I apologise if these concepts are already familiar to you, but for the sake of those to whom it sounds alien, a few concise definitions.

Cultivating here has to do with improvement through work or study, correcting mistakes, increasing capacity, and refining and purifying.

Wisdom and virtues are the ability to live eminently according to the good as determined by our humanity, according to our nature. To pursue faith, hope, love, prudence, justice, steadfastness, and temperance as a habit.

How do we cultivate wisdom and virtues? By nourishing the soul with the true, the good and the beautiful. To put the soul in order, to direct it to what is good, true and beautiful.

This ordering and nourishment are accomplished through the practice of the seven liberal arts on the four sciences.

Perhaps just a quick explanation of the concept of arts as used here. Art here is not the end product of an artist's effort. Here it is the method that brings about something other than the art itself, a skill. The liberal arts bring about understanding and therefore they are the art of thinking.

This reasonableness or ability to think is what distinguishes a human being from the animal. In particular, a human being is unique in his/her ability to think with the use of symbols including words, numbers, shapes, and musical and visual imagery.

The first three of these arts are the Trivium: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. It develops the expert and appropriate use of verbal symbols, or language. This development is essential for our humanity.

Furthermore, no animal can use numbers and shapes like humans. Even music arises from our ability to hear numbers in their relationships and proportions.

The four arts of the Quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, then develop number skills.

I will expand a bit on the seven liberal arts when I talk more about how we currently apply them.

So, by means of the seven liberal arts we sharpen the skills to be able to think well and then by implication to be able to live well.

Just one last thought about the liberal arts before we move on to the sciences. The liberal arts are called this way because they are the arts that are freely available to every free person. These arts are also essential to freedom. A society that does not master these arts cannot be free. He who does not master logic is at the mercy of manipulators outside himself in society and within his own soul. He who does not master rhetoric will never be able to express his thoughts freely and in an appropriate manner.

If the seven liberal arts sharpen skills, the four sciences are the grindstone. What we form thoughts and thinking about is the domain of knowledge within each type of inquiry. The idea of "science" as considered here is much broader than simply the knowledge contained in the natural sciences. The hijacking of the word "science" by modernism and its naturalistic bias is well reflected by the popular saying: science has proven, or it has been scientifically proven as an announcement of indisputable truth. As if the natural sciences have sole right to the truth. Science in the broadest sense aims at the understanding of causes. The order of the sciences is grounded in universal human experience.

Firstly, natural sciences are knowledge of the physical order such as biology, physics and chemistry. Biology is directed by the attempt to understand the causes of existence and change in living beings. Physics is directed by investigating forces that bring about change in the physical realm. Chemistry is directed by inquiry into the elements that make up physical objects.

The method (mode) of inquiry of the natural sciences is research into material and efficient causes. Observation and measurement are particularly applicable to this domain. The goal of the natural sciences is understanding the causes of change in the physical world so that a human being can live with wisdom and virtues in relation to the cosmos.



Secondly, human sciences are the knowledge of moral order. That is to say, the sciences of human behaviour and the soul, namely ethics and politics. Ethics asks the question: how can a human being fulfil his/her potential, how can he/she flourish? How can he/she be truly good? Politics seeks to understand how human society brings about the flourishing of its members. How can a society cultivate virtues in its members? Political studies therefore also include reflection on history and economics. The human sciences are of a higher order than the natural sciences and the method of investigation is deep reflection on the human soul. This includes a dialectical interaction with works of art, literature and other historical sources. The human sciences aim at understanding the causes of human behaviour so that a human being can achieve the virtues for him-/herself and can also stimulate and cultivate them in others.

Thirdly, the philosophical sciences are the knowledge of metaphysics and epistemology. The unique tools of philosophical inquiry are deep thought and dialectical reasoning. The goal of philosophical sciences is to understand the limitations of human knowledge and causality itself. It is in metaphysics that we see one of the strongest contrasts between classical and modernist education. The following quote by Andrew Kern describes this contrast:

To the modernist, especially after John Dewey, metaphysics is a waste of time because we can only know what the natural sciences reveal to us. Thus, modern education is driven by experimentation and measurement. The modernist educator has determined that knowledge is the adaptation of an organism to its environment. The classical educator is deliberately metaphysical and does not approach philosophy with despair. He believes that the world we live in is real and that it is knowable. Therefore, for the classical educator, knowledge is gained when the seeker encounters an idea embodied or incarnated in concrete reality. When the modernist educator teaches, his goal is an adaptation to the environment, or what is commonly called a practical application. When a classical educator teaches, his goal is wisdom and virtue. This will have plenty of practical applications, but it will also include the ability to know when not to adapt to the environment – when to resist it and when to be martyred by it. The irony is that the modernist disables his student from sound practical applications because he has misrepresented reality and thereby made it difficult to adapt to it. Meanwhile, the classical educator has enabled the student to think in terms of circumstances without abandoning virtue.

The last of the four sciences is the theological science. Here we are concerned with knowledge of the First Cause, God Himself. The theological science is the highest science. All the instruments of the lower sciences are employed for the acquisition of theological knowledge. Of course, the Christian recognises that certain theological truths are discovered only through Special revelation. The purpose of theological science is to direct all other knowledge to the First Cause.

These are then, in very broad terms, the liberal arts and the sciences as understood within classical education. For the classical educator, the purpose of education is to direct the student's soul to the true, the good and the beautiful. This is done by practising the skills of the liberal arts on the sciences, so that the student can live in freedom with wisdom and virtue.

Allow me a few moments to highlight two more important elements of classical education that stand in stark contrast to modern pragmatic education.

Firstly, the classical educator is convinced that a human being is a creature with eternal value. For the Christian, he/she is an image bearer of God Himself. The human being is not just an organism that must survive. He/she has an eternal soul. Thus, the flourishing of the human being is not only related to material provision, but to his/her relationship with the true, the good and the beautiful. There is a fundamental difference in the view of education as feeding a soul versus armouring a participant for survival in a competitive society. Classical education has high regard for humanity.

Secondly, the classical educator recognises reality as a coherent and "knowable" whole and therefore classical learning is always integrated. All knowledge is related, and no science stands apart from another. For the classical educator, the mastery of the liberal arts and the strengthening of those skills are of utmost importance. Specialisation in an academic field is only possible when these skills have been mastered. Being familiar with the content of a subject is never the end goal. To have the skills to familiarise yourself with the content of any subject and to be able to recognise and appropriate the true, the beautiful, and the good in it is to be educated.

These are high ideals indeed. And like the good products of a modern pragmatic education, you may rightly ask, how does it work in practice?

From a personal point of view, classical education is a Copernican Revolution for me. As the product of both a modern pragmatic school system and teacher training, I am very deeply ingrained in its principles. It is almost a daily struggle to remind myself that the souls of my children are now central to the system. My constant tendency is to confuse the true, the beautiful and the good with that which works, that which ticks boxes, that which pleases officials and that which will one day put bread on the table. Of course, wisdom and the virtues do not exclude these things, but it is so easy to confuse the by-products with the end product.



My Copernican Revolution is therefore mainly limited to my household as we teach at home. It is relatively easy to direct our schedule, resources, outcomes, and assessment according to a classical education philosophy. At this point, there are still relatively few and ineffective government restrictions on homeschooling. Time will tell if the BELA legislation will complicate things for us. My classical approach therefore only takes into account the five individuals in my house and in this way we avoid the great upheaval that would be necessary in the public education sphere for a classical approach.

In everything we do the good, true and beautiful are central. This is my barometer. If I cannot explain how a specific activity promotes our understanding and experience of this, we are no longer engaged in education. By way of explanation, I am going to expand a little more on how we practise the trivium, (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) on a daily basis and in doing so I hope to make the contrast between a classical approach and the modern approach even clearer.

The focus of what we learn is not content but skill. We practise the liberal arts of grammar, logic and rhetoric on the content.

Of course, education does not start the year a child turns five or six. Education begins on day one. We already then start with the acquisition of vocabulary and abundant ideas. This is grammar. Learning a language is perhaps the best example of this. We start with the grammar, the basic elements (vocabulary) and the rules (syntax) that determine its structure. Every subject area has a grammar. For example, think of learning a new hobby. In any new field of knowledge, there is vocabulary and structure that must be mastered. For the young child, learning grammar is a natural process. We name, "Mommy, what is this?" We name objects, and their parts, we conceive and discuss the categories to which they belong. What is it, what isn't it, what else is like it? We pay attention (attend). With the five senses we investigate closely. We get quiet and learn to look carefully and listen. We discipline ourselves to pay attention to what we experience. We compare with previous experiences. Paying attention is a discipline that must be cultivated. We memorise facts and relationships between objects and events so that we can remember, connect, and expand old ideas into new ideas. Memorisation becomes the rich storehouse and foundation on which we build our thinking. We express what we remember by reciting, drawing, dancing, singing. If truth is the correspondence of ideas with reality, it is necessary that we must be able to experience, name and remember reality. Within the grammar we capture these skills. These skills are applicable in every subject area. Yes, there is the grammar of language, but also of mathematics, geography, history, natural sciences, music, art and even, cooking, sewing, technology, sports and so on. Please note, the focus is not the content itself, we practise naming, esteeming, memorising and expressing the content of any subject area.

The art of logic or the dialectic establishes the skill of organised, logical thinking. The higher order function of human thought is our ability to come to new insights and conclusions from what we already know. We must therefore understand and practise the rules of formal logic and be able to point out and avoid errors of thought. Being able to perceive, name and remember facts is not only intellectually satisfying. We also want to understand how these facts relate to each other. We want to understand causes and effects so that we can judge correctly about the true, the beautiful, and the good. By asking ourselves the correct questions, we can better understand reality. We ask questions about definitions, comparison, circumstances, relationships, testimony and authority. We currently have a finch that is busy building nests in the tree in the courtyard of our house. The grammar of birds, nests, eggs, migration, etc. is already ingrained in our youngest children. However, when we pay attention to the finches, we observe certain interesting behaviour for which we would like to have a cause or an explanation. By asking ourselves good questions we can come to a valid conclusion about the behaviour of the finches. What is a finch? What is a finch not? How is a finch different from a pigeon? How do finch nests differ from pigeon nests? How do finch nests differ from each other? What are the circumstances of the finches in our tree? What is their relationship with the tree, with us, with each other, with other living organisms in our garden? Who is an authority on finch behaviour, where can we find good evidence about it? Thus, we come to valid conclusions about the finches' behaviour. These thinking skills are practised and sharpened over and over in every subject area we study. This applies to what we want to know about finches but also to how we should think about law and justice, to how we solve a maths problem and to how we understand Jesus' parables.

The art of rhetoric is the skill of being able to express our thoughts in a coherent and convincing manner. Firstly, we think of the content of the message, what do we want to communicate about? Then we decide how to organise the content. How are we going to start, what are we going to end with? In what order is the content persuasive? Elocution is the style in which we will convey the content. What techniques can we use to convey the content as persuasively as possible? We also practise memorisation, not only of the recitation, but also the skill of using everything from our memory that applies to this content. We conceive and practise the public transmission of our ideas. We take into account aspects such as intonation, hand gestures, resources, media, the audience and the environment. Whether it is through a formal research paper, an oral presentation, a poem, or a drawing, the skill of rhetoric makes it possible for us to express our ideas within each subject area.

Finally, I would like to share just briefly about assessment or evaluation, I am not sure which term is currently being used. If the fundamental outcome of education is wisdom and the practice of the virtues through appreciation of truth, goodness, and beauty, assessment necessarily looks different.

Within a classical approach, assessment is individual, personal and human. Progress in wisdom and virtues is not quantifiable. This can only be determined in deep and human relationships.

The competitive, quantitative system of modern pragmatic education is of no value to the classical educator. The C on the report is no indication of the growth in wisdom and virtue of the individual. If it has been achieved through hard work, perseverance, conscientiousness and growth in skill, it indicates much more progress than the A of the gifted student who is really just resting on his/her laurels. Assessment should be a celebration of the extent to which we have already mastered skills and an incentive to deepen our understanding of the true, the good and the beautiful.



I mentioned at the beginning that it is important for us as parents that our children should be able to participate with zeal and competence in the great, age-old intellectual conversation. It is our belief that mastering content in a handful of subjects will never achieve this goal. Our children need the skills that will enable learning and growth in every aspect of their lives for the rest of their lives. They need the skills to be able to make sense of the reality in which they find themselves, to be able to recognise the true, the good and the beautiful in it and to follow it faithfully. To be able to draw the necessary conclusion to a Creator in every aspect of the creation they study and to share it with their fellow human beings with wisdom and endearment.

A classical education is the fulfilment of Paul's command to learn all that is true, all that is noble, all that is right, all that is pure, all that is beautiful, all that is praiseworthy – whatever virtue or praiseworthy cause there may be – to think about it and then practise it.

For the sake of the souls of our children, we cannot settle for anything less.