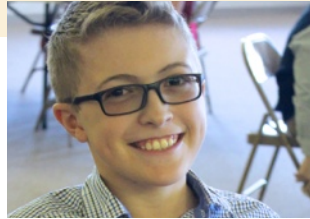




THE ACADEMIC JOURNAL

Philosophy, Pedagogy, and Perspectives 4.27.17

Character Scholarship Community



Welcome to our forty first edition of "The Academic Journal," a bimonthly bulletin in which you can read about MCA's educational philosophy, instructional methodology, and the various viewpoints and positions of our faculty, staff, students, and families.

Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts; nothing else will ever be of any service to them.

"Tom, I wonder"—upon which Mr. Gradgrind, who was the person overhearing, stepped forth into the light and said, 'Louisa, never wonder!' Herein lay the spring of the mechanical art and mystery of educating the reason without stooping to the cultivation of the sentiments and affections. Never wonder. By means of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, settle everything somehow, and never wonder.

From *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens

A Useless Education

The industrial model of education satirized by Dickens is a useful education. Facts are useful; information is useful. In our age of information and technology, the industrial model still holds sway. Students are taught facts and tested on them, and they are trained to prepare for the jobs they eventually may hold. Students analyze texts while adults analyze students. Sticks and carrots provide motivation; everything is well managed. A factory model of schooling is utilitarian and pragmatic, sending students into careers well armed with information and technical skills carefully tailored to their future plans.

We live in an age of information; in fact, we are bombarded with information nearly all of our waking hours. In schools, students are inundated with information that they then regurgitate on tests designed to measure their retention of reams of information. Information is a useful and necessary part of our lives and a necessary part of schooling, but it is a means and not an end. The end goal of education is not information, but *formation*. Gradgrind was dead wrong. Facts are not enough. The sentiments and affections must be cultivated. Children are a wonderful and mysterious unity of body, mind and soul, all of which education much reach and form. The design and delivery of the curriculum should be pointed toward that which is true, good and beautiful. We teach not just facts; we teach that which is worth admiration and affection, shaping both heart and mind.

Classical education is sometimes viewed as useless, or at least not very practical. Students take courses that have nothing whatsoever to do with their career paths. We fill their heads with useless stories, poems, and songs. We paint, we sing, we dance, we take time to look at clouds and bugs: all useless endeavors in terms of training students for jobs, but it is these endeavors that are formative.



Common Core promises to engage students in complex texts, and it does just that. Students read a worthy poem and then analyze it. Students read a complex text and then analyze it. Test questions are centered on the parts but neglect the whole, never asking, "What does all it mean?" All of this analysis is very useful. In a classical environment, in contrast, we want students not just to analyze, but to synthesize, to put together what has been taken apart, to understand the wholeness, relationships, purposes and wider stories of things. We want them not just to analyze a text, but to fall in love with it, to wrap their arms around the beauty of a poem, to stare in wide-eyed wonder at a caterpillar spinning its chrysalis. We want to stimulate their intellects, but more importantly, we want to fire their imaginations. Children need a close acquaintance with heroes and villains, orcs and elves, bold knights and fiery dragons. They need to meet characters in their books who show them not only what to do, but how to *be*; they need stories that abide in their hearts, walking with them through good days and not-so-good days, whispering lessons of humility and courage. Children need to engage in totally "useless" activities such as lying on a hillside and watching clouds, whittling out a whistle, building a tree house or just thinking. All of these useless endeavors and more are part and parcel of a formative education, a soul-nourishing, human-being-building education.

In a classical school, the task of the teacher goes well beyond the delivery of information; the main task of a classical educator is to inspire. Teachers who love those useless books, poems, mathematical proofs and natural wonders pass those loves along to their students, inspiring them to be the human beings they were meant to be. Good teachers open up the wonders of the world, a world that is orderly, beautiful and able to be understood.

Classical educators ask questions of themselves: "How do we awaken students to a world of wonder and awe? How do we help them love what is worth loving? How do we point them toward truth, goodness and beauty? How do we light the fires of their imaginations?" Classical educators who invest heart and mind into answering these questions can bring a wonderful enchantment to education. Answering the questions well involves turning much of the common wisdom on its head, thinking differently about what we do and why we do it. It involves thinking beyond what is useful and pragmatic to what is soul-nourishing and formative.



The first duty of a university is to teach Wisdom, not a trade; Character, not technicalities. We must learn to support ourselves, but we must also learn how to live.
~Sir Winston Churchill

In the last two years, the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Wall Street Journal* have each published articles on the classical liberal arts. In each case, they mention that employers, especially in the high-tech industries, are looking for people taught in the liberal arts tradition because people so taught are able to think and solve problems and to interact well with ideas and with others. Those trained solely in useful technical skills lack some of these deeper characteristics that are so important in any walk of life. In short, these employers are looking for people who have learned useless things.

So, as a classical school, we will value formation over information, imagination over intellect, synthesis over analysis, inspiration over motivation, being over doing. We will take time to do useless things, to think, to feel, to love, to be enchanted, and we will all be the better for it. We will be more human and more liberated.

As a counterpoint to Mr. Gradgrind, let me leave you with a quote by Sir Winston Churchill: *The first duty of a university is to teach Wisdom, not a trade; Character, not technicalities. We must learn to support ourselves, but we must also learn how to live.*

During this beautiful springtime, I hope you and your children take time to do useless things...and to live!

Pamela J. Braley, Upper School Director

