

Emily Dalglish
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New and Old Ideas of Curriculum in its Social Context

TE 818 has confirmed and contested several ideas I once held about the curriculum in its social context. On the one hand, it has confirmed my beliefs about the positives of a traditional model for education, namely the Trivium. However, the course has also caused me to reevaluate my view of science education and its importance. Both of these positions were and are considered in the current, progressive educational context. There is pressure from many in the education world to be “progressive”—this implying the following educational trends such as focusing on nearly exclusively on reading and writing, while science and social studies are put on the back burner.

Thinkers such as E.D. Hirsch and Neil Postman have given me pause in their respective works, *Why Traditional Education is More Progressive*, and *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*. In both of these works, Hirsch and Postman argue against following the latest educational trends. Rather, it is their viewpoint, that educators follow what has worked for thousands of years—the classical model. Hirsch sites the work of Communist intellectual Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci believed, “children, particularly the children of the poor, should not be encouraged to follow ‘natural’ inclinations, which would only keep them ignorant and make them slaves of emotion. They should learn the value of hard work, gain the knowledge that leads to understanding, and master the traditional culture in order to command its rhetoric”. Hirsch goes on to counter the portrait progressives have painted of a traditional, boring, merely verbal, premature, fragmented, boring, and lockstep education with the classical model. In this way, Hirsch demonstrates how this model of education can be relevant and transcend from the context of the communist era to present day.

It is in the present day that Postman presses for a reintroduction of the Trivium model into modern education. It must be noted however, that Postman, while he seems to be advocating the use of the Trivium, his understanding of it is limited. He asserts that Hirsch desires that students learn facts, but not “where these things came from and why”. To assert that an educator not care that his students be concerned with “why” is absurd. This even more so because the primary concern of the logic stage is dealing with the question of “why?”. Grammar, as Postman understands it, is strictly English grammar. However, in the context of the Trivium, grammar refers to the grammar of all subjects. Nonetheless, Postman is a strong advocate for using the Trivium model. He particularly favors the rhetoric stage in which students learn the art of effective communication.

Having been fortunate enough to have had the unique experience of teaching in a private, classical school and then moving to teach in the public school system, I have seen the benefits of classical education far out way the modern, progressive model of education. Students schooled under the Trivium method had a solid understanding of key principals and taught to them in the grammar phase. Likewise, they could artfully utilize the skills of logic and rhetoric they learned in the later phases. Seeing these strong recommendations for using the classical model by Hirsch and Postman, I was encouraged and confirmed in my high regard for this format for education.

One area where I was challenged was in my view of science education. As I have moved from a classical to a progressive context in my teaching career, I had begun to

believe the progressive view point that students need to learn to read and write in order to perform in other academic areas and thus reading and writing must be the primary (nearly sole) focus of education. While the premise may hold true (particularly in lower el), the conclusion unnecessarily cuts valuable content from students' education. After reading *Rocket Boys* by Homer Hickam Jr., I realized the passion ignited in some students by science. Similarly, as I was disheartened by the teaching of biology in Westridge high school as cited in Reba N. Page's article *The Uncertain Value of School Knowledge: Biology at Westridge High School*, I came to see the inconsistency in my own, newly formed, view on science.

In his work *Rocket Boys*, Homer recalls laying in bed thinking about his passion: science. In an almost religious experience, Homer says, "I had the startling revelation that plane geometry was, in fact, a message from God". He goes on to describe reconciling this notion with his ministers. One cannot ignore the raw passion in Homer for the sciences. Now as an educator, I would think it exceedingly difficult to tell Homer that reading and writing are really more important, and once he learn those, he can learn all he wants to about science (virtually on his own). No, this is an unconscionable disservice to students.

Another disservice to students may be seen in the modern example at Westridge high school. Here, students are given a muddled view of science with unnecessary rigor on inappropriate and trivial matters, while matters of substance and importance are deemed exceedingly difficult and presented in an intimidating manner.

Both of these examples caused me to reflect more candidly on my own practice in the discipline of science. Again, I cannot rightly tell a student, whose passion is science, that it is of little importance. Likewise, I cannot reconcile the lack of instructional integrity in presenting concepts in an unattainable form while stressing trivial points of procedure.

Each of these factors, classical or progressive, reading or science, depend largely on the context in which they are presented. While science was the focus in the course examined in Page's article on Westridge high school, the context made a crucial difference in the accessibility of the material to students. The context for education is weighty indeed. As seen in the film, *Freedom Writers*, the context in which education is administered and received has large ramifications for both teachers and students alike. As Erin had to adapt to her urban setting and the attitudes of her students, so I must reconcile my traditional leanings and my realization of the importance of science with my progressive setting.