CLASSROOM PRACTICES FOR CULTIVATING THE AFFECTIONS

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Note: This article has been prepared from an audio recording.

Every time I get to speak on this topic with fellow classical educators, I am so excited because I was a classically educated student, as was my husband, pretty much kindergarten through twelfth grade and on into college at New Saint Andrews. We really feel that our affections, our hearts, were truly molded by our classical education. In many ways I am here to give back a little, to pay a debt of gratitude to teachers like yourselves. I just want to say thank you for the work you are doing. It truly is making a difference in the lives of students like myself.

As a fifth-grade teacher, I am responsible for teaching my students many things: spelling, Latin, Shurley grammar, math, history, and how to write a good topic sentence. But as a classical teacher, I am also supposed to be shaping the character of my students. We learn from C.S. Lewis that training affections, or cultivating virtue, or teaching students to love truth, beauty, and goodness and the Lord in each other is actually what education is for. These noble goals are often listed as our chief objectives, even on our school's website. In his book on education [*Abolition of Man*], C.S. Lewis says that the most important thing that we are doing is shaping what students love. He says this "virtue is rightly ordered love, the condition of affection in which every object is accorded that kind of degree of love which is appropriate to it." Students "must be trained to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which are actually pleasant, likeable, disgusting and hateful."

When I first started teaching, I was so excited that my job wasn't just to teach Latin and grammar and history, but actually to form students' characters and to change their lives. How am I supposed to go from the daily events of my classroom and my curriculum to actually forming their affections and shaping their hearts? How in the world do we actually do this in our lessons and our routines and our homework assignments? How do we actually train a student to love one thing and hate another? Lewis goes on a few pages later to say that it is not any explanation of virtue or even a list of reasons why virtue is good that will actually help a student grow in virtue or shape their heart. Instead it is habit-shaping practices, bodily actions that most shape the heart.

This really hit home to me one year when I was teaching my eighth-grade girls a Bible study on gratitude. (All of my examples from this year will come only from eighth-grade girls because in 7th and 8th grade at our school we separate genders. The boys are in one classroom and I teach the girls.) They would come to my

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classroom for a period and we would read Bible verses and I would teach them theological principles and they got really good at this. They could quote Bible verses. They could explain the theological underpinnings of gratitude, how it was so important in our lives, and give brilliant examples. However, I started to notice that something was really wrong. These same students who were so eloquent and so knowledgeable about gratitude in the classroom would walk out of my classroom and down the halls grumbling about their homework, about their teacher, or about the way their hair looked that day. I started realizing that I was reinforcing this deadly message that said there is separation between what we talk about in the classroom and what you actually live out in your real, everyday lives.

After experimenting for a few years, it has been my experience, as Lewis suggested, that it is the habit-forming practices (or liturgies, as others have called them), that most shape affection. By practices I mean how we do what we do in the classroom: things like methods, routines, pedagogies, the form of our assignment—basically how we teach the content of our curriculum. I want to distinguish the practices of classical Christian schools from the content, which is what we teach.

A lot of the energy of classical education in the past three decades has gone into figuring out what we should teach and why. Remembering that Latin is something that we should teach and giving defenses for why we should teach it is an example. I want to direct our attention beyond the content to how we teach it because, as Lewis says, simply having virtue in our curriculum doesn't mean our students will actually develop a love for virtue.

And so my question is, *how do we use our academic practices to shape our students affections and what are the ingredients of those practices that most powerfully shaped students hearts?*

Lewis' words in *The Abolition of Man* reminded me of meeting a girl at this very ACCS conference about two or three years ago. Like me, she was classically educated, kindergarten through twelfth grade. She recently graduated from college. A couple of co-teachers and I asked her about her experience. We wanted her to share with us what she had gotten out of classical education. Sadly she told us that the fruit of her experience had made her cynical; that she approached the world, because of how her teachers had taught her, only looking for worldview truth, whether it was in a Shakespeare class or a chemistry class or a Bible class. This left her with an approach to creation, and history, and art, as something only to be judged and evaluated and analyzed for its worldview context. Analyzing worldview truths in her life had completely outweighed loving beauty and living out goodness. When she encountered a story, all she could think about was whether or not it had a good worldview. When she encountered an awe-inspiring cathedral, her instinctive response was to criticize it and say something like, "Well, heresy was preached here once."

Though this wasn't her teachers' explicit goal, the affections that had been formed in her heart were a love for rational proof, judging, and being right. While she had taken Shakespeare and chemistry and Bible classes, the way she was taught those subjects actually influenced her more than the content of the lessons. The constant emphasis on worldview, at the expense of everything else, had left her only with the knowledge of truth and how to measure it and no real understanding of how to live it out. I am not trying to say at all that truth is bad, but the way in which we teach truth can itself be true or false. Simply getting our students to know or think about truth is not our primary calling as teachers. More than just graduating students who have a good worldview and great critical thinking skills and good theology and reading comprehension, we want our students' lives and loves to be shaped by what happens in our classroom. We want our students to go out in the

world and do things. We want them to spread the gospel and bring their friends to church and worship the Lord and create beautiful works of art and serve people. In fact many of our schools have goals for a graduate that list these exact things.

I am so passionate about this because I am a graduate of classical education and I experienced this sort of heart transformation, but many of my friends and peers who are also classically educated had a very different experience—sort of the opposite because of the way that they were taught, even though the curriculum and content was quite similar. C.S. Lewis addresses the importance of the way that we learn to know something in *Mere Christianity* and he uses an example of the Atlantic Ocean to do this. Knowing the Atlantic Ocean is a metaphor for knowing God. He says there are a few different ways you could go about getting knowledge of the Atlantic Ocean. First, you could read tons of books and basically find out all the facts that there are about the Atlantic Ocean. You could look at maps and study charts and diagrams and come away with this wealth of factual knowledge but you wouldn't actually know the Atlantic Ocean until you had experienced this, until you had played in the waves and watched the tide and felt the salt breeze in your face and heard the roar of the waves and that there is a physical and visceral type of knowledge where you come to know something by feel rather than by intellect. I think in this example Lewis makes it clear that how you learn about the Atlantic Ocean is the most important factor in whether you have real knowledge of the Atlantic Ocean at all.

We saw earlier that Lewis said in *Abolition of Man* that virtue is the result of having emotions that have been trained by habit. There are a number of ways of understanding and articulating this principle that it is our habits that shape what our hearts love. Our hearts are touched through the practices and these physical experiences that we have. So we might say that to train affections, we should teach through experiences as well as explanations. We might also say that the way we learn something is more influential than the something that we learned, that the form of a lesson teaches as much as its content, or that the way to a person's heart is through their body.

Liturgy is a good word to describe the methods and pedagogies and practices in our classrooms, because liturgy means a habitual practice, an action or a behavior that is repeated and that subconsciously shapes us. It is also the form that we use to deliver the content of our lesson, the thing that structures our days and in the end, it is what most shapes our lives. As a teacher, we all have liturgies in our lessons and our classrooms, even though they may be invisible to us. So think about things like: How do you review a topic? How do you assign homework and what kind of homework do you assign? How do you assess your students? How do you begin and end your classes? How do you spend the class time? Do you spend most the time lecturing? Or are you a discussion-based teacher? Are you a crafty projects sort of teacher? In addition to the practices of our lessons, we also all have liturgies of our classroom, things like: How do we address our students? How do you punish and reward them and get their attention? How do we relate to them and expect them to relate to each other? Even how are our classrooms arranged? How do we allow our students to ask questions or make comments? What are our daily routines?

I don't think we give as much thought to these things as we do to teaching the content itself. But liturgy is so important, even though it seems like a trivial thing. Thomas Cranmer wrote, "The mind is captive to what the will wants, and the will is captive to what the heart wants." Because our goal in classical Christian education isn't just to teach students information, but to form their hearts, we don't want them to just know truth and goodness, we want them to live out goodness and be truthful and love beauty. We want to shape their hearts to reach their lives. This is done in part through reaching their senses. In other words, if our goal as educators is not just right knowing or right thinking but it is rightly ordered love and then right action, and since action requires heart engagement, and since the heart is discipled through bodily habits, I think it is our practices that are actually the part of education that most shape our students lives.

So, for example, here is one illustration of an affection that I wanted to cultivate. I want my students to understand that truth isn't just a list of propositions; truth is the person of Jesus Christ. Obedience of the Lord isn't just following a list of rules, it is following the example of the story of Christ's life in the gospels. I tried to cultivate this affection in them by always using stories to explain moral questions. Or when I had a discipline situation, I used a story from something that we were reading in class to address their sin. I learned that while it is true that experiential practices seem to shape affection it wasn't quite as simple as, OK I'll give my students a fun experience—and boom!—their hearts will be changed. I discovered this with many practices that went terribly wrong and I realized that I needed a model for good academic liturgy, something to use as a measuring stick for my development of classroom practices. After doing some research, especially in the early church in the medieval era, I found that I didn't need to reinvent the wheel. There are so many incredible models of educational practices from the early church in the Middle Ages which were built from serious study of God and Scripture and the nature of man, which were developed specifically for the purpose of shaping affections.

One of the most prevalent medieval liturgies for learning something is a three-step liturgy expressed in the metaphor of honey-making. This is probably the most common medieval metaphor for study and learning and the most common "template" for lesson planning, if we could call it that, from the early church in the medieval era.

First, a bee flies around as we know and it collects nectar; second, it digests the nectar; and thirdly, that digestion results in the production of honey. These three stages of honey-making, the medievals said, correspond to the three stages by which anything is truly learned in

a way that it is internalized, in a way that it can shape the heart. They named these three stages: *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *compositio*. In other words, first you collect from what you are learning, then you spend time digesting it, last of all you compose with it both by creating external things and by living a life that is shaped by what you have been studying.

Another common medieval metaphor that went along with the honey-making one was the *lectio, meditatio, compositio* progression of eating. This came from the early church's view of reading the Bible as a type of feasting on Scriptures where first you took the word in, you ingested it, then you digested it, and finally the Word made you grow. This was a practice that would be followed by a medieval monk in the library with Homer and then in the chapel with his Psalter. It was designed to cultivate virtue by shaping the affections of students who practiced it. Gregory the Great, one of the people who developed this model, said, "We ought to transform what we read within our very selves—so that when our mind is stirred by what it hears, our lives may concur by practicing what has been heard." Because this progression of *lectio, meditatio, compositio* is a liturgy that so deeply originates in Christian tradition and is for the purpose of training students' affections, I found that it is an incredibly fruitful model in planning both lessons *and* the flow of an academic day for the purpose of shaping students affections.

Here is one example from my eighth-grade class. First, I made the mistake of sending my students home with a packet of Augustine's *Confessions*, to read on their own, followed by a quiz the next day. Yes, it was after a whole week of reading and talking about it and common placing it together, but from the amount of frantic and desperate texts the night I assigned that reading, it was clear the students weren't getting it. These questions are really easy, but I thought Augustine was challenging in high school and college and these are just beginning eighth grade girls. These questions were terrible. "Name one experience of infancy mentioned by Augustine." This isn't what I wanted my students to be getting out of Augustine when their affections could be shaped by his beautiful portrayal of what love for God is or how our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him. So to make a long, sad story short, my students bombed this quiz as a class. And even worse, those who got all the answers right, didn't understand the reading and they definitely didn't love it. If I shaped any of their affections, it was affection for despising Augustine.

Here is what I came up with instead and this is very simple. There are far more creative ways of implementing *lectio, meditatio, compositio*.

What I did next time, repenting of the error of my first way, was rather than give students several pages of Augustine to read, I gave them two paragraphs. I gave them two whole class periods and divided them up in pairs. They spent two whole class periods analyzing their passages. They took pages of notes, they drew pictures, and they covered their passages with analysis. That was the *lectio*, the collection stage. Then for the *meditatio*, the digestion stage, I gave them an assignment of preparing to teach a brief lesson to the class based on what they had learned from Augustine. We were in book ten, which is his book on memory and why memory is a virtue and necessary for being a human and so on. I encouraged my girls to think about our own practices of memory. How do we as classical students go about memorizing? This required them to go back over the reading they had done, think about what it meant, and how to communicate it to the rest of the class. It was really amazing to walk around from pair to pair as they were working on this phase of the project. I would hear things like, "Wow, Augustine is so cool!" and "Look at how he is talking about our senses being the gateway to memory," and "I can totally use this when memorizing my Latin vocabulary or my history dates." For the end of the *meditatio* stage, going on into the *compositio* stage, they taught their lessons on Augustine memory

with each other. I was so impressed, not just by their depth of understanding Augustine, but by how much more they had understood and how much more they had gotten from reading one paragraph in two hours versus ten pages in one night. Not only were they able to communicate their deep understanding of Augustine to the class but they did so using methods that Augustine said would help engage the memory, using emotions and word pictures and senses of smell, taste, and touch. And they told me they loved it. Later in the year they kept referring to "Oh, Augustine was so much fun!" They were actually applying what they were learning in Augustine to something relevant, which was the practice of how we do memory ourselves or understanding why memory is a virtue. This continued to bear honey throughout the rest of our eighth grade year as the girls built memory palaces to do their history homework and borrowed his philosophy of memory in their own lives. They said that they wanted to reinvent the way classical grammar schools teach memory based on Augustine as well. They also said that they loved Augustine and they loved deep reading now because of the way that we did this. I had been really dreading teaching Augustine to junior-high girls, but it was amazing to me to see how much the girls loved it because the girls understood it. There is a monumental difference between assigning a reading and a quiz versus following this liturgy of collect, digest, and compose.

The other thing that I discovered is in order for this liturgy to be most effective for a particular lesson, I also needed to contextualize these practices in a whole day that was designed to shape affections. I realized my students are formed just as much by their experiences five minutes before class starts and five minutes after class ends. It is possible for the liturgies of the rest of the day to undermine what is being communicated through following *lectio*, *meditatio*, *compositio* and the actual content of humanities. I realized this was happening at the beginning of the year because we would get down to three to five minutes of class and I would say, "OK, we need to stop everything! Rush! Cram everything in your binders!" I would give rapid fire announcements: "OK, don't forget that if you fail this test it is worth a fifth of your grade, and this project is really important so study it so that you get an A, and by the way there is a pop quiz tomorrow, and you want to make sure you study for it so you can make sure you get a good grade." What I have realized is that the liturgy of the way of ending class was contradicting and undermining what I was doing in class. During class, I was saying learning is about what you love and then living it out. In the last five minutes of class, my practices were saying that school is about cramming all the right things into your agenda, and worrying that you got the homework agenda right so that your grades wouldn't suffer. Something I say to my students all the time is, "You haven't learned this until you are living it." But as the teacher, I also have to remember they are learning what I make them live. That includes what we were living together before and after the lesson itself. I realize that it doesn't matter how much I am shaping their affections in class if I am contradicting it by the liturgies I draw the rest of the time.

I am still working out how to do this in an eighth-grade classroom when I don't have the students all day long but I did make some changes, especially to the way that we ended class. I would stop ten minutes before the bell rang and spend time praying and singing and thanking God for what we had learned. Then I would give the students 3–5 minutes at the end of the day where I would play background classical music and they would journal and write down things that they learned that day and wanted to remember. That way I felt like the practices I was using to end class weren't contradicting the practices that I was using to teach class.

In addition to daily liturgies, I have also inculcated practices to form students' hearts that structure all of our different routines, our beginnings and our endings,

our meal times, our breaks, our passings periods, with different traditions. One example of a yearly tradition is that in fifth grade we would begin the initiation ceremony to mark the beginning of the year to say "you are beginning something new, something that is about changing who you are as a person." We would have the students come up to the front of the class. They would sign an enormous charter and then we would pray a prayer of blessing over them and have them recite a class promise. Also, in fifth grade another favorite, regular practice was—and this just happened about once a month—that whenever I was reading a particularly suspenseful chapter to my students, I would have them bring pillows and blankets. I would make hot chocolate. We would push all the desks and chairs to the side of the room, black out every little bit of light that could possibly come through windows with black trash bags (they were very meticulous about that bit), and then we would turn our flashlights on and drink hot chocolate and read *Lord of the Rings* or the *Hobbit* in the dark on the floor. I found that sometimes it is these practices of sitting on the floor, in a blanket, in the dark with your flashlight, or drinking tea while reading, that really opened the doors to students' hearts. I really want to emphasize this. These practices are not just a fun in the fluff. I am a very strict, hard teacher. I believe that these practices are what opened the door to making my students able to love Augustine.

The principle is that following this idea of *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *compositio*, inculcating practices that structure both our days and our individual lessons, actually most shaped students' affections. Therefore these little practices, these things that we sometimes think of as trivial, can be the difference between life and death.

In his essay, "The Weight of Glory," Lewis comments on the gravity of what we as teachers often think are the trivial daily interactions. I paraphrased this quote to make it about teaching students rather than people in general. But it really made me change how I approached my students in my practices, to think about them in these terms.

> It is a serious thing to teach in a school of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the most frustrating, rebellious, or boring student in your class may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree or another, helping our students to one or other of these destinations.

That terrifies me and sends me to my knees on a regular basis.

> . . . it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with our students, our lectures, recesses, passing periods, lunches, classes, bathroom policies, lesson plans, discussions, discipline moments, grades, classroom décor, and parent-teacher conferences. There are no ordinary students. You have never taught a mere mortal.