ASSOCIATION OF CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

Distinctive School Series:

Assessment, Testing, and Grades

"The purpose of education is not the assimilation of facts or the retention of information, but the habituation of the mind and body to will and act in accordance with what one knows." David Hicks

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We classical educators love rigor in the pursuit of knowledge. But, we may inadvertently pursue mere information instead. The canon of classical education books seems to agree: Education is not information centric.

"The purpose of education is not the assimilation of facts or the retention of information, but the habituation of the mind and body to will and act in accordance with what one knows."
Norms & Nobility, David Hicks (p. 20)

"Modern education concentrates on teaching subjects, leaving the method of thinking, arguing, and expressing one's conclusions to be picked up by the scholar as he goes along; mediæval education concentrated on first forging and learning to handle the tools of learning, using whatever subject came handy as a piece of material on which to doodle until the use of the tool became second nature."
—Dorothy Sayers, Lost Tools of Learning.

"What if education ... is not primarily about the absorption of ideas and information, but about the formation of hearts and desires? What if we began by appreciating how education not only gets into our head but also (and more fundamentally) grabs us by the gut? What if education was primarily concerned with shaping our hopes and passions - our visions of 'the good life' - and not merely about the dissemination of data and information as inputs to our thinking? What if the primary work of education was the transforming of our imagination rather than the saturation of our intellect? … What if education wasn't first and

foremost about what we know, but about what we love?" James K.A. Smith

"For the educational establishment... test scores are treated as indications of the extent to which the required ground covering has been done. ...as educationally significant. However, while they may be prognostic of a child's ability to get through school... they do not provide us with an appraisal of the child's progress in the long process of becoming a generally educated human being -- the advance made toward a more skillful, thoughtful, and cultivated mind." Mortimer Adler

"A lecture has been well described as the process whereby the notes of the teacher become the notes of the student without passing through the mind of either." Mortimer Adler

"Eustace Clarence liked animals, especially beetles, if they were dead and pinned on a card. He liked books if they were books of information and had pictures of grain elevators or of fat foreign children doing exercises in model schools…. Most of us know what we should expect to find in a dragon's lair, but, as I said before, Eustace had read only the wrong books. They had a lot to say about exports and imports and governments and drains, but they were weak on dragons." C.S. Lewis

In the context of these and countless other authors, classical educators should endeavor to be very careful about what practices we absorb from the mainstream educational culture. Sure, we all took finals in college. We've all done multiple choice. We've all had timed tests.

We mistake "information" for "knowledge."

First, we must mince words. Some might ask "don't classically educated students need to know stuff? Yes. But lets talk about information vs. knowledge. Today, we confuse the terms because knowledge has lost some of its flower. To "know" in an older sense requires a soulish grasp of something. For example, to 'know' the 7 laws of teaching once meant to masterfully execute them, not recite them as we typically mean today.

Why is knowledge different in a classical school than in a conventional school? Because it requires synthesis into a whole that can be understood as part of every other whole.

I teach Trial Advocacy in which we learn about 8 pages of 'evidentiary rules.' A court has rules for evidence allowed into the courtroom. Each rule has a number and very precise wording. Each year, I have students who identify all of the rules by number on a written

quiz. They may get 100%, but they don't know rules, they memorized the data. They only come to know them as they apply them in the courtroom trials we run in competitive Mock Trial. The only reason I have a quiz on the numbers is to ensure they tried to learn the grammar of the subject before I take them through the logic and rhetoric. The real test is how they use them as they try cases. I never return to the informational quizzing after the first quiz.

Why is knowledge different in a classical school than in a conventional school? Because it requires synthesis into a whole that can be understood as part of every other whole.

How does information fit in to classical education?

Dorothy Sayers provides an excellent answer for us: *"The "subjects" supply material; but they are all to be regarded as mere grist for the mental mill to work upon. The pupils should be encouraged to go and forage for their own information, and so guided towards the proper use of libraries and books of reference, and shown how to tell which sources are authoritative and which are not."*

Sadly, today, our loss of an agrarian culture causes us to lose sight of many of these old, but excellent metaphors. Grist is the general term used by millers for the material they are milling. Wheat, barley, corn, rye and a variety of other grains would be dumped onto a slab outside the top of the mill. Think of a mill, on a hill, using the water of a passing stream to turn its stone. In this metaphor, the miller's work is to make masterful flour. His interest is that the milling process works with excellence to produce excellent flour. He buys good raw material (we must always use the greatest academic content available), but his interest is in the process of milling. He turns his flour to the town baker and children then eat the bread and pastries.

If a parent told the children "go up behind the mill and you'll find your meal on a rock slab" and they did so, one mouthful of dusty, dirty grist would help them understand the joy of freshly baked food. In this context, when we shove grist (information) into children without a humane learning process, we feed them dry, dusty, infested grain. No wonder they long for a snow day.

Isn't memory a key to classical education?

The medievals revered memory. But, once again, the term is not what we think. We think of memory in a data sense, since we live in the age of scientism. Memory for the medievals was a different thing. It involved connections to the past, present and future. It involved knowing story

formed to generalize knowledge, not to provide data recall. One of the greatest memory advocates was St. Augustine.

Augustine's words speak of memory, but in a very metaphysical way. He speaks of memory of the past, and our ability to relate to God.

"Already we see for Augustine that these operations of remembering, attending, and anticipating, are all activities of the soul's power of 'memory' - memoria. Thus the memory is not limited to recollecting or re-presenting the past only, as we now presently use the term. Memory, for Augustine, is the particular power of the mind or soul that can summon these tenses into the present. In potency, or subconsciously, all time is presently united in the soul." Dr. Seamus O'Neil (Augustine and Boethius, Memory and Eternity).

So, the medieval educator would have seen information as a curiosity. Why do we fixate on that which must be understood, not memorized?

In light of classical education, our demand that students reproduce information for a test should be scrutinized.

"The wisdom of what a person says is in direct proportion to his progress in learning the holy scriptures--and I am not speaking of intensive reading or memorization, but real understanding and careful investigation of their meaning. " St. Augustine

Doesn't the 7 laws call for review? Doesn't this demand testing?

Yes and no. John Milton Gregory's 7 Laws of Teaching tells us that review is central to education, but once again, we typically impose different meaning on review. We think of review as "study guides" with information. Or retracing our lectures in summary at the end of the term. Gregory sees it in the old way— about knowledge. *"The fourth error is that of making the review merely a process of lifeless and colorless repetition of questions and answers and often the very questions and answers which were originally used. This is a review in name only." …"The law of review in its full force and philosophy requires that there shall be fresh vision— a clear rethinking and reusing of the material which has been learned, which shall be related to the first study."* and, he does not mention an exam or test as part of this. Except, to say that "*the test and confirmation of teaching must be made by reviews."* The tests, for Gregory, are to evaluate the teacher's review.

Lest we think that Gregory's call was for review in the conventional "comprehensive final exam," this is not what Gregory intends. For him, review meant frequent USE of the reviewed

knowledge. *"A review is something more than a repetition. A machine may repeat a process, but only an intelligent agent can review it. The repetition done by a machine is a second movement precisely like the first; a repetition by the mind is the re-thinking of a thought."* And, he's talking about mastery, not testing for information.

His meaning is that frequent review (and I would include quizzing) will cement knowledge. If we place an emphasis on final exams and a large study guide, the tendency will be to puts the emphasis on information— A mistake Gregory anticipates:

"The third mistake is that of delaying all review work until the end of the semester or term, when, the material of the course being largely forgotten, the review amounts to little more than a poor learning with little interest and less value."

Information has become the god, and the test is its priest.

It is conceivable that a school could have "final exams" or large "tests" that are rhetorical in nature, but this almost never works in today's world. There are always some teachers who default to the mental model they know and use the time to do a massive dump of information into a study guide and then stress it with students. Some of this might even be justified as "understanding" when in reality, it's just a concept repetition. This leads students to ask all semester long "will this be on the test?" Information has become the god, and the test is its priest. For this reason, I recommend that administrators send a clear message: **We do not support information based testing. We don't focus attention on testing (aka finals week). We don't weight testing heavily in grading.**

Comprehensive vs. Cumulative

Comprehensive is often a word used to describe final exams given at the end of a term. I think it's a progressive term. The term generally means that all (or much) of the information you've covered in the whole year will likely be on the end-of-term test. Of course, to accomplish this, we must lengthen the time for students to dutifully write information into a test instrument. And, of course, by "comprehensive" we mean all of the 'material' (information and skill) covered over the term. Boy, the tasteless dusty grist slab seems to be right outside the front door of our schools.

"Cumulative" can be a classical concept. Integrating all of the works covered in a year or summative works that include new wonder and insights generated by students who are shown, for the first time, how they all relate, creates joy in education. But why can't this be done through take-home essays

or conversations with the teacher? Because we think that testing must be scientific— it must be factual. It must be controlled in a single sitting, in a classroom. It must be possible to justify an 84.5% on the test. We need to break free of the scientific understanding of knowledge and understanding and return to a humane understanding.

Integrated learning can even be done in the sciences, if we can break free from scientism. Rather than a science exam with questions about weights and measures, what if we asked students to compare and contrast Einstein's world with Newtons, or with Planck's or Bohr's? Sadly, these type of essay questions usually end up in the 'extra credit' section at the end of the information-laden test. We send the message that true thought is the slave of information.

Why should we diminish conventional informational testing in the secondary?

(Note: Diminish not eliminate.) Almost certainly, our classical schools reflect a modern-educational scheme because we live in a modern world. Nearly all of us went to progressive schools. Without knowing it, we track the mud into the front room.

Testing and quizzing can help establish a check on learning. But they should not be allowed to become central to the process. If we drive tests and quizzes into the center of focus for teachers or for students, we will fail in our classical Christian mission. Cumulative exams should be broader and shorter, and require little particular regurgitation of information. And, they can be done as homework.

We should limit worksheets, testing, and quizzes (by which I mean instruments administered in class which must be studied for so the information can be learned). When teachers see us limit what they depend upon, they will question what they should do. This provides an opportunity to advance new and wonderful learning and assessment tools. If we fail to do this, we'll inadvertently lean into the status-quo of education, which is what we're trying to transform.

The reality is that our ability to teach [math and science] differently is probably limited by the expectations of colleges, parents, teachers, and available textbooks.

In some sense, I'm calling for more frequent quizzing in some classes (because Gregory calls for frequent review). Most math courses, because we teach them based on a learned practice, need to quiz the students for their understanding of the process. This is for both the student and the teacher's advantage. High-school science classes may also have this need because we teach them as informational classes

(though we should try not to). Both of these are contrary to the classical form, but the reality is that our ability to teach them differently is probably limited by the expectations of colleges, parents, teachers, and available textbooks. When compromises must be made, we should try to lean away, not into the error. This is why I discourage conventional finals. It's an unnecessary step that leads toward conventional education.

How does "information- based learning" hurt students?

Information-based learning is like junk food. Physiologically, it doesn't cause harm so much as it replaces healthy food in our diet. In school, the more information transfer you spend time on, the less depth you achieve. Consider a curriculum that has a "what students will know and what can they do" approach to learning objectives. This is the typical formulation for learning goals used in progressive (public) schools. When classical schools use this form, they often fill the objectives with information-based goals (the student will know the periodic table and be able to reproduce it on a test). These objectives add up to push out better, more classical objectives. For example, the more classical objective "the student will understand the historical development of the idea of the atom." The more time we spend on information transfer, and less on logical or rhetorical level thinking will happen in the classroom.

Secondly, what gets measured gets done. If we test in a big way, we drive every motivation toward the test. If teachers and students perceive that they are measured based upon, say, an informational test at the end of the semester, then they will focus on information. Teachers write informational study guides and students spend their time learning information. So, administrators need to be aware of what they value, what they focus upon, and what they spend time on. That will send the message about what is important.

Why do we test?

Sometimes, it helps to understand why we do things. We test for three reasons.

1. **To assess mastery.** For many, this assumes that multiple choice, short answer, short essay, fill in the blank, study guides, and the information transfer formula of the common test equates to mastery. These things tell us little of logic or rhetorical-level thinking. These things actually are grammar-level and relate only to superficial information absorption. The trivium moves beyond these in the secondary (where most of this type

of testing occurs) and thus, informational testing should be a minimal practice in the secondary. Mastery is assessed by a master, as in the medieval guild system. This is why teachers were called, in the old system, "master." Mastery can no more be assessed on a 60 minute informational test than a written driver's test can assess one's ability to win the Indianapolis 500. We should focus on other assessments such as oral exams, integration/ compare/ contrast essays, or other rhetorical engagements. Testing also helps teachers know if they're doing their job and kids are learning. Quizzes (with cumulative questions thrown in) can achieve this.

2. **To force students to study**. If we're honest, this is the real reason we give tests. We want students to absorb information, and thus we want to give tests to make them absorb it. By "know," we mean repeat information. We want to teach it to them and we want them to listen. If we have a test at the end, they'll listen. If duty is the lowest form of obedience (Lewis) then testing is the lowest form of learning. Teachers should be encouraged to use more creative and classical means that will get students engaged in the learning process. After all, we want them to love learning, not eat the grist off the floor.
3. **To avoid subjectivity and conflict.** OK maybe this is the real, real reason. Colleges look at GPA, Parents want good colleges, students want good grades, so the pressure is on! It's easier to have a test with missed answers (the answer was 42, but what was the question again?) than a grade based upon an oral assessment. Teachers can justify missed answers on an informational test. It's easier than sitting down with a parent and saying "your student isn't up to mastery yet in his knowledge of force-vectors. He doesn't apply them well." But, these are the very conversations that a classical Christian education should be fostering. A master sits down with a student like Christ sat at the feet of the scribes as a young boy, or as He taught with authority in the temple as a man. This authoritative teaching model was dominant for centuries. Now, we need an impersonal paper test with a score on top to convince parents that Jenny doesn't know calculus, even though she memorized the textbook.

Should we throw out testing?

As with any correction, we should not over correct. There is grammar to be learned at every level. There is a need for information to be retained so that it can be used as grist

for real education. So, the occasional quiz and factual test are valid tools for use. But, the danger is that teachers and administrators overuse these tools. They do so because they think 'rigor' demands it. Or, they do so because they think it's important for some subjects. In fact, the emphasis in a classical school should never be on informational testing.

The key word is 'emphasis.' If we have big hairy final exam that takes the better part of a week, should we expect students to understand when we say 'but it only counts for 20% of your grade.'? Our statement falls unheard. The fact that we take time out of our schedule to do 'testing' says it all.

But wait. Can't 'good' final tests be created that aren't informational? Yes, good assessments can be created. But ask this: If we want a student to express a human understanding of a concept through an essay, why are we taking class time to do the assessment? True assessments that require thought can rarely be cheated upon without being obvious. And why wait until the prescribes 'final week' of the term. Can't they show their understanding all along the way?

Recommendations

1) **If you can create a study guide for it, it's probably about information. Stop it.** Study guides that state what to prepare for (you'll be asked to compare/contrast two works we've read this term) are the rare exception to this rule. Minimize informational activities. Facts do need to be known. Use small passing quizzes or tests during an odd week in October to get these things out of the way. They are grist for the mill. And a mill can't work without grist. Periodic quizzes and small tests can ensure that the facts are acquired. Don't put emphasis here. Use the facts in logical or rhetorical level activities.

2) **Do not have a special finals week schedule.** By this, I mean classes are spread between 3-5 days to allow each class to have a longer time for testing, and only a few tests per day. And, review days are added in the days or weeks prior so that 'new material won't be covered.' (hear the materialistic modern educator in the term!) It's possible to have some variation of a creative finals week in a classical style. But, beware that gravity always pulls toward the contemporary vision of finals—information based and deadly to true education. I recommend not even going there. It just begs for backsliding into informational testing.

Weeks like this do at least three negative things. First, they build into the culture of the school a signal that students need to be about gathering information all semester long. After all, all the information will be restated in the review and then they will be cumulatively tested. Secondly, teachers

gravitate toward informational testing. When you give a 2 hour test just days before the end of the term, it has to be graded— so teachers use informational questions (multiple choice, short answer, etc.) so they can grade them before grades are due. Teachers also feel the pressure to make the tests less subjective. If the student writes a paper in class, the teacher has to justify a subjective grade to parents— one that typically makes up a large part of the grade. If they ask for a list of the 50 states, and get 40 of them right, the student obviously got a 80% on the test. This is easier to justify. I once had a parent insist that it was unreasonable to expect a student know a complete set of instructions for preparing a piece of equipment because 'every test let's you pass with 70%', as though that were a law written in stone. Of course, with this piece of equipment, 70% of the instructions got you nothing.

Third, students stress out. Now stress can be a good thing. Stress before the big game or band competition often drives students to perform. Stress before senior thesis defense is expected and drives excellence. But stress about "information retention" changes the learning process from one of wonder and engagement to one of dread and fear of memorization. Information becomes king. And what message does it send? Information transfer is important because we even have review days and finals.

3) **Use your schedule to communicate what is classically valuable.** At my former school, we took a few weeks out of 5th grade to study and perform a Shakespeare play. Each year, we took time for a Christmas concert and music festival that collectively consumed about a week. We had 3 days of thesis defense. Each of these time appropriations sent a message. Shakespeare and poetry were important. Music is important. Rhetoric is important. What of finals week? "Informational testing is important." Is that the message we want to send in a classical Christian school?

4) **Focus on virtue.** The reason for large in-class tests is because you don't trust the student to do it at home. Yet, we claim as classical educators to be about 'cultivating virtue.' By the time students are in the secondary, they need to have their virtue mettle tested. See our paper on school discipline. Part of what we should be doing is 1) creating assignments that really can't be cheated on at home because 'looking up' the information won't help them. 2) expecting students to follow our ethical instructions (no collaborating with friends, what sources can you use, etc.) If they cheat and don't get caught, is that worse than not giving them the chance to cheat? How will true virtue ever be tested in these students if we do not expect it of them in school?

5) **'Optics' matter— what is visible sends a message.** Create academic gravity by doing visible things that are about classical learning— synthesizing, integrating, unifying, applying the truth of Christ. Try 'Rhetoric week" where the whole upper school attends the thesis defense of various classes. We ran 10th, 11th, and 12th grade defenses simultaneously and posted schedules so that students not giving a speech presently could choose which ones to attend. Add some free food and it's a party of true learning!

6) **Of Science and math:** These are difficult because they are often taught as knowledge and process. And, science and math teachers are often the most informationally driven. This is because our world has turned science and math into our gods and we must therefore teach them just as they are taught in the public school down the street, with a few adjustments to make them Christian and a little bit classical.

But, there's much that can be done. For example, a final assignment in a chemistry class could be to answer a bunch of multiple choice and short answer about detergents and their molecular structure. Or, you could ask a student to write a description, including chemical equations, of how they would remove 5 different stains from items around the house. These types of questions often become the "bonus" questions at the end of an informational test. Turn this around. Focus on integration, knowledge, and philosophy. But, "The kids do poorly on these types of questions. That's why they're extra-credit!" If this is true, you need to strive to be a better teacher. True learning applies what we know.

It's OK to have an end-of term test of normal length. Mathematicians, of all people, should know that sampling the concepts from the term can create a group of about 5 significant problems that will represent all of the skills necessary without testing every single one. Sure, a concept or two may slip through and not be on the test. But look at the big picture. The assessment, in general, will come out fine. The students with mastery will do as well on a short test as on a long one. Periodic testing should have shown weak spots in individual concepts for the teacher's benefit.

7) **Create assessments that your best students are excited to complete.** Teachers know that there are two types of good students— those after the grade and those who love the pursuit of knowledge. Either of these students should find the assessment as much a part of learning something new as the classroom lecture or discussion was. For several years, my mock trial students were offered options to shorten or reduce senior thesis because of a Nationals competition. Few of them, if any, ever took us up on the offer. They WANTED to defend their

thesis. It represented investment. They gave up sleep instead.

8) **Oral exams.** Oral assessments are underused and probably the most effective way for a teacher to gauge mastery— not of information, but of the student's understanding. Ask a student "does the cannon ball drop at the same rate as a paper clip?" When they answer yes, ask "did you consider wind resistance?" "Oh, I thought you just wanted the rate of gravitational acceleration, the paper clip might have more wind resistance." (this clarification would have torpedo'd the student's answer on the written test, and it's really a teacher clarification problem) "How would you go about finding out if it does have more wind resistance?" "If you were to fire a cannon at a 45 degree up angle, when does the decent begin?" "I'd have to work that out." "Here's a white board, give it a try." You get the point. A conversation is powerful. In 15 minutes, I believe a teacher can assess mastery better than in a 45 minute paper test. Standardized testers realized this with computers. If you respond to the last answer (like a computer can do), you can assess the student in a fraction of the time. Why? Contextual questions give teachers a quick understanding of what is known. Add to that the humane function of understanding the student, and oral testing becomes extremely valuable.

Why do we test students on paper but conduct job interviews in person? Because Dewey and others industrialized education with stop watches and paper exams. That's why.

Why do we test students on paper but conduct job interviews in person?

Oral exams have been the heart of classical education for centuries. We need to bring back this art.

How do we explain this to parents?

If you look at the 5 richest men in America— Gates, Bezos, Buffett, Zuckerberg, Ellison, three were college dropouts. If you measure success by wealth, it's long been known that academic success does not always correlate with financial success. Some, including myself, believe this is because education makes information retention and skill development its center point. In the real world, these skills are not central. Most parents define success, especially in high school, as getting good grades to get into a good college to get a good job to make money. The problem is that information memory rarely relates to success in the real world.

As classicists, we bristle at the very idea that vocational success is our measure. But, we happen to be in luck.

Teaching kids to think, it turns out, actually has its benefits. I'm not advocating wealth as success. I am saying that even those who do believe that is the purpose of education may be persuaded that our method of true education is better for both wealth and life.

Grades Glorious Grades

When did grades come into play in medieval education? They didn't. They were a product of the enlightenment-turned-industrial-revolution's desire to quantify, measure, and standardize all things.

Most research traces 'grading' to a pre- 1813 activity at Yale College where students were ordered by levels of "Optimi, Inferiores, and Pejores" based on exam scores. By 1817, William and Mary faculty had students grouped into No. 1, No.2. No3, and No 4, with the following criteria: "*No. 1. (Names listed) The first in their respective classes; No. 2. Orderly, correct, and attentive; No. 3. They have made very little improvement; No. 4. They have learnt little or nothing.*" Further development in grading students continued in the 1850's through the 1870's at Harvard and the University of Michigan.

In 1877, Harvard records dividing students into divisions based on a 100 point scale, with divisions at 90, 75-89, 60-74, and below. You might recognize the break points. In 1897, Mount Holyoke college adopted letters for marking students as follows:

A Excellent, equivalent to percents 95-100
B Good, equivalent to percents 85-94 (inclusive)
C Fair, equivalent to percents 76-84 (inclusive)
D Passed (barely) equivalent to percent 75
E Failed (below75)

(An A is Not An A is Not An A; The History of Grading. The Educational Forum, Vol. 57, Spring 1993)

Of course, these college grades soon made their way into the progressive reconstruction of k-12 education between 1905 and 1930. Suffice it to say, grading as we know it is not a medieval construct. It's a construct of behavioralist psychologists in education.

Modern educators, influenced by the science of behavioral psychology, believed that education was a measured scientific activity like rats running a maze or pigeons getting food by pecking a lever.

On Behavioralism

Behavioralism simply applies the principles of training animals to people.

Behaviors that are rewarded are repeated. Behaviors that are punished are generally not. The Koehler Method of animal training was invented by a man who trained animals for Disney's movies. His work is revered because he could, through behavioral training, get animals to do just about anything. B.F. Skinner's pigeons, Pavlov's dogs, and Dewey's school children all fit in the same category.

Through a system of rewards and punishments, the training of a child will result in consistent and correct behavior. The problem with this is *scientism*. It assumes that a child is simply an animal and can be trained as such. And, to a point, they are right. Rewards and punishment can result in behavioral control— for a time. It works very well for animals, and for children until they decide otherwise.

But children are not animals. They are creatures, created both like the animals, and not like them. We are corporeal beings living on planet earth who have physical needs. We also have souls that can be trained to love virtue — souls created in the image of God. The art of classical education is to combine the spiritual and soulish nature of a child by cultivating virtue, while also training the physical body. So what does this have to do with assessment?

You cannot escape the influence of the behavioralists. I cannot. Behavioralism has been so deeply mixed into our cultural soup that we see everything according to reward and punishment. There is some truth here, so it's not all bad. But, as a whole, we fail to see much of the damage done by this force. Testing and grades are key areas where the behavioralists shaped education.

Does that make grades bad? First, we must examine why we do them.

What we want is mastery, not performance.

One result of behavioralism is that it makes us think in terms of performance to a standard rather than mastery of an art. We can see this in our information based testing and grading system. We place importance upon the recall of information or the answers to short questions because they fit well on a test, which drives a grade, which drives performance. Teachers really don't need these tools to gauge mastery.

One result of behavioralism is that it makes us think in terms of performance to a standard rather than mastery of an art.

After managing teachers for years, I found that most teachers are good assessors of mastery, especially if you can get them away from percentages. But rarely do we ask them to assess mastery. For example, my usual drill as a headmaster started

when a teacher would mention a student failed a writing assignment because "Johnny can't write well." I'd go to all 5 of Johnny's teachers and they'd all say, oh-yes, Johnny can't write. And, they each described the same problem. Rarely did they point to a single assignment or test.

Contrast this with the number of times I've asked why Suzi's writing grades are so low. Teachers often point to low spelling scores that dragged down the rest of Suzi's percentages. Math doesn't lie, you know. But, poor spellers have become pulitzer prize winning authors. Most people realize that rhetorical writing is rarely a function of spelling. But still, teachers seem as though they are the victim of their own grading system— as though they must give Suzi a 'D' because she numbers work out that way. Really? Suzi's a bad writer because she can't spell? Why do we depend on a system of percentages that is so contrived?

Is leisure compatible with learning?

No other classical concept raises eyebrows like "leisure" related to learning. Yet, the concept comes up repeatedly in medieval education. We must recognize that the difference between rigor and leisure is exactly one thing: Do students love to learn? If they do, it's leisure. If they don't, it's rigor. It's akin to the old axiom "if you love what you do, you'll never work another day in your life."

In my mock trial experience, I give my entire team 'A's. Fussy grade-mongers look askance. So, I've often been asked why. I coach the highest-level team, so they're all the best students. But really, it's because they don't care about their grades, so neither do I. They pursue the mock trial experience because they love it. The competition, the camaraderie, the art of the pursuit— it all adds up to students who willingly learn. A student may spend 30 hours writing a 2 page mock-trial paper, but they love every minute of it. This is possible, to different degrees, in every class— not just ones based in competition.

Our job as teachers is to make the time pass so quickly that students hardly think about it. There's no angst. No fretting about finals. Just a community that pines to learn. They pine so much, that they long to return to our schools after college because we're where real learning happened. Yes, I hear this repeatedly from my former students. I hope this can be the same for every student at every classical Christian school.

Why and how we should use grades…

If we assume that a grade is a reflection of mastery in the given subject we can assume three purposes.

1. **To communicate with students.** When students do an assignment, they need to know if their performance was acceptable or exceptional. Without this comparative information, Johnny may say "Well, I spent 5 minutes on this exercise last time and so I'll spend the same or less this time. It seems I did OK." If the teacher prints "you need to work harder", does she mean to be exceptional or acceptable? How much harder? A 75% communicates volumes.
2. **To communicate with parents.** Sometimes parent intervention in the learning process is required (frequently, we hope). But nothing says 'get involved' like a 57% mid-term grade.
3. **To communicate with colleges & outsiders.** For high-school, grades are used by colleges, scholarship organizations, and a host of other outside entities, including Krispy Kream, to gauge the quality of the student. Schools must realize two things about this very important fact:

    1. Grades are a language that communicate a truth.

    2. This truth is a relative measure that envelops students overall, not just those at your school.

    3. So, if the same student at YOUR school would get a higher grade at another school, your use of the language creates a deception for outsiders. This means your grades lack integrity.

4. **To assess collective mastery for the teacher or administration.** Grades can provide teachers and administrators with an understanding of performance for the overall group. Oddly, teachers create the system and then rely in it to tell them of the mastery. It's a bit like having a telephone discussion with yourself.

Pillaging the Industrial Age

Yes, grades probably are dehumanizing. They are, however, an academic 'language' that communicates effectively at some level. So, much like we have to work with the language we have, we must also figure out how to communicate mastery in an age of data.

As with all educational matters these days, there's a good chance the 'right ordering' of grades is placed higher than it should be. Grades can easily masquerade as a quality measure of education or a point of pride for students.

The Quality of the Grade

Often, our instruments are the problem. If a student answers 8 of 10 questions correctly, we assume they are 'fair to good' in their mastery (80% is a low B). But what if 3 of those 10 questions reflected a level far above mastery? Then, the student who got one of the 3 (thus 8 correct) can only be said to be performing at above mastery? The idea that 80% of the 'material' is automatically flawed.

In the educational world, psychologists trained us to test. They trained us to treat learning like data transfer. They trained us to assess with tools that were **precise** and **false.**

How many times have we heard a teacher say to a student "I didn't give you that grade, you earned it." The teacher proceeds to pull out a grade-book and point to the last column: 78.3%. Put a white lab coat on the teacher and he or she would look quite like the behavioralists who created our modern educational system. The problem is that the teacher DID give the student the grade. 78.3% does not reflect the student's educational learning, it reflects a combination of the teacher's test, the student's jumping through hoops as the teacher requested, the teacher's grading, and the teacher's assessment of precisely how much information had to be grasped to become a master of French, or history, or biology, or geography. Thus, 78.3% is derived from the teacher's system and it's almost certainly incorrect because it attempts to quantify the unquantifiable.

The Idolatry of Grades

Educators lament parents who make idols of grades. But then, educators create the monster that chases them.

Classical Christian educators should realize that grades are not an absolute form of justice that must be set by "the system." Rather, they are a flexible tool that should be used to communicate. There are two ditches on either side of this road. Since we've seen that the primary (only) use of grades is communication, as with any form of communication, integrity is the issue. Two questions must be assessed:

1. **Does the grade communicate with integrity with regard to our school's standards?** If a student receives a 'C' in French, it will communicate that they are mediocre at French. We may intend it to mean 'average' or 'acceptable' at our institution. And we may think this is 'integrity' in grading. But, we're communicating with students and parents that expect C to mean barely passing. We should be consistent with the lingua franca

of our times. A 'B' may communicate 'average' with more integrity.

2. **Does the grade communicate to outsiders with integrity?** If a college sees 3.12 as a GPA, they will not look much further. If they see a 'C' in French, they will assume the student struggles with foreign language. Thus, the student will fall below their requirement for some scholarship or admission and that's all that will be considered.

If that 3.12 was at a classical school where the student would have achieved a 3.98 at a public school, we have a problem with integrity. The classical school's GPA does not reflect a standard measure. If I tell a carpet layer that my room is 12 feet wide and he cuts the carpet. And then, the carpet comes up wrong because I used a Roman foot rather than a standard foot, I should not expect a refund. A Roman foot measure may be perfectly classical, but it does not communicate with integrity today.

Ideas for the classical use of grades

1. **Should we treat 'C' as average**? I recommend against it. 'C' is not seen as average by parents or outsiders, so it miscommunicates. 'B' seems closer to average these days.
2. **Should we inflate grades?** This question assumes a standard that is set. The standard has been moving, and it communicates a truth. As with any standard that moves, we aren't inflating if we're conforming to the communication of the day. For those who think grades are a justice matter— the percentage reflects an absolute level of mastery, read the earlier section on the inadequacy of grade percentages for mastery. So, it's actually not inflation to calibrate to standard understandings. It is possible for too many A's to be given, or too many on the Deans List. This is also problematic because it also miscommunicates, especially from an academically rigorous school.
3. **How should we calibrate our GPA's**? I recommend that schools, for high school, try to calibrate to the state that they're in. Check with local schools. You want to align with what other schools with similar student bodies do in your area.

Ideas:

1. Do an average calculation of the last 3 graduating classes (or the entire secondary, if you've not graduated many students) and see how it compares with another Christian school in your area (if they're willing to tell you).

2. The SAT reports the GPA's of students with their SAT scores. As an average, this can help. If your school has an average SAT score of 1250 (2 part) and the average reported GPA for that SAT score from The College Board is 3.98, but your students average 3.10, you have a problem. You're GPA is probably under reporting your student's actual performance.

4. **Should we celebrate high performance in grades?** The virtue of temperance comes into play here. If you make too big a deal of GPA with awards, etc., you will communicate that the academic virtues are the greatest virtues. On the other hand, classicists are not egalitarians. We don't want to say "I'm as good as you" to children (See C.S. Lewis: Screwtape Proposes a Toast). Thus, if grades are celebrated, it should be done with temperance. There should be other recognition for other virtues. Recognizing too many creates divisions. Also, take care with too much pride in grades. This is why more focus should be given to virtues like charity, faithfulness, or fortitude.

Ideas:

1. One rule I make is that no more than about a third of any group (class, grade, school) should be recognized.)
2. Consider the little things. Do we publish the deans list prominently by announcing it boldly? Or in the back of our newsletter? Or post it on the board outside the office? Do we call the kids to the front in the award ceremony or simply name them and clap at the end? What message does each of these send?

5. **What should we tell parents about grades?**

Ideas:

1. First, for grades k-5 or so, we may want to tell parents not to show report cards to students. Typically, parents are directing the work in these grades. In general, report cards train young students to perform for the grade. Since they rarely control the factors that make them improve their grades (the parents do that), consider why we have parents give kudos to students for their grades. Often, we use other measures in grades k-1 (satisfactory, good, excellent, for example). This is for the same reason. Performing for grades may start early and that should not be the classical educator's goal.

2. In grades 6th and up, students control their own study habits. And, we should encourage the independence. But, it might be prudent to have measures of equal weight on the report card for other virtues.
3. Structure the report card in sections: Academic virtues, Christian virtues, and Other virtues, for example. This way, the grades can be recognized as a form of excellence, not THE form of excellence.

6. **What can make grading more humane? More 'classical'?**

    1. Have each teacher ask themselves two questions at the end of term:

        1. What does a student who has mastered this subject look like?
        2. Is there anyone in this class for whom the grade does not accurately reflect mastery (based on the vision from #1)? If there are those who are getting a grade higher than their level of mastery, the teacher needs to reevaluate their grading system for next time. You really can't lower the grade without angst. If there are students for whom the grade is lower than their level of mastery, and they have been a virtuous student (worked hard, tried, etc.), then raise the grade. Parents generally don't complain about that.