An Integration of Subjects: Twenty-First Century or Inherently Classical?

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As scholars and experts in the realm of public education pursue methodology that will close the "global achievement gap" in education, they aim to use an integrated curriculum as just one of several crucial pillars for the recent emphasis on *twenty-first century* skills. According to Metiri Group, twenty-first century skills also include helping students develop technological literacy, higher-order and inventive thinking, collaborative learning skills, and real-world/project-based assignments, just to name a few.[1] While mainstream public educators gaze into the twenty-first century, classical Christian educators peer into antiquity to accomplish some of the same goals. Could it be, however, that in some ways, the advocates of twenty-first century skills are taking a page from the book on the classical education movement? While it remains to be seen whether or not twenty-first century skills in America's classrooms will succeed or simply become a passing pedagogy, it would appear that classical education can take a bit of the credit for at least one twenty-first century pillar—the integration of subjects. The classical Christian model of education suggests a natural framework for this integration due to the chronological presentation of history (including biblical and church history) and the consistent application of strong language skills across the curriculum.

Our modern-day, classical, Christian model of education emphasizes teaching history chronologically with events of the Bible and church history woven into the approach. Merging biblical and Christian events into the overall teaching of history—this is the beginning of course integration. Since history occurs in time, it seems rational that students can and should learn history this way, and they should learn about other disciplines assimilated into this chronologically constructed series of events. Marlin Detweiler of Veritas Press and Veritas Scholar's Academy in Lancaster, PA, writes of the need to integrate history with biblical events and church history:

> Few grammar school teachers have enough knowledge of Egyptian culture and its impact on the Israelites or can adequately teach the Reformation period. Additional tools were needed to effectively and memorably teach the timeline of history. Thus, the birth of this model of learning and integrating these two disciplines.[2]

The twentieth century, however, witnessed the rise of child development as a psychology all its own, and this tremendously impacted—for better or for worse—our approach to teaching history in America's public schools. For example, according to the International World History Project (history-world.org), up until the nineteenth century, the concept of childhood as we understand it today did not exist. In the mid-twentieth century, Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget cultivated his constructivist theory of cognitive development in children. This was the inspiration behind several studies in Great Britain in the 1970s and 1980s regarding how children learn history. The studies explored many aspects including children's understanding of the past and their ability to empathize with people from the past. Based on his own research during this time, Roy Hallam argued that children do not understand historical reasoning until Piaget's fourth and final stage of development, which isn't until the middle teen years. This suggested a contradiction to earlier studies by Jerome Bruner and more recent studies conducted in the United States. Thankfully, the more recent studies, which are not necessarily connected to classical education, uphold the notion that younger children do learn history through storytelling and literature integration.[3] But for a season of time, the experimental application of various theories adversely affected the teaching of history to elementary-aged children.

In classical Christian education, there is no question that the chronology of history as a "story" is celebrated as a theme to embed other subjects. God created the concept of time, and God created humans (including children) with the ability to understand time. Therefore, history stands strong as a mighty tool in the hands of the educator. The child studying the Middles Ages

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and the Renaissance can learn about the worldviews, religious thought, artistic approaches, scientific discoveries, literary masterpieces, and mathematics of the time period and the historical implications associated across these disciplines. Clearly, one area affects another, and it is the duty of the teacher to help the student see the connections. For even an elementary school child can learn how the medieval church affected ideas concerning government, science, art, and literature. An art teacher can teach about Michelangelo, DaVinci, one-point perspective, and vanishing points. A math teacher can talk about the mathematics behind one-point perspective. A science teacher can help students explore Copernicus, Galileo, and the discovery of a heliocentric solar system. And, last of all, the language arts teacher can coach students through reading, writing, and speaking about these historically themed topics. Jacques Barzun, the French born American history professor of Columbia College, stated in an essay:

> Teachers of English who assign stories to read, and teachers of science as they come to great principles, should be asked to make historical points about authors and discoverers and should say something about their lives and works, reinforcing the idea that the consequences of history are with us still, present all the time; we not only make history but are bathed in it.[4]

In essence, the historical time period provides a point of reference for all of these subjects to shine with context and relevancy as they are learned. **As a result, the child does not walk away with a disjointed arsenal of mere facts and topical information, but rather a timeline of learning to which more knowledge and skills are added throughout his/her lifetime.**

If the study of chronological history plays the role of a backdrop to which one can embed subjects, then language arts plays the role of an overlay or an application to the same subjects. Language arts is not merely a subject in itself. Rather, it is a series of skill sets acquired and practiced in order to be able to manipulate and comprehend subjects. Once classical students develop the ability to listen, read, comprehend, write, and speak, they spend the rest of their educational careers fine-tuning these verbal muscles and applying them to numerous branches of knowledge. In a classical curriculum, the cornerstone of grammar, logic, and rhetoric supplies the rigors of communication through the written and spoken word. A ninth-grade geometry teacher, for example, can assign his students to use their math skills and computer software to design a bridge that will not fall down under prescribed conditions. As part of the assignment, the students can also write essays to explain and defend why their bridges will not fall down. Perhaps, in the essays, they cite historical discoveries that contributed to the knowledge we have about bridges today. With this approach, it is not always necessary to separate the school day into short blocks of time designated to various subjects. Instead, a school day can be spent applying language skills to a given theme over a longer period of time.

Tragically, over time, much of what was effective in education was tossed out because of what was ineffective in education. While America speeds ahead into the twenty-first digital age, classical educators are the ones who are at an advantage because they know the importance of how to draw out the effective methodologies of the past and merge them with the best of what is new. Integration of subjects, in a sense, is not new. In the ancient world, there was a natural overlap of basic courses to suit the practical needs of the government and society. In the twenty-first century, there are so many areas of specialization that there is often a disconnection. Therefore, in the twenty-first century, whether we are *twenty-first* century educators or *classical educators*, we are revisiting ways to bring integration and wholeness to learning once again.

NOTES

1. Metiri Group, "Twenty-First Century Skills," http://www.metiri.com/21st%20Century%20Skills/PDFtwentyfirst%20century%20skills.pdf.

2. Marlin Detweiler, "History and Bible Tools in an Integrated Approach: History and Bible in Grammar School," (essay, 2002).

3. Jere Brophy and Bruce VanSledright, *Teaching and Learning History in Elementary Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

4. Jacques Barzun, *A Jacques Barzun Reader*, ed. Michael Murray (New York: HarperCollins, 2002).