ACCS Distinctive Schools Series

Project Work and Homework: Integrating the Common, Liberal, and Fine Arts

The sequence matters—no one can start building with a roof. Mastery matters—a poor foundation will risk destroying the entire edifice —Christopher Perrin

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The empiricism of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) runs the research, and the textbook companies. The rationalism of Rene Descartes (1596-1650) runs the administration, thus standardized testing and grading: and the romanticism of Jean-Jaques Rousseau (1712-1778) runs the classroom, thus the relativistic morality and child-centered pedagogical approach and the near-constant conflict between curriculum developers, school administrators, and teachers. — Andrew Kern

By freedom the spirit grows, by servitude it is crushed. — Seneca

As farmers put stakes beside their plants, so the right kid of teacher provides firm support for the young in the shape of the lessons and admonitions, carefully chosen so as to produce an upright growth of character. —Plutarch

The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection. — John Milton

It is perhaps axiomatic that the beautiful bloom of virtuous education grows atop a stem of thorny issues that must be grasped and resolved so that its full fragrance might be enjoyed. Such are the, perhaps prosaic, topics of project work and homework in the classical Christian school.

Project Work

Should lower school students read *Little House in the Big Woods* by Laura Ingalls Wilder and then dance with ribbons to fiddle music and make play-doh pies? Should 2nd graders make ziggurats out of legos after they study Egypt? What about a Roman road made out of macaroni during Latin class? What sort of projects are appropriate for students in logic and rhetoric school? These questions all address the place of projects in the overall classical Christian educational curriculum. Are projects and hands-on learning activities essential, optional, or heretical? Quite simply, should Classical Christian schools should consider projects as supplemental at best and heretical at worst? While even the question, so phrased, might seem aggressive, we must not be unaware that the devil is often in the philosophical details hiding in the pedagogical nooks and crannies. If one has never really considered the 'projects question' before, or were even aware that there was such, it might seem somewhat out of left field.

Let's begin our discussion by exposing the often hidden problems associated with project work to the light, then consider in what ways they could be usefully incorporated into the classical Christian education.

On the superficial level, to wax Chestertonian, that "eccentric prince of paradox," in assigning a project, while school masters promote necessary activity, the activity does not necessarily promote school mastery. In other words, project work tends towards busy work, with little deep cognitive activity driving towards specific learning goals. This is especially true of the sort of take-home projects that require 2nd grade moms to traipse over to Hobby Lobby to source an assortment of balls and paint in order to helps their child make a 3D planetary system. Who is doing the work? How is this graded? What is the child actually learning? Will a parent, knowing that a grade is on the line, allow their child free reign in the certain knowledge that another mom is most likely ensuring their child turns in something worthy of the space museum? Even in classroom-based group project work, inevitably one or two driven individuals do the majority of the group's work, while the rest are content to coast.

At a deeper level, the problem with projects is that they are literally the most obviously Dewey-inspired pedagogical activity that a school can encourage. John Dewey wrote, "All genuine learning comes through experience." He wanted to progress away from seeing great books and the library as the centerpiece of the school, and move towards the centrality of experiential projects and hands-on learning. What mattered was the process of learning, not the content. His approach was more child-centric and less Logos-centric. In modern practice, this means that anything that is hard is for the child is considered bad for the child, anything that is not entertaining to the child is regarded as damaging to their learning.

Underlying and motivating Dewey's experiential progressive education was his unwavering disavowal of Christianity and its influence on education and society. He wrote,

> There is no god and there is no soul. Hence, there is no need for the props of traditional religion. With dogma and creed excluded, the immutable truth is dead and buried. There is no room for fixed and natural law or permanent moral absolutes.

Contrast Dewey's iconoclastic atheism with classical Christian education. The purpose of classical Christian education is neither to make a child happy, nor even smart, but to make him durable to live a good life of Christian virtue. We aver with John Milton that,

> The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection.

However, As James KA Smith rightly acknowledged, we are not 'brains on a stick' or disembodied spirits. Such learning takes place through our reason, our sensory experiences, through tradition, and through revelation, or poetic knowledge. While Dewey believed that only reason and experience were sufficient foundations, classical Christian education aims to recover reason, tradition, experience, and revelation as legitimate forms of knowing. Matter matters, and hands-on experience should play a role in our pedagogy.

So what, for example, does a school do with the endless list of recommended activities in Susan Wise Bauer's *History of the World*? Before you send you parents on another sortie into the craft store, or in a fit of anti-Dewey fervor toss the activity packet in the waste bin, the thoughtful approach is two ask two essential questions before beginning any project, lengthy assignment, or even field trip:

- What is the desired learning outcome?
- How will student mastery be evaluated?

Schools should use their published scope and sequence along with curriculum guides to to define learning goals and shape weekly lesson plans. Habitually starting with the end in mind will mean fewer frazzled families, and it is likely that you will see fewer Lego ziggurats and gingerbread houses, and Roman roads made of Cheerios.

How you ask students and their families to spend time sends a message about the school's priorities. Just because a textbook recommends a certain project does not mean it is part of your curriculum. Think of textbooks as 'published resources,' which means that they are tools in the hands of the living curriculum—the faculty.

Naturally, none of this is to gainsay the undeniable value of children working cooperatively, learning to love each other through leadership, patience, perseverance, shared joy, even competition.

Projects that go well are those that require students to go deeper into a text to make it come alive. We have seen students vivify a scene from a book they read in lower school using a shoe box and different paper products. As the students work on their shoe boxes, they are flipping back through their book, mining key scenes and passages for inspiration. Once complete, students present their final product to the class and give a speech that is targeting specific learning outcomes. In this example, students were required to share what details and themes in the text led them to choose the particular colors and materials that they used in their visual.

Consider too how field trips, a perennial favorite with Grammar school students and their parents, integrate with learning goals. How will students avoid simply being passive enjoyers of an experience? What pre- and post-work is assigned? How will the results of the field trip be evaluated? What does it do that an in-class assignment cannot accomplish?

Integrating the Common, Liberal, and Fine Arts

Better than projects are the use of the common arts, which require the student to embody the liberal arts. In his book *A Common Arts Education: Renewing the Tradition of Training the Hands, Head, and Heart,* Chris Hall rediscovers the place of the common arts in the classical curriculum. They are those arts we use to survive, to build, to find our way around. He quotes Milton (see above) who believed the liberal arts are actually embodiments of those liberal arts.

Hall astutely observes:

> If you look at the ancients, and you go all the way back to the Greeks and the Romans, you'll find that they have a little bit of a disdain for common arts if they're done for money. You hear the ancient Greeks, Socrates for example, disparages them in *The Republic*, how these arts are just for money, but you have to realize– Socrates is wearing a stola made by a tailor, sitting on a bench made by a woodworker, inside a home made by a stonemason, drinking wine from a bowl made by a vintner and a potter respectively.

Contrastingly, Hugh of Saint Victor, in *The Didascalicon,* talks about the value of tailoring, weaving, and armament, in which he includes stone masonry and woodworking. He mentions things like cooking and agriculture, and does so in almost the same breath as he does the liberal arts.

Hugh understood that the Arts are all about producing something valuable, whether physical or intellectual, and the teaching tool needed is not lecture or socratic seminar but imitation. As Clark and Jain have written, "Imitation precedes art." As the recovery of the tools of learning continues, school leaders would be wise to think less about the modern idea of projects and more about the classical idea of completing an apprenticeship under the tutelage of a master.

An administrators mind might first jump to the challenge of scheduling, but the low hanging fruit would be to start by encouraging your lower school teachers to complete one common arts project per semester. Running from one fad to another is not the ethos of a classical Christian school, so begin your journey into the common arts with simple and small steps. The difference between a project and the common arts is their beauty and utility. A castle made out of toilet papers is not really useful, beyond that one assignment whereas the common arts produce products that serve others.

Assigning Homework

Almost every time school administrators gather, and the same can be said of parents, the issue of homework is sure to arise. Classical Christian educators of our day are in what is at once the exhilarating yet unenviable position of passing on something to our children that neither we nor the parents we serve were likely beneficiaries of in our own K-12 education. Parents often do not understand the workload and are not accustomed to what is suitable. Consequently, it is our job to cast a vision for the rewarding benefits of homework to encourage students to become more independent, responsible, and progress towards mastery.

Homework may be defined as the academic work assigned by the teacher in which the student is intentionally not given class time to complete the assignment. The same dilemma that schools face with project work also arises with homework; it seems to take away family time and its purpose is not always clear. The key is to use them both purposefully.

In the book *Ending the Homework Hassle*, author John Rosemond highlights a number of virtues that clearly align with classical Christian schools. For example, he writes on perseverance,

> …the idea of completing what you set out to do, the ability to confront difficulties and overcome them. It also includes the idea of pressing one's own limits to advance to a higher level. It's a sad fact that many parents shield their child from frustration in the misguided notion that allowing the child to struggle is neglectful, abusive, or will lead to a child feeling unloved. The fact is that parents are putting off the inevitable until a later time when the process will be harder and immeasurably more painful for the child.

No parent likes to see their child suffer in isolation and so they default to blaming the teacher for assigning solitary confinement to their child. What is needed is for school leaders to give the parents a vision for independent thought being the result of independent practice. A child who cannot tolerate being alone by himself is going to struggle.

Littlejohn and Evans write in *Wisdom and Eloquence* on rigor, "the heart of the matter is to give students time in increasing measure to reflect carefully on the things that they are learning… out of class assignments must relate directly to the lessons being covered and that they only be assigned if the same educational benefit cannot be gained without their being assigned. No busywork!"

Homework is one of the tools that classical Christian school teachers use to grow lifelong learners who are not co-dependents. Homework should never be busywork, but should have a clear goal to cultivate mastery. The child-centered educational movement is trying to cancel homework on the grounds that it stifles the child's happiness and development. However, a logos-centered approach to education requires that students get comfortable working through challenging content and problems according to their own merits.

Cascading communication about homework to parents can happen through events and newsletters, but it first needs to happen between administration and faculty. Developing a policy or set of principles that drive the ongoing communication between the teacher and the parent is the best way to cascade communication. Here are a few practical principles for assigning homework and communicating well to parents:

- Set a desired average amount of homework time per grade range per week and share it with parents. Some schools will set a 'maximum time allowed' for homework that unintentionally preconditions some parents to set a stopwatch every time their child sits down to do their homework. Using a 'per week average' encourages parents to take the long view and have fewer hair-trigger reactions on the nights where the load is a bit heavier. There are at least four examples on the Member Resource Center that show specific homework ranges.
- Avoid homework on weekends and holidays. The one exception would be reading, because reading is like breathing for humans—it oxygenates and feeds the mind and renews the imagination and intuition.
- During regular calls, teachers should check in on how much homework the student is completing

during an average evening. If above the desired average, teachers should work with colleagues to return to the desired average. Upper School administrators should complete 'random' calls to parents to glean the same information.

- Humanities teachers and Math/Science teachers should consider alternating when tests are given (M/W/F and T/Th) and major assignments are due (essays and lab reports).

These principles are not meant to limit the ability of parents to work with their children on academic matters, nor is it to excuse sloth which might necessitate a student being disciplined and having work to complete at recess or home, nor is it to negate the possible need for remediation. Get in a rhythm. Nobody likes surprises. Train your students to expect when they will have homework and why it is important to the goals of the class.

Whether your school is thinking about projects, homework, or the common arts, there should first be an integrated vision as to why the practice fits with the school's educational vision. It is from the roots that an apple tree finds it nourishment and produces fruit. Classroom practices that do not arise from an underlying and vivifying philosophy are merely stapling fruit to a tree. Take the time to align the administration and the faculty on homework, projects, and common arts, and communicate clearly and visionally with the parents. Moreover, remember the dictum that there is time enough as long as you do only one thing at a time. Administrations interested in institutional reform should not burden their teachers and parents with change fatigue but focus on successful implementation of one key initiative at a time.