ACCS Distinctive Schools Series

Rigor: *Scholé*, *Multum non Multa*, and how schools manage workload

I have no problem with high standards or tight rules…There is nothing wrong with hard work in a rigorous school, but there is something wrong with work that is hard for all the wrong reasons. —Douglas Wilson.

Water in moderation will make a plant grow, while a flood of water will choke it. In the same way, the mind will thrive reasonably under hard work, but will drown if the work is excessive.
—Plutarch, On Bringing Up a Boy

Rigor is not simply a matter of working hard and trying to cover a lot of ground… Rigor, when you learn math or Latin or higher level reading skills, is not measured by how much ground you cover, but how closely you focus your attention on what you are learning.
—Andrew Kern, Circe Institute Blog, April 8, 2015

The Greek word for leisure is scholé (skoh-LAY). It does not mean leisure in the American sense of relaxing on a vacation at the beach. It means rather "restful learning" that comes from discussion, conversation and reflection among good friends. —Christopher Perrin, Recovering Leisure (Scholé) in Education, December 10, 2013, Inside Classical Education, Classical Academic Press.

At schools, the children who are too stupid or lazy to learn languages and mathematics and elementary science can be set to doing things that children used to do in their spare time. Let, them, for example, make mud pies and call it modeling. But all the time there must be no faintest hint that they are inferior to the children who are at work. —C.S. Lewis, Screwtape Proposes a Toast.

Classical Christian schools aim to pack 5,000 years of human history and thought into 12,000 classroom hours. Central to our model of education are the ideas expressed through literature, natural revelation (history and science), special revelation (scripture), and the artistic works of men. Too many of these exist for any mortal to master and appreciate within a lifetime, let alone before said mortal has enjoyed 18 summers. Add to these demands the excessive insertions by modernity tied to data and information, which creates a flood of content masquerading as, and often mistaken for, education. When the many different issues are brought to bear around content quantity in a classical Christian school, a mixture of many different concerns may cause heads of school to become schizophrenic on rigor— do it, wait, no, don't do it! To more fully appreciate the call to rigor matched with *scholé* in classical schools, we need to break apart the arguments and get to their heart.

Some have helpfully equated *multum non multa* (much, not many) with the Mies van der Rohe's phrase "less is more," and even education as leisure (*scholé*). Similar to the idea of *multum non multa* is the phrase *festina lente* (make haste slowly). These stakes in the ground often create tension around rigor. Both *multum non multa* and *festina lente* should serve to guide academic leaders when they think about rigor in classical Christian school classrooms.

The Many Vectors of Rigor

The Grit Movement of recent years (Angela Duckworth) has asserted what classical educators have known for centuries: Fortitude is formed by hard work (the modern term is "grit"), and those with fortitude go further in life. Thus, if we equate fortitude with rigor, up to a point, rigor is an essential part of classical Christian education.

Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi, *(ph.: cheek-fent-me-hi-ay)* in his book *Flow*, describes the importance of balancing the challenge given by the teacher to the skill of the student. If the academic tasks are too easy, the result is student apathy. When the rigor and the student's requisite skill are matched, Csíkszentmihályi calls this 'flow.' The author described flow as "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost."

But want happens when students and parents complain that the work is too hard? Sadly, progressive education ideas have so permeated our thinking that many, otherwise rational and themselves hardworking professionals, succumb to the wails from the kitchen table as their children profess to be overwhelmed by their workload. While it is natural for children to want the easy path, it is unnatural for parents to think that the easy path is their children's birthright. Progressive, experiential education was scathingly summed up by Neil Postman in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, "…there must be nothing that has to be remembered, studied, applied, or worst of all, endured." He argues that modern schools have become child-centered and have traded complexity, hierarchy, and exposition for relaxing entertainment.

Most often, however, when rigor *is* excessive, the problem is one of quality vs quantity "what" not "how much." Douglas Wilson writes, "There is no way to make classical education entertaining throughout. There is work, pleasure, and joy in classical education, but there is no slack-jawed staring at a box, demanding to be entertained." Classical Christian education is cumulative and hierarchical in that the content and skills build upon one another in an orderly fashion over time. Whether students are called upon to solve a mathematical puzzle or explain the rationale for the book title *Pride and Prejudice*, there is no way of removing complexity. However, as Wilson notes, such complexity should not be at the expense of pleasure and joy in the learning experience.

Content Drives Rigor?

As noted, there is a battle Royale between the championing quality over quantity, and those advocating for the exact opposite. Typically the first skirmish is over the quantity of content: the stuff you need to know and works you need to read. On one front, we have the modern tendency to equate fact-acquisition with education. Many classical Christian schools enter unwittingly into the STEM or 'state standards' race, which greatly expands the ledger of facts required to graduate. On another front, we face a canon of ideas that demand a lot of reading and historical study. Opposing these fronts are two distinct positions: Treat education as "wandering in a garden" where learning is from wonder and lacks any external stress. This typically calls for the reading load to focus on fewer works more deeply. At its extreme, the "unschool" or no-homework proponents camp out, asserting that students will grow to hate learning if it is forced upon them. The second position takes 'grit' and makes it 'grind.' We see this in the hot-house competitive prep-schools, perhaps exageratingly exemplified in the Japanese school system where suicide and shame is not the unheard of consequence of failing to make it into a top university.

In *Wisdom and Eloquence,* Littlejohn and Evans write, "A skeleton must be both rigid and flexible at the appropriate points." Although they are discussing a school's curriculum, the skeletal metaphor describe the need to pursue a *via media* with regard to rigor as teachers guide students through the tradition. Although there is certainly content to be covered in history and in math and in literature, the goal is not coverage, but mastery, not simply quantity by quality.

The whole point of the recovery of classical Christian education is not merely to cover informational content, but to hands students the tools of learning so that they can go on learning for the rest of their lives. In "The

Lost Tools of Learning," Dorothy Sayers shares three different times on the importance of viewing education as more than a collection of subjects,

> The 'subjects' supply material; but they are all to be regarded as mere grist for the mental mill to work upon.
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> 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; medieval 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.
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> 'Subjects' of some kind there must be, of course. One cannot learn the use of a tool by merely waving it in the air; neither can one learn the theory of grammar without learning an actual language, or learn to argue and orate without speaking about something in particular. The debating subjects of the Middle Ages were drawn largely from Theology, or from the Ethics and History of Antiquity.

In the context of the essay, Sayers is not teaching that classical Christian education is simply a method, but she is describing the right attitude towards rigor. Rigor is not about challenging students to read all 800 pages of *The Brothers Karamazov,* but to think with wisdom and articulate with eloquence the ideas related to faith and doubt and God's existence during suffering. Rigor is about selecting the right content to give students a new challenge with the tools of learning. This is maieutic teaching (related to midwifery) because the teacher helps the students bring ideas to birth. In this form of the Socratic method, teachers would, in this example, use discussion and questioning about *The Brothers Karamozov* to awaken the creative and inquisitive powers latent in the student.

Rigor as a path to Fortitude

Rigor begets Fortitude, which we should all agree is a virtue. So is temperance. Depth is often achieved through close, slow study— but not always. The operational questions on how to balance fortitude and temperance are endless:

> How much homework is too much? How does this change from lower school to upper school?
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> How many books should be read and papers be written?
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> Which courses should be offered in the overall curriculum?
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> How do AP Coursework and the SAT/ACT impact our educational objectives and curricular planning?
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> Should schools take away recess in order to cover more academic content?
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> What do teachers and administrators do with families that complain about the academic rigor?
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> How do classical Christian schools receive transfer students?

Recommendations

1) *If you can create a study guide for it, it's probably about information.* 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 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 place emphasis here.

2) *Don't apologize for homework practice, but teach families the importance of deliberate practice for mastery.* Homework should never be assigned due to a teacher's poor planning, but it is a part of a well-rounded classical Christian education. Homework equips students in the necessary tools for learning, provides them with practice outside of the classroom, encourages them to work independently, and reinforces the concepts presented in class. Homework also provides parents an opportunity to be involved in the academic life of their children. You can look to the ACCS Member Resource Center to find guides for writing a homework policy that can be part of teacher training. If you decide to communicate an average expected time for doing homework (say, 10 minutes per grade level which means 10 minutes of homework on average for a 1st grader or 120 minutes for a 12th grader), know that

parents will hold you accountable to this. Also, encourage habits of the household that match the atmosphere of the school (e.g. student must read for 30 minutes to watch 15 minutes of television.)

3) *Consider implementing DEAR time or other windows of time to study.* If students are expected to read significant amounts of content, let them have their first fruits of the reading through DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) for 20-30 minutes while at school. Few academic activities have such a high return on investment as silent sustained reading that builds the attention and independent thinking. Similarly, offering a silent study period a few days per week for a window of time promotes completion of homework and gives students a head start.

4) *Avoid the drive-through rapid consumption approach to scheduling.* In a blog entitled, "Piling It On," Dr. Christopher Perrin asserts that classical schools have too many periods and teach too many subjects. Our eyes are too big for our stomaches. AP Coursework, SAT/ACT, and Dual Credit do not typically align with our goals and usually prioritize coverage over mastery. Some schools avoid the buffet approach by using block scheduling and reducing the number of subjects taught.

5) *Promote the rewards of rigor and do not compromise on academic rigor for the sake of enrollment growth.* In *Wisdom and Eloquence*, Littlejohn and Evans write, "We would not accept transferring students after the third week of his or her junior year… It was a real testimony to the rigor and quality of our program that we occasionally had families choose to place their rising senior into our junior class, recognizing that she would not enter college for another two years… The focus must be on the student's academic success and not on concerns like 'we really need more boys in our senior class.'" Getting families to embrace the rigor of your school requires you to excel in persuading them of the rewards of rigor. Our goal is not just for our students to conform to the standard but to love the standard.

6) *Provide time for scholé (restful learning) in the day.* Recess and play have been almost crowded out in public schools, because they have no concept of leisure. Plutarch wrote, "Water in moderation will make a plant grow, while a flood of water will choke it. In the same way, the mind will thrive reasonably under hard work, but will drown if the work is excessive." This could mean doing a Socratic Discussion with tea in logic school or engaging parents to do a medieval feast in fourth grade. Some schools provide a longer lunch and recess period so that students can develop deeper friendships. These relationships provide a context for rigor to be received well.

7) *Start an invite-only reading group among parents.* Nothing is less classical than compulsory parent education where parents are required to participate in certain learning activities. It might be better than nothing but a superior pathway would be to invite a small group of parents to read Dr. Timothy Dernlan's accessible book, *A Guide to Understanding Classical Christian Education: 100 Common Questions*. The book can be read in less than two hours but the real power is in the conversation and reflection. Once this community is formed, subsequent books within the classical tradition could be read and enjoyed together. Make it clear that the purpose of the reading is for enjoyment and contemplation and community, not for developing action plans and setting learning objective for the children.

8) *If the students do not love the standard, temporarily lower the standard.* This may sound like a compromise and even conflicting with a previous recommendation, but rigor that corrupts a student's relationship with learning will not help the school in the long run. This is not referring to bending the rules for a disgruntled student or pretending that every single situation requires a case by case approach. Our universal goal is to reorder the students disordered loves, so schools must be honest about where their families are at in the process. A love for learning grows over the years and so it might be possible that a younger school is trying to copy and paste the higher standards of an established school, but the younger school's families are not quite ready. School leaders must challenge their families but do so in a way that also knows them and loves them. Temporarily lowering a standard during the school's growing years enables students to experience a taste for mastery which will then enable the school to raise its academic standards.