

The New York Times
Opinionator

JUNE 7, 2010, 9:00 PM

A Classical Education: Back to the Future

By *STANLEY FISH*

[Stanley Fish](#) on education, law and society.

Tags:

[curriculum](#), [education](#), [high school](#), [No Child Left Behind](#), [president obama](#), [reunions](#)

I wore my high school ring for more than 40 years. It became black and misshapen and I finally took it off. But now I have a new one, courtesy of the organizing committee of my 55th high school reunion, which I attended over the Memorial Day weekend.

I wore the ring (and will wear it again) because although I have degrees from two Ivy league schools and have taught at U.C. Berkeley, Johns Hopkins, Columbia and Duke, Classical High School (in Providence, RI) is the best and most demanding educational institution I have ever been associated with. The name tells the story. When I attended, offerings and requirements included four years of Latin, three years of French, two years of German, physics, chemistry, biology, algebra, geometry, calculus, trigonometry, English, history, civics, in addition to extra-curricular activities, and clubs — French Club, Latin Club, German Club, Science Club, among many others. A student body made up of the children of immigrants or first generation Americans; many, like me, the first in their families to finish high school. Nearly a 100 percent college attendance rate. A yearbook that featured student translations from Virgil and original poems in Latin.

Sounds downright antediluvian, outmoded, narrow and elitist, and maybe it was (and is; the curriculum's still there, with some additions like Japanese), but when I returned home I found three new books waiting for me, each of which made a case for something like the education I received at Classical. The books are [Leigh A. Bortins' "The Core: Teaching Your Child the Foundations of Classical Education,"](#) [Martha C. Nussbaum's "Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities"](#) and [Diane Ravitch's "The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education."](#)

Three more different perspectives from three more different authors could hardly be imagined.

Leigh A. Bortins writes as an engineer, a home schooling advocate and the C.E.O. of Classical Conversations, Inc. She sees learning "as a continuing conversation that humankind has been engaged in for centuries" and believes that the decisions we must

make today will be better if they are informed by “classical content,” that is, by an awareness of what great thinkers of the past have made of the problems we encounter in the present. She wants her children and ours to “hear the collective wisdom of the ages” and “regularly consult the advice of wise and virtuous men and women” when faced with modern “predicaments.”

To this end, she proposes a two-pronged program of instruction: “classical education emphasizes using the classical skills to study classical content.” By classical skills she means imitation, memorization, drill, recitation and above all grammar, not grammar as the study of the formal structure of sentences (although that is part of it), but grammar as the study of the formal structure of anything: “Every occupation, field of study or concept has a vocabulary that the student must acquire like a foreign language A basketball player practicing the fundamentals could be considered a grammarian . . . as he repeatedly drills the basic skills, of passing dribbling, and shooting.” “Every student,” Bortins counsels, “must learn to speak the language of the subject.”

“Classical content” identifies just what the subjects to be classically studied are. They are the subjects informed and structured by “the ideas that make us human” — math, science, language, history, economics and literature, each of which, Bortins insists, can be mastered by the rigorous application of the skills of the classical Trivium, grammar, the study of basic forms, logic, the skill of abstracting from particulars and rhetoric, the ability to “speak and write persuasively and eloquently about any topic while integrating allusions and examples from one field of study to explain a point in another.” Assiduously practice, or as Bortins puts it, “overpractice” these skills, and “a student is prepared to study anything.”

Notably absent from Bortins’ vision of education is any mention of assessment outcomes, testing, job training (one of her sub-chapters is entitled “The Trivium Replaces Careerism”) and the wonders of technology. Her emphasis is solely on content and the means of delivering it. She warns against the narrowing distractions of “industrialization and technologies” and declares that “students would be better educated if they weren’t allowed to use computers . . . until they were proficient readers and writers.”

Martha Nussbaum, philosopher, classicist, ethicist and law professor, starts from the same place. She critiques the current emphasis on “science and technology” and the “applied skills suited to profit making” and she argues that the “humanistic aspects of science and social science — the imaginative and creative aspect, and the aspect of rigorous critical thought — are . . . losing ground” as the humanities and the arts “are being cut away” and dismissed as “useless frills” in the context of an overriding imperative “to stay competitive in the global market.” The result, she complains, is that “abilities crucial to the health of any democracy” are being lost, especially the ability to “think critically,” the ability, that is, “to probe, to evaluate evidence, to write papers with

well-structured arguments, and to analyze the arguments presented to them in other texts.”

While not the language of the Trivium (which Nussbaum knows well), it breathes the same spirit, and we might well be reading Bortins when Nussbaum praises the kind of course that pays “attention to logical structures” and thus “gives students templates that they can then apply to texts of many different types.” But this and related abilities will look “dispensable if what we want are marketable outputs of a quantifiable nature,” if we embrace an “economic growth” paradigm rather than a “human development paradigm.”

For Nussbaum, human development means the development of the capacity to transcend the local prejudices of one’s immediate (even national) context and become a responsible citizen of the world. Students should be brought “to see themselves as members of a heterogeneous nation . . . and a still more heterogeneous world, and to understand something of this history of the diverse groups that inhabit it.” Developing intelligent world citizenship is an enormous task that can not even begin to be accomplished without the humanities and arts that “cultivate capacities for play and empathy,” encourage thinking that is “flexible, open and creative” and work against the provincialism that too often leads us to see those who are different as demonized others.

Unfortunately, at least according to Nussbaum, the trend toward a narrower and narrower vision of education is not being resisted by the Obama administration. Rather than decreasing the focus on testing and test preparation — a focus that reverses the relationship between test and content; the test becomes the content — “the administration plans to expand it.” Obama and his secretary of education, Arne Duncan (who, says Nussbaum, “presided over a rapid decline in humanities and arts funding” as head of the Chicago public schools), continue to implement the assumptions driving the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind, chiefly the assumption that “individual income and national economic progress” should be education’s main goals.

Diane Ravitch, noted historian and theorist of education, writes as someone who once strongly supported the promise and goals of No Child Left Behind but underwent a de-conversion in 2007: “Where once I had been hopeful, even enthusiastic, about the potential benefits of testing, accountability, choice, and markets, I now found myself experiencing profound doubts about these same ideas.”

Her conclusions, backed up by exhaustive research and an encyclopedic knowledge both of the literature and of situations on the ground, are devastating. The mantra of choice produced a “do your own thing” proliferation of educational schemes, “each with its own curriculum, and methods, each with its own private management, all competing for . . . public dollars” rather than laboring to discover “better ways of educating hard-to-educate students.” The emphasis on testing produced students who could “master test taking methods, but not the subject itself,” with the consequence that the progress claimed on the basis of test scores was an “illusion”: “The scores had gone up, but the students were

not better educated.” A faith in markets produced gamesmanship, entrepreneurial maneuvering and outright cheating, very little reflection on “what children should know” and very little thought about the nature of the curriculum.

Ravitch, like Nussbaum, finds little hope in the policies of President Obama, who promised change but seems to have picked up “the same banner of choice, competition, and markets that had been the hallmark of his predecessors.” The result is that we continue to see “the shrinking of time available to teach anything other than reading and math; other subjects, including history, science, the arts, geography, even recess, were curtailed.”

Ravitch’s recommendations are simple, commonsensical and entirely consonant with the views of Bortins and Nussbaum. Begin with “a well conceived, coherent, sequential curriculum,” and then “adjust other parts of the education system to support the goals of learning.” This will produce a “foundation of knowledge and skills that grows stronger each year.” Forget about the latest fad and quick-fix, and buckle down to the time-honored, traditional “study and practice of the liberal arts and sciences: history, literature, geography, the sciences, civics, mathematics, the arts and foreign languages.”

In short, get knowledgeable and well-trained teachers, equip them with a carefully calibrated curriculum and a syllabus filled with challenging texts and materials, and put them in a room with students who are told where they are going and how they are going to get there.

Worked for me.