

THE TORCH BY NOVA CLASSICAL ACADEMY

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A DEEP DIVE INTO CLASSICAL EDUCATION

The Torch: The Rhetoric Stage February 2022

On Rhetoric, Friendship, and Virtue

Last month, we strolled through the world of “knowable truth” by reviewing the structure of [The Logic Stage](#) of learning. This month, we will sit in the presence of the Rhetoric Stage of learning, finishing out the third stage of the Trivium. I use the term “presence” with special intention, due to the idea that Rhetoric is about communication and as such, requires a relationship between

the speaker and the listener. This relationship, this **presence** between both parties, allows for the Great Conversation to continue in perpetuity.

Even though at first blush we might equate the Rhetoric stage with grades 9-12, students at Nova Classical Academy begin rhetorical skills in Kindergarten. Kindergarten scholars have a class called Oratory, taught by Ms. Urbrock, where they come up to the podium and speak in front of their peers. The subject of their oratory might be a new toy, or what they did last summer, or they may sing a song that Ms. Urbrock has practiced with them. This early stage oratory practice strengthens their speaking skills and as Sister Miriam Joseph states in her book *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric*, builds the confidence to “communicate thought from one mind to another”.

As I contemplated the Rhetoric stage in preparation for this month’s newsletter, I finally came across a seminar with my Latin Five students (10th grade) in the spring of 2013. We had just finished translating Cicero’s *De Amicitia*, “On Friendship”, a philosophical treatise which defines and explores friendship through a conversation between Fannius, Scaevola, and Laelius, three historical figures from the Roman Republic. Laelius states that “friendship may be thus defined: a complete accord on all subjects human and divine, joined with mutual goodwill and affection”. This definition struck me as simple and poignant, but I was left with the question: How does this definition resonate with my students and their idea of friendship?

As we [define classical education](#) and the Trivium, **Rhetoric is the ability to apply the foundational knowledge and logical understanding of a subject purposefully and creatively to solve a problem, express an opinion with clarity, or create something new.** The Latin Five students took on all of the aforementioned Rhetoric-stage skills during the *De Amicitia* seminar through a careful critique of Cicero’s definition of friendship and if his definition was not satisfying, an exhortation to generate their own definition of friendship.

Listening to the students work through the critique and creation of a new definition was fascinating and inspiring. From the outset, they understood that if Cicero did not have the full picture of friendship in his essay, there was not an individual member in the room who held the “right answer”, but only through collective conversation, critique and correction, was a definition to be found. Here is what they agreed upon with after an entire class period’s discussion:

Friendship needs a high level of trust and selflessness. Friends need both similarities and differences. In friendship, each person is comfortable and secure around each other, gets some amount of support and motivation from each other, and the feeling should be mutual and solid. In a friendship, there is always care for the entire person.

After creating this shared definition, the students wrote a response paper to the seminar in which they presented their argument whether or not Friendship should be added to the cardinal virtues at Nova Classical Academy. Rereading those essays today, I found this reflection from a student:

Nova defines “virtue” as “a good habit”. If we make friendship a “good habit”, we give it an entirely different meaning. Friendships are not “habits”. They are relationships that should be cared for and nurtured. They are extremely important, and should not be viewed as something we should practice to make ourselves better people. The virtues never change. However, a friendship can.

I wanted to share both the collaborative definition as well as student reaction to the Rhetoric stage exercise because they highlight how students are able to come to a deeper understanding of a concept. By engaging in the Great Conversation in an “environment in which students engage in disagreement and argumentation civilly . . . students hone their thinking skills in the pursuit of truth” (McCoy 2021). We will further explore the Great Conversation towards the end of the school year, but in the meantime, consider what it might be like to create a shared definition of friendship while eating dinner at the table or roasting marshmallows around a campfire as we emerge from winter. Especially now, the importance of civil communication from one mind to another cannot be understated.

May your friendships be cared for and nurtured,



Dr. Johnson

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