

# ROCKBRIDGE REPORTER

A Newsletter for Rockbridge Academy

April 2001

## A VISION FOR THE SECONDARY

Edited from comments given by Michael J. McKenna, March 16, 2001

The English novelist J.R.R. Tolkien once told his students that all true education is actually “a kind of never ending story—a matter of continual beginnings, of habitual fresh starts, of persistent newness.” His friend, C.S. Lewis, said that education is “like a tantalizingly perpetual verandah—the initiation of unending beginnings.”

In Dorothy Sayers’ article “The Lost Tools of Learning,” the point is made that the classical methodology works not because it is concerned with educating children in *subjects*, but rather because it’s concern is with the instruction of children in the *art of learning*. Once they’ve mastered the art, then they will be fit to go out and learn “subjects.” In order for the *Trivium* to be as effective in the lives of our children as it is meant to be, it must be understood as an inviolable whole, comprised of Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric. No one of those three aspects was ever intended to be taken as a separate part unto itself.

You may remember the scene in the movie *Amadeus*, when Antonio Salieri is recalling the buffoonish Emperor’s comment regarding the length of Mozart’s opera, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. The Emperor, thinking the opera contained too many notes for the royal ear, said Mozart should just “cut a few, and it would be perfect.”

But Salieri objected: “Take away one note, displace one phrase...and there would be diminishment.” The same may be said of the *Trivium*: Take away one aspect, displace one stage...and there will be diminishment.

To help demonstrate this point, consider the following: Suppose Mr. and Mrs. Jones



TAKE AWAY ONE ASPECT,  
DISPLACE ONE STAGE...AND  
THERE WILL BE DIMINISHMENT.

think that the grammar stage, with all that “rote memorization,” is just so mechanical and boring. Given that, they begin their child in another school, intending to place him in the classical school when things get really interesting at the Dialectic. However, during these years, in addition to missing out on the rigor of the classical curriculum and the significant amount of material his would-be classmates are learning, the young Jones is also missing out on Latin instruction. Aside from the actual Latin, he’s also

not being trained to think about his own language and other foreign languages in only the way that Latin instruction can. In addition, he’s also missing out on valuable information that will be used and built upon at the Dialectic. The long and short of it is, when the Joneses attempt to place their child at the Dialectic level, the chances are great that he may be woefully behind, ill equipped to accomplish the tasks before him, or both.

Now let’s consider the family who appreciates the philosophy behind the Grammar stage, yet considers the Dialectic and Rhetoric stages unimportant. Their child spends his formative years gaining useful knowledge in the Grammar school, but then once transferred, isn’t being taught how to rightly think about these particulars in light of the science of Logic. His thinking becomes muddled; he begins to resemble the drunkard in Mr. Finkbeiner’s analogy,

weaving in and out of belief systems. As in any classroom environment, he is battered about the head and shoulders with words, words, words. He doesn’t know what the words mean; he doesn’t know how to ward them off or fling them back; he is prey to words in his emotions instead of being

masters of them in his intellect. For the average Christian student, this is a very frustrating yet all too common position to be in.

Now consider the student who completes the first two stages of the *Trivium*, Grammar and Dialectic, but does not take advantage of the last. He has been equipped with knowledge, and has also been taught to reason rightly about the particulars. However, he has not been trained to express his knowledge or his

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thoughts in a way that is effective and winsome. He knows what he wants to say, but he does not know how to say it. This, too, is a frustration plaguing many students and adults in our land, and sadly, in the church.

The point being that the *Trivium*, rightly understood, is a unity in diversity, an *E Pluribus Unum*, a seamless whole.

### **Arx Axiom: Fortress of First Principles**

During the twilight years of the Roman Empire when it seemed that the notion of the Fortress of First Principles—*Arx Axiom*—was losing its strength, Augustine revived its popularity. The *Arx Axiom* principle was the idea that the duty of the Roman Army was two-fold: it was to both defend and *promote* the glory of Roman civilization. But instead of applying the tradition to the task of the Empire, Augustine applied it to the task of the church. Instead of describing a culture war between Romans and barbarians, he posited a spiritual war between the City of Man and the City of God.

So for Augustine, *Arx Axiom* was the essential posture of the Christian worldview. It was bearing witness to the lost as a fortress of first principles and a citadel of truth.

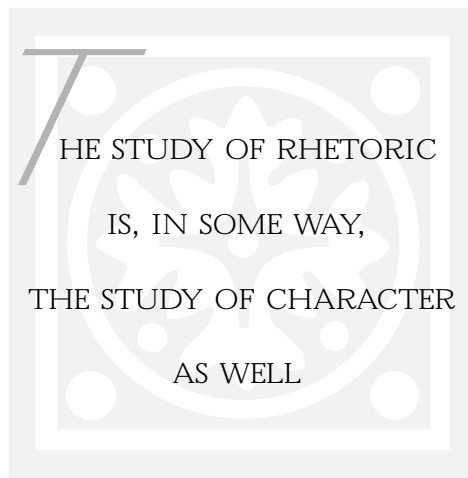
This posture is at the very heart of the classical methodology, and its capstone is the Rhetoric stage. Combined with the Truth of the Christian worldview, and the training in fundamentals, Logic, and Rhetoric, the classically trained student is a formidable weapon in the Church's arsenal. Without the ability effectively and winsomely to promote the Christian worldview, our Christian schools and churches become nothing more than walls of defense, whose weapons have long since rusted away, having been left to neglect. Meanwhile, the barbarians are at the gates, sharpening their swords and pikes.

In what specific ways is the Rhetoric stage integral to the proper training and instruction of our children? Let's begin by defining the term: Corbett and Connors, in their book *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, define rhetoric this way: "Rhetoric is the art or the discipline that deals with the use of discourse, either spoken or written, to inform or persuade or motivate an audience, whether that audience is made up of one person or a group of persons."

The point must be underscored yet again that knowledge and understanding (Grammar and Logic) are incomplete

without the ability to persuasively defend and promote the Biblical world and life view in speech and writing (Rhetoric). If our children are to be well-equipped defenders of the Truth, they must be able to effectively communicate that Truth.

In Acts chapter 17, we read of the Apostle Paul as he encounters the men of Athens in the Areopagus. As he contemplates the altar TO THE UNKNOWN GOD, he is able to so effectively and persuasively reason with these men, even to the point of



using their own poets to help make his case, that some were persuaded, and others desired to hear more from him. All the wisdom and knowledge in the world wouldn't have helped Paul without the ability to apply them to persuasive speech. The point is simply this: Factual knowledge and Logical thinking are incomplete in and of themselves without the ability to communicate and persuade effectively.

Another beneficial aspect of the Rhetoric stage is that of poetry and literature. Poetry and literature, taught from the perspective of the rhetorician, expose students to great manners of expression and figures of speech useful in the art of communication.

Peggy Noonan was a speechwriter for President Bush the Elder. At a lecture she once gave to the students of a prestigious university school of journalism, she gave some advice that floored me: "Don't study journalism." (I'm sure the dean of the school was eager to have her come back!) Instead, do you know what she told them? Study literature and history. If you want to write well, she urged them, study great writers. If you want to be able to provide an interesting take on just about any subject, study history. These two subjects, she said,

give budding young journalists far more grist for their mills than the narrow topic of "journalism" ever could.

Rhetoric students at Rockbridge will study Apologetics, a close relation to Rhetoric. Whereas apologetics ties together various subjects in the light of Scripture, Rhetoric enables students to present that worldview winsomely and effectively. The two "subjects" fit hand in glove.

Character training is an important, invisible aspect of education at Rockbridge. Likewise, character training is an important aspect of Rhetoric. Traditionally, the character of a Rhetorician was just as important as what he had to say. An evil man was not a Rhetorician, but rather a demagogue. C.S. Lewis had this to say about the Rhetorician in *A Preface to Paradise*: "I do not think (and no great civilization has ever thought) that the art of the Rhetorician is necessarily vile. It is in itself noble, though, of course, like most arts, it can be wickedly used." The study of Rhetoric is, in some way, the study of character as well. As such, it is an essential, indispensable aspect of the classical Christian approach to education.

### **Possible objections to the secondary level at Rockbridge Academy:**

#### **The Trivium in general is an antiquated approach.**

The brilliant men and women who preceded us in the course of Western civilization knew nothing of criteria referenced tests or whole language or software enhancements, but they were educated in a way that we can only dream of today despite all the baubles, bangles, and beads of modern academia. The notions of Athanasius, Anselm, Aquinas, Erasmus, and Luther informed their thinking and shaped their worldview. And so they were able to preserve and to pass on to us a heritage of real substance.

In this rapidly changing world, with our nifty and newfangled gadgets, what do we have to show for it? Education that focuses on instilling specific or vocational skills is outdated before it's finished. On the other hand, education that focuses on passing down the wisdom of the ages is what really stands the test of time. Students need to be able to *understand a concrete body of knowledge, think deeply about that knowledge, and then express their thoughts effectively*. Should they decide to go into the work place, their future employers will teach them what specific skills they want them to know.

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# SCIENCE FAIR

By Bob Blair

The Rockbridge Academy 2001 Science Fair, held on March 2nd, was a great success. All of our enthusiastic young scientists examined a portion of God's creation and diligently applied the scientific method to test their hypotheses. This year, a new format for the fair was introduced in which the entire afternoon at Rockbridge was focused upon science. The sixth, seventh, and ninth grade science classes were officially judged in the auditorium. The third through fifth grade classes displayed their work in their classrooms. We were privileged this year to have the following four judges participate in the fair: Mrs. Amy Boswell, Mrs. Terry Norman, Dr. Graham Gutsche, and Mr. Bob Owen. We offer a very big "Thank You" to our judges because they had an extremely difficult task, considering all of the excellent work on display.

The topics addressed by each grade and the results of the judging were as follows:

**Third Grade: Light**

**Fourth Grade: Newton's Laws as They**

**Apply to Catapults**

**Fifth Grade: Electrostatic**

**Sixth Grade: Physics — Mechanics and Optics**

First Place – Shawn Laser

Second Place – Kristyn Kinsey

Third Place – Patrick Peroutka

**Seventh Grade: Earth Science**

First Place – Matt Tucker

Second Place – Maggie Lively

Third Place – Brandon Antkowiak

**Ninth Grade: Conservation of**

**Energy/ Energy Conversion**

First Place – Gavin Blair

Second Place – Josh Davis

Third Place – David Sheir

## National Spelling Bee Finalist in Our Midst!

Janet Schonhaler, 8th grade, might be missing some school in late May. But that's okay; she's earned the privilege. Janet won the Anne Arundel County-wide Spelling Bee held last February, and as a result, will be attending the national finals in Washington, D.C. on May 27. While Janet may be a gifted speller, it wasn't simply her natural abilities that got her this far. In preparation for the county competition, Janet studied hundreds of spelling words, requiring hours of study. Once she was guaranteed a place at the nationals, the studying didn't stop there. Janet continues to prepare very seriously for the final event. Congratulations, Janet! You're an example to us all. Godspeed!

# Miscellaneous

I always told my students to ask questions. If they had a question, the chances were that five other people in a class of 15 had the same question. One parent recently asked me a question having to do with the issue of transferring credits from Rockbridge Academy (or any currently unaccredited high school) to an accredited public high school.

So I got on the phone to the Maryland State Department of Education and spoke with Jistine P. Smith, Educational Program Specialist for the State of Maryland. She forwarded to me the applicable law for just such a question, COMAR 13A.03.02.03J Transfer, Subsection (3)(b), specifically, which reads as follows:

(3) Transcript of Record from  
Nonaccredited School

(b) A local superintendent of schools shall determine by an evaluation of a student whether credits earned at a nonaccredited high school will be accepted at the public

high school to which the student transfers. This evaluation may include administration of standardized tests and examinations, the use of interviews, as well as the inspection of transcripts, report cards, and other documentation.

The long and short of it is this: even though Rockbridge Academy is currently unaccredited, the work students do here will transfer over without much, if any difficulty. In my previous experience, when students transferred to government high schools, virtually every credit transferred with them, even Bible credits. Once or twice I came across a public school principal who didn't take the Bible credits, but most were willing to accept them as an elective. Even in those rare circumstances when Bible credits were rejected, because that is something we do in addition to government schools, the students still had enough credits to transfer without any problems. On the heels of this discussion, credits from nonaccredited schools also transfer with no problem to colleges as well.

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### I want my child to participate in athletics.

You want your child to participate in athletics? Good! So do I. But athletics will only come as we build and acquire the critical mass of students that make basketball and lacrosse teams possible. In the meantime, we must place first things first. When it comes to pioneering efforts such as schools like Rockbridge, when we truly recognize our *first principles* and consider the sole purpose of education, we have to admit that athletic teams are not the primary focus. That is not to say that they are bad. Just that they don't rise to the level of first principles. They are worthy of our efforts, and they will come when we have enough students enrolled to establish them. One final comment: I may still be new to this area, but it seems to me that children around here lack no athletic outlets outside of school.

### Small groups of students are not conducive to proper socialization.

1) Students will socialize no matter where they are. Nothing's going to stop that (which is not a bad thing if it's kept in its place). But again, keep in mind: the first principles, and the sole purpose of education; 2) Students have other outlets, beside school, for socialization: Family (the primary, God-ordained outlet for developing social skills. Did Laura Wilder, growing up on the prairie, lack social graces?), church, athletic leagues, scouts, etc. Again, what is the purpose of school? 3) The Moral aspect: Since children will socialize no matter where they are, is it not better for their socialization to take place in a setting where the students' character is taken into serious consideration while the socialization is going on? As Paul said on I Corinthians 15:33, "Evil company corrupts good character."

### The conclusion of the matter:

Christian education is necessary for the promotion of a biblical worldview. The educational framework, which is derived from even a cursory reading of the Scriptures, does not allow for neutrality when it comes to the Creator and His claims on our understanding. (Eph. 6:4; Deut. 6:4-7).

Classical education, built upon the medieval, time-honored methodology of the *Trivium*, implies three vital and inseparable facets: Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric. We cannot say, on the one hand, that we want our children to have a classical education, if we intend to deny them the full force of what that means. The *Trivium* without Rhetoric is like a morning without coffee. Unthinkable!