

Multum Non Multa

by Andrew Campbell

It is all well and good to talk about traditional classical education, but how do we put it into practice today? Don't we have far more history to learn other than classical history, not to mention science, modern languages, and common school subjects like health and driver's ed.? After all, we're not preparing our children to be Greek philosophers, Roman orators, or (most of us) British statesmen. We have practical matters to consider: government requirements, standardized tests, college admissions.

Yes, all that is true, at least to a certain extent. But we can still derive some important principles from the history of classical education. One of these principles was articulated by Pliny the Younger; that principle is *multum non multa*: not many things (*multa*), but much (*multum*). Formal education should not merely introduce us to many things—the “*multa*,” which can, by necessity, lead only to superficial knowledge—but should encourage us to drink deeply at the springs of our culture. Much, not many.

How does this play out in the classical curriculum? First, the number of subjects is limited to a few key disciplines. We are accustomed to schools expanding their offerings to include vocational and technical subjects such as home economics, wood shop, and computer keyboarding. In the wry words of Jacques Barzun, we expect our schools to turn out “ideal citizens, super tolerant neighbors, agents of world peace, and happy family folk, at once sexually adept and flawless drivers of cars.” The classical curriculum, on the other hand, insists on a limited number of demanding subjects taught in depth. Moreover, formal study of certain subjects—especially science and modern languages—is reserved for high school. As we'll see, this is actually an efficient use of the student's time and effort.

Second, whenever possible, subjects are taught in relation to one another and in the context of broader intellectual concerns. For example, as the student gains proficiency in Latin translation, some historical, literary, and theological readings may be undertaken in the original language. The student doesn't just read a chapter about Julius Caesar or Cicero in a history textbook; she reads Caesar's and Cicero's own writings in Latin. The study of selections from Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* is at once a lesson in Latin, logic, history, and theology. Further, one of the key “intelligences” is lateral thinking, the ability to make connections between seemingly disparate fields and ideas, and the classical curriculum encourages this skill. In all subjects, students should be led to ask big questions: What is Man? What is the good life? How, then, should we live?

Third, the core readings in English and history (Classical, Christian, and Modern Studies) consist of a very few representative masterpieces that the student reads slowly and studies in depth. Does such a pared-down program sufficiently prepare students for college work, let alone life?

The verdict of history is yes. The great Renaissance educator Vittorio da Feltre assigned only four authors to his young students: Virgil, Homer, Cicero, and Demosthenes. (These were, of course, read in the original Latin and Greek.) The traditional classical model emphasizes the slow, careful reading of a small corpus of great literature—especially the epic poets.

Contrast this with the typical approach of contemporary American schools. One cannot help but observe the trend in modern schools to substitute light “escape” reading for the more difficult classics. The practice is defended in the name of getting students to read. The assumption is that because students learn to read by reading, schools must provide books that students will want to read, books that will not overtax their patience, their limited vocabulary, or even their more limited education. A corollary to this assumption, as we have seen, is that students cannot enjoy reading serious classics with their demanding styles and remote contents. Clearly, the classical academy rejects this thesis. Not only does it refute the notion that classics are inaccessible or unenjoyable to young readers, but it reminds us that the purpose of learning is discovery, not escape. Substituting the literature of escape for the classics is not education, but an attack on learning; it is not intellectual, but anti-intellectual. It represents a capitulation to the adolescent appetites of our students and our race.

In his book, *Climbing Parnassus: A New Apologia for Greek and Latin*, Tracy Lee Simmons minces no words on this subject:

“Most public schools in America now strive to be cut rate educational malls for the intellectually lame—whether or not students first darken the school doors that way, so most of them leave—while even some private schools pose as little more than colorful felt boards for the earnestly shallow, commonly confusing pious or patriotic piffle with real education.”

Unfortunately, this trend is noticeable even among homeschoolers. While truly “good books” are an excellent and necessary preparation for the Great Books, in most cases they may most profitably be read independently or within the family circle, not as part of formal schooling. Later, students are rushed through the whole Western canon in a few years of Great Books, with reading lists based on those of university programs. For example, the formal reading list for the seventh grade presented in one popular guide includes a dizzying twenty-one books, ranging from Don Quixote (an abridged version is permitted) to Pilgrim’s Progress to the Grimms’ Fairy Tales to Pride and Prejudice. And this is only for English! Another publisher’s recommendations for the same year include eighteen titles, taking the student through Genesis in a week and the whole of the Iliad in five. At the same time, the students are also reading a work of theology, a study on ancient cities, the Epic of Gilgamesh, and a challenging adult novel by C. S. Lewis.

By contrast, Simmons reminds us that “schools of the best kind have always aimed high while keeping feet to the ground. They didn’t try to do too much; they tried to do the most important things.”

The core readings suggested in *The Latin-Centered Curriculum* focus on those “important things”—the few truly enduring and representative literary monuments of the past 2,500 years. Ample time is given for students to read, reread, and “live into” their schoolbooks. As will be seen in the following discussion, the ancients possessed an effective method for approaching their great classics—which were no easier for the schoolboys of A.D. 100 than they are for our daughters and sons. The difference is that the grammarians and rhetors were highly selective in the texts they placed before their students. These works were models both of style and of their culture’s aesthetic and moral norms. We would do well to take seriously their approach.

Does this mean that students will go through thirteen years of schooling never cracking an English novel? Are we denying our children the pleasure of floating down the river with Rat and Mole, bursting with excitement when Almanzo wins first prize for his milk fed pumpkin, or pushing past a row of old coats to step into the Narnian winter? Of course not. What it does mean is that we apply the principle of *multum non multa* in selecting schoolbooks. The streamlined classical curriculum leaves plenty of time for other pursuits, including reading for pleasure and discovery. It is in these hours that students can sail the seas to Treasure Island, sit in the drawing rooms of Austen and Trollope, thrill to the daring escapades of the Scarlet Pimpernel, march with the Roman legions in *Eagle of the Ninth*, circle the globe with Phileas Fogg, or experience the angst of modern dystopias in *1984* and *Brave New World*.

In addition to studying the core readings in depth, the student is expected to read independently every day, and families are strongly encouraged to read aloud for at least one hour three times a week. Daily is better. If time does not permit parents and children to read together regularly, high quality audio books and dramatizations may prove helpful. Independent and family reading is linked to schoolwork and enriches it, but should not be considered part of the formal school day. Rather, this time introduces the student to a wide range of English literature and foreign works in translation, establishes the habit of daily reading, and draws families together.

The advantages of the *multum non multa* approach are many. Eliminating busywork—workbooks, redundant curricula, excessive “escape” reading—from the school day cuts the student’s work time tremendously. Rolling subjects together—Latin and logic, Greek and geometry, history and literature—further reduces wasted time and mental energy. The time savings may be applied to the student’s own interests and to enrichment subjects such as sports, dance, or cooking. Parents will find that their preparation time is much reduced as they eliminate redundant subjects and learn alongside their children. Parents may also enjoy considerable savings on formal curricula, perhaps freeing funds for music lessons, building a quality home library, or other family needs.

The principle of *multum non multa*, which could be translated, “less is more,” has been subordinated in recent years to what may be termed *multum optimum in se* – “more is necessarily better.” The educational well-being of our children may depend on which approach we, as parents and educators, choose.

Originally published in *The Classical Teacher* Spring 2013 edition.