

TOWARD A PROGRESSIVE CLASSICAL EDUCATION

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This is a preliminary sketch of my vision for progressive classical education. At present, these notes are fragmentary and scattered, but I hope they can help start a conversation among secular homeschoolers who don't want to be defined or limited by the political and religious agenda of the Christian classical education movement.

“SIC” AS A FRAMEWORK FOR PROGRESSIVE CLASSICAL EDUCATION

S Is for SECULAR

Progressive classical education does not rest on a religious worldview; it does not assume or promote any particular faith. By placing religious beliefs, practices, institutions, and stories in their historical and social context, it encourages free thought in pursuit of truth without assuming, *a priori*, the form that truth will take.

Progressive classical educators understand that scientific knowledge changes over time in response to new data. At the same time, they understand that it is very unlikely that certain foundational concepts, such as evolution, will be overturned, and therefore they do not consider such things controversial or open to debate—especially not on the basis of religious doctrine or uninformed opinion.

I Is for INCLUSIVE

Progressive classical education respects the fundamental dignity and rights of all human persons without exception. It aims to expand students' intellectual, social, and personal horizons through multicultural and transhistorical awareness and understanding.

To that end, progressive classical education teaches literature, history, and geography from a global perspective rather than approaching these subjects through the lens of national ideology or a focus on “Western civilization.” In addition, progressive classical education is explicitly and unapologetically anti-racist and anti-colonialist and therefore cannot rely on the uncritical use of textbooks or literary works that represent the experience of wealthy white Christian men as normative. Curriculum should highlight the experiences of marginalized and oppressed groups—including women, sexual and gender minorities, indigenous peoples, people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, and workers—and give priority to narratives in which these people speak for themselves.

C Is for CLASSICAL

Progressive classical education places the classical language arts—the Trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric—at the center of the curriculum. It teaches students to use the classical language arts to engage fully and actively with their contemporary social and political realities from a global and inclusive perspective. In addition, students use the classical “tools of learning” to critique the past—including previous iterations of the classical tradition— as well as current cultural movements.

Progressive classical educators look to the past for potential sources of wisdom but do not succumb to the appeal to tradition (*argumentum ad antiquitatem*), a logical fallacy that asserts that what is old must necessarily be true. They are willing and able to critique and reject notions that offend against contemporary mores or their own ethics. They are not taken in by glittering generalities or unsubstantiated claims about the benefits of classical education itself but look for evidence that a given method is effective and appropriate for their students.

WHY SIC:

- to avoid the cultural myopia and chauvinism that can be an unintended result of the traditional classical curriculum
- to expose students to “the best which has been thought and said,” not just in Europe and North America but throughout the world
- to make students aware of the common concerns of humanity across time and space
- to highlight the exchange of ideas between cultures (crosscultural intellectual history)
- to shift the student’s perspective by decentering the West and by showing that the major world cultures have all developed their own distinctive literary and philosophical classics and canons

SCOPE AND PURPOSE OF PROGRESSIVE CLASSICAL EDUCATION

A carefully structured progressive classical education encompasses the humanities, the STEM subjects, and the arts, as well as practical life skills and the student’s own interests and talents. It prepares students for the “3 C’s” of adulthood—civic life, career, and for many, college—by providing broad academic knowledge, multicultural awareness and understanding, excellent communication skills, and good habits of work and learning. More importantly, however, it provides students with the intellectual tools to create a more just society.

METHODS

Classical education in the 21st century must embrace evidence-based teaching methods. We know that some traditional methods—direct instruction, memorization, and explicit and systematic phonics training, to name a few—are supported by research as highly effective. Other traditional pedagogies, like the grammar-translation method of teaching classical languages, have proved less successful. We should not be afraid to adopt whatever methods work for our students without being beholden to educational ideology, whether traditional or

progressive.

This blog has helpful information on teaching methods:

<https://progclassicaleducation.blogspot.com/>

This paper discusses advances in Latin pedagogy:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Y1TgmsycxZfFYQsX5inUfrna3eUFhp83-WYUMwSWr8/e/dit>

This blog discusses inclusive teaching in classics:

<https://inclusivelatinclassroomblog.wordpress.com/>

GOALS AND CONCERNS

- Balancing traditional content with progressive values
- Encouraging intellectual honesty
- Avoiding whitewashing and romanticizing the past
- Using the tools of the Trivium to critique the classical tradition itself
- Applying the skills of the Trivium to contemporary issues
- Dismantling structures that perpetuate harmful ideologies

A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION: *HUMANITAS*

Education should be humanizing, humane, humanistic, humanitarian.

- Humanizing: education should put us more in touch with our common humanity
- Humane: non-coercive, compassionate, attending to the whole person (and children are born persons)
- Humanistic: emphasizing the human as the source of meaning and therefore as the proper focus of study
- Humanitarian: encouraging an attitude of service toward others; using our gifts for the common good and not just personal gain or comfort

#stayhuman

From my interview with Eloise Rickman for her “Beautiful Childhood” course

(<https://fridabemighty.com/>):

Eloise: Following on from this, many parents want to raise their children to be anti-racist, aware of social justice and diverse world views, and there have been criticisms levelled at some traditional classical books and curricula for not representing enough outside of western history. What might a modern classical education look like (if that's not a contradiction in terms)?

AJ: To date, the classical education revival has focused almost exclusively on Western civilization. Perhaps that's understandable, since classical education as we know it developed in Europe, but such a narrow focus does a disservice to students living in today's global society. It's clearly unacceptable to rely on outdated textbooks that promote Eurocentric or white supremacist views. Classical education strives to hand on, in the words of Matthew Arnold, "the best that has been thought and said." Surely we cannot put racism, colonialism, sexism, or other pernicious ideologies in that category.

So I firmly believe that classical education has to change with the times. The whole point of education, after all, is to prepare our children for the world they live in, not the world as it was 2500 years ago. A truly meaningful classical curriculum, therefore, must include different cultures, marginalized communities, and contemporary issues. The skills that the classical curriculum emphasizes—orderly thought, the precise use of language, a willingness to question *everything*—can and should be applied to our circumstances in the here and now.