



Classical Education and the Humanities Classroom

Literature, rhetoric, and senior thesis have some of the strongest classical connections of any courses at PCA. Between discussing, writing, speaking, analyzing, and synthesizing, these courses cover most of the primary objectives of classical education. But, while these skills are taught, employed, and beneficial for students, they are not the key skills and goals of a classical education. What makes these skills so important are their aid for instructing in the overarching goals of a classical education—critical thinking, virtue, and eloquence.

Critical thinking is a concept we throw around a lot and hear in a variety of settings. At PCA, we even have critical thinking standards posted in most of our Upper School classrooms. These standards are a great tool for guiding students towards strong critical thinking. In the end, critical thinking is the ability to look at something from all sides. Humanities classes, like literature and rhetoric, help build critical thinking by first teaching analysis. In a typical literature class, we discuss what students have read previously. We employ the book as a guide, constantly going back to it for support. This helps develop analytical tools that enable deep thinking. But, we discuss the book because we do not want students to stop with what they see in the text, we want them to be able to interact with other ideas, testing them for accuracy, fairness, and a host of other important features, but most importantly, truth. Rhetoric likewise teaches critical thinking. Most of the time students prepare speeches ahead of time, after learning the time-honored skills on how to do so. These skills help students to anticipate the arguments of others and react to them with fairness and logic—important parts of critical thinking. We could continue with an analysis of our writing instruction, which also builds these same skills. The discussion, speeches, and writing within literature and rhetoric have much to do with the greater skill of critical thinking.

Virtue is another important goal of classical education, one tied inextricably to our faith as well. The ancients saw virtue as something which could be gained only by forming the habit. We hope to form that habit in our students via their practice of virtue in all areas of life. In a Harkness discussion, students practice virtue in how they treat and respond to each other. When writing, students pour a part of themselves onto paper, paper which we then peer edit. It is a grave responsibility that our students have when peer editing to do so with both diligence and respect. But most of all, we hope that we as faculty model for our students what virtue is, putting into practice what we teach and expect in our classes.

Classical education seeks to teach eloquence. Most people think initially of eloquence in speaking and then in writing. Both of these are major aspects of our literature and rhetoric classes. In literature we discuss, giving the opportunity for students to practice rhetorical brilliance. In literature we write, guiding the students towards stylistically eloquent prose that moves and persuades. In rhetoric, we deliver speeches, over and over again. But eloquence does not only connect to our speaking and writing, it is also tied back to virtue. Every action our students take, every word they speak, every thought they take captive has the opportunity to

speak volumes. We desire them to speak volumes eloquently through the love of Christ. We pray that our students learn eloquence in each word, thought, and deed—all to the glory of God.

Finally, there is another class we teach, senior thesis. Senior thesis is a capstone course. Being a capstone course, it rolls all of the skills acquired into one project that illustrates everything our students learn. In senior thesis our students research and write on a controversial topic via a Christian perspective. At the end of the year, the students present their theses to an audience and then are questioned by a small panel to probe their understanding. This is our students' opportunity to shine, to put into practice all they have learned and done. It is also a chance to delve deeply into a topic of interest to them, revealing their ability to be life-long learners seeking God's truth.

Classical education is not only a way of doing things differently in the classroom. When you walk into a humanities classroom, you will witness the discussions, the speeches, the writing, but you will also witness something happening on a subtler level, the development of critical thinking, the practice of virtue, and the building of eloquence. The end goal, what we seek, is for our students to have the tools necessary to be agents of redemption in God's world.