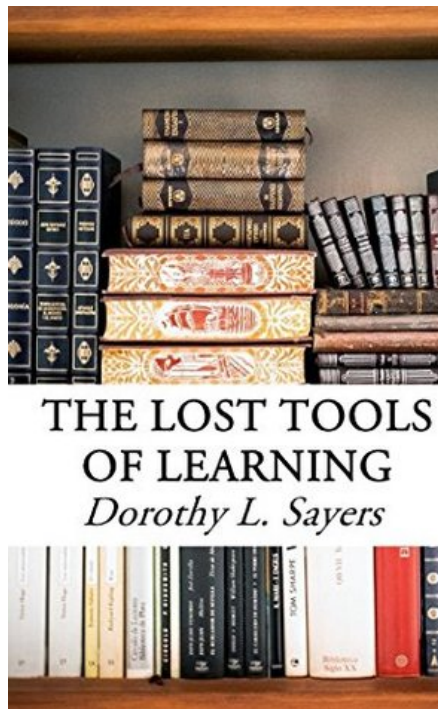




The Lost Tools of Learning: Symposium on Education

Dorothy L. Sayers

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In 1947, Dorothy Sayers first delivered this speech at Oxford University. It has since been republished countless times due to its sheer eloquence and unanswered articulation of the 3 "lost tools" in classical education: grammar, logic and rhetoric.

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From Reader Review The Lost Tools of Learning: Symposium on Education for online ebook

Joshua says

Excellent case for the Trivium and a call to recover this lost discipline.

Lee Reed says

There are a lot of people who are huge fans of this essay (it is really more of an essay than a book) but in it Sayers is really just rehashing ideas presented many years before by John Henry Newman. Newman was a leader in the Oxford movement in England and wrote extensively on education. Sayers work is her own interpretation of that work and simply no where near as good. Both works call for a return to the foundations of a classic education, though even this Sayers re-interprets a bit. There is some good to be found in Sayers work, but you would be better served to read Newman's "The Idea of a University..." which is available from Amazon for free.

Mistie says

Very similar to my own views on education.

Steve Greenleaf says

In a 23 page essay written in 1947, Dorothy Sayers argues for the relevance and use of the Trivium, the classical and medieval foundation of education based on Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric, taught in the order just listed. Is Sayers simply an old-fashioned fuddy-duddy? (Or as she suggests she'll be branded, a "reactionary, romantic, mediaevalist, laudatory temporis acti (praiser of times past)" (The Lost Tools of Learning (Kindle Location 25) Fig. Kindle Edition. I think not. Her complaint is one that many can sympathize with: "although we often succeed in teaching our pupils "subjects," we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think: they learn everything, except the art of learning." Id. 77-78. As Sayers points out, Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric are not "subjects" in the usual school sense, but the means of learning subjects. She summarizes the function of each in this educational scheme:

The whole of the Trivium was, in fact, intended to teach the pupil the proper use of the tools of learning, before he began to apply them to "subjects" at all. First, he learned a language; not just how to order a meal in a foreign language, but the structure of a language, and hence of language itself—what it was, how it was put together, and how it worked. Secondly, he learned how to use language; how to define his terms and make accurate statements; how to construct an argument and Logic and Disputation. Thirdly, he learned to express himself in language—how to say what he had to say elegantly and persuasively.

Id. (92-97)

Most people know Sayers as the author of the Lord Peter Wimsey detective novels, a series of classics in the

English detective genre. But besides this successful career, and working as a single woman in advertising, she also was a major translator and commentator of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and a Christian apologist of the first order (*The Mind of the Maker*, for instance). Thus, when it comes to valuing this medieval tradition, she knows whereof she speaks.

Following the tradition, she argues that at some age (pre-puberty), students should be introduced to Grammar by way of learning an inflected language. She suggests Latin (no surprise). She argues that younger (late elementary) children will benefit from the repetition and mechanics of learning a grammar. It's not the higher order thinking of logic or rhetoric, but it's a fundamental. I must note that in my own experience, I never liked or learned any grammar to speak of until I was forced to do so in taking Spanish beginning in high school. (This doesn't mean that English teachers didn't teach grammar. My failure reveals that I suffered the double-whammy of not-so-smart and stubborn.) In her scheme—or rather the tradition that she endorses—she seems to adhere to an intuitive Piaget-like sequence. She writes:

I recognize three states of development. These, in a rough-and-ready fashion, I will call the Poll-Parrot, the Pert, and the Poetic—the latter coinciding, approximately, with the onset of puberty. The Poll-Parrot stage is the one in which learning by heart is easy and, on the whole, pleasurable; whereas reasoning is difficult and, on the whole, little relished. At this age, one readily memorizes the shapes and appearances of things; one likes to recite the number-plates of cars; one rejoices in the chanting of rhymes and the rumble and thunder of unintelligible polysyllables; one enjoys the mere accumulation of things. The Pert age, which follows upon this (and, naturally, overlaps it to some extent), is characterized by contradicting, answering back, liking to “catch out” (especially one's elders); and by the propounding of conundrums. Its nuisance-value is extremely high. It usually sets in about the Fourth Form.

Id. 158-164

She concludes with that most challenging age bracket:

The Poetic age is popularly known as the “difficult” age. It is self-centered; it yearns to express itself; it rather specializes in being misunderstood; it is restless and tries to achieve independence; and, with good luck and good guidance, it should show the beginnings of creativeness; a reaching out towards a synthesis of what it already knows, and a deliberate eagerness to know and do some one thing in preference to all others.

Id. 164-167

Thus, this first stage isn't so unlike contemporary schooling in that students learn to read, write, speak, calculate, and observe (science). But Sayers identifies this crucial difference: “The difference be felt rather in the attitude of the teachers, who must look upon all these activities less as “subjects” in themselves than as a gathering-together of material for use in the next part of the Trivium.” Id. 206-208.

As to the next stage of learning, Sayers writes:

It is difficult to say at what age, precisely, we should pass from the first to the second part of the Trivium. Generally speaking, the answer is: so soon as the pupil shows himself disposed to pertness and interminable argument. For as, in the first part, the master faculties are Observation and Memory, so, in the second, the master faculty is the Discursive Reason. In the first, the exercise to which the rest of the material was, as it were, keyed, was the Latin grammar; in the second, the key-exercise will be Formal Logic.

Id. 221-224

The final stage, beginning around age 14, Sayers suggests, is Rhetoric, which ties knowledge together. This contrasts with Dialectic (logic), which parses knowledge into discreet bits in order to best test it. Here we

must appreciate that Rhetoric means the study of persuasion, not fancy speech or (necessarily) deceptive speech. The tradition follows Aristotle and not Plato on the utility and importance of Rhetoric, something we should do as well. Sayers suggests that the poetic impulse, the desire to persuade (and I'd add, seduce) comes to the fore at this stage. Having received the mechanics of language through Grammar and the crap-detector (my term, not hers) of Dialectic, the student can put it all together in persuasive prose and poetry.

So why follow this prescription? Sayers, remember, worked for an ad agency and then she published this essay just following the Second World War. She writes:

[W]e let our young men and women go out unarmed, in a day when armor was never so necessary. By teaching them all to read, we have left them at the mercy of the printed word. By the invention of the film and the radio, we have made certain that no aversion to reading shall secure them from the incessant battery of words, words, words. They do not know what the words mean; they do not know how to ward them off or blunt their edge or fling them back; they are a prey to words in their emotions instead of being the masters of them in their intellects.

Id. 132-136

Is this not true today—and more so?

What is the end of education? Let Sayers have the last word:

[T]he sole true end of education is simply this: to teach men [sic] how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain.

Id. 328-329

So is this a Quixotic quest? Probably, but Sayers makes a strong argument. People argue about school curriculums because they shape the future. The curriculum must change as the culture changes, but perhaps some aspects shouldn't be altered nearly so much. Sayers adds a lot of thought to the issue. In a future essay, I'll address an even more comprehensive (but I think largely consistent) curriculum offered by William Irwin Thompson that is used in at least one K-12 school today. The search continues.

Mark says

Sayers argues that we have lost the proper, and traditional, foundation for learning and we suffer for it. We will continue to suffer.

The Trivium is grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. Grammar is learning how to use a language at the basic level. Dialectic is understanding an argument enough to agree or dispute it. And Rhetoric is constructing and delivering persuasive communication.

The Trivium is the medieval curriculum up to age 16. It prepares a person for learning at the university level and it prepares the non-scholar for life. I agree with Sayer's conclusions about the benefits of a curriculum based on the Trivium and I sympathize with her criticisms of the present-day, far-from-classical educational approach. I do not like sharp, and somewhat nasty, tone that she employs to make her point.

It is, I understand, an important apologetic for home-schoolers, and I'm glad that she wrote it.

Tami says

Here's the essay/book that reanimated the classical Christian school movement.

Joshua says

The main point of Sayers' essay, that learning to learn is more important than learning per se, is a good one (and a principle I was, more or less, brought up on). Somehow, it's more human - slower, more careful - and more eternal-facing (why cram before the exam? why cram before death?). It's particularly relevant today, when ignorance is regarded as a root cause for much (most?) misery in the world (cramming doesn't help. Just look at the students after cramming. Zombie movies could get inspiration). Regarding the classical approach she advocates - I haven't thought enough about it to say anything worthwhile right now, but it certainly seems to have more going for it than whatever educators now think they are doing. Sayers writes with a clarity which (besides being a pleasure to read) indicates a lot of thinking happened before the essay... always a Good Thing. One last thing I particularly liked was the emphasis on the connectedness of knowledge, perhaps because I work in science - something that is, if we ask the gurus, singularly remarkable for its unified and confident grasp of Truth - and find that it is not so unified as all that. For example, upon being limited by specialization, we talk about 'inter-disciplinary science' and consequently miss the whole point. So, looking back on a rather long review for a rather short essay, I guess it exemplifies Sayers' tendency to intellectual provocativeness.

Jamila says

Excellent synopsis of classical education

Although I had to use my dictionary many times during the reading of this piece, perhaps evidence of my missing tools, I found the tenets well presented and clearly described. Valuable insights for anyone who values the training of mighty thinkers!

Ahmad Abdul Rahim says

Rangka-kerja yang dicadangkan Dorothy Sayers adalah masih di peringkat cadangan namun pesan-pesannya tentang kepentingan sistem pendidikan tradisional Latin Christendom (trivium dan quadrivium) sudahpun cukup menyedarkan. Manusia moden suka menganggap diri mereka sebagai generasi paling progresif, saintifik dan ergo, logik. Tetapi tidak ramai daripada mereka (yakni kita) boleh mengaku bahawa mereka pernah menjalani sebarang pengajian atau latihan -walau betapa asasi pun- dalam bidang mantik.

Kiel says

A speech given at Oxford University in 1947 in book form, The Lost Tools of Learning is a call to return to proper education. Though over 70 years old it rings true with hardly any loss of impact over time, as so much profound wisdom of past ages often does. I'll just share my favorite quotes.

"...do you sometimes have an uneasy suspicion that the product of modern educational methods is less good than he or she might be at disentangling fact from opinion and the proven from the plausible?"

"...have you ever pondered upon the extremely high incidence of irrelevant matter which crops up at committee meetings, and upon the very great rarity of persons capable of acting as chairmen of committees?"

"...although we often succeed in teaching our pupils "subjects," we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think: they learn everything, except the art of learning."

"For we let our young men and women go out unarmed, in a day when armor was never so necessary. By teaching them all to read, we have left them at the mercy of the printed word. By the invention of the film and the radio, we have made certain that no aversion to reading shall secure them from the incessant battery of words, words, words. They do not know what the words mean; they do not know how to ward them off or blunt their edge or fling them back; they are a prey to words in their emotions instead of being the masters of them in their intellects."

"We dole out lip-service to the importance of education—lip-service and, just occasionally, a little grant of money; we postpone the school-leaving age, and plan to build bigger and better schools; the teachers slave conscientiously in and out of school hours; and yet, as I believe, all this devoted effort is largely frustrated, because we have lost the tools of learning, and in their absence can only make a botched and piecemeal job of it."

"This reminds me of the grammar of Theology. I shall add it to the curriculum, because theology is the mistress-science without which the whole educational structure will necessarily lack its final synthesis."

22 pages, 1 hour to listen. I wish everyone would listen.

Skylar Burris says

Since this paper is known to have had great influence on the emergence of the classical schooling movement, I could not help but include it in my article Learning How to Think: A Reading List for Parents Considering Classical Education.". I first read it about the time I decided to send my child to a classical Christian school. Sayers argues "that if we are to produce a society of educated people, fitted to preserve their intellectual freedom amid the complex pressures of our modern society, we must turn back the wheel of progress...to the point at which education began to lose sight of its true object, towards the end of the Middle Ages."

"WHAT?" you might inquire. "You want to send your daughter back to the Dark Ages?"

Not exactly. Somehow I don't think my daughter would have enjoyed a very good education (or a very good life for that matter) during the Middle Ages. Just a hunch. (Sayers would ask you to define your terms. What do you mean by "send back"?)

However, the classical methods of education do appeal to me. I, with Sayers, am not "comfortable" with the "artificial prolongation of intellectual childhood and adolescence into the years of physical maturity which is so marked in our own day."

"Have you ever," Sayers asks, "been fretted by the extraordinary inability of the average debater to speak to the question, or to meet and refute the arguments of speakers on the other side?" Yes, yes I have. Yes.

“Have you ever been faintly troubled by the amount of slipshod syntax going about?” More than faintly.

“Is it not the great defect of our education today...that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils ‘subjects,’ we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think”? Well, I never could figure out how to answer the “is it not” construction appropriately. Probably because I didn’t have a classical education ;) .

So what’s the classical system? The Trivium. Hmmm...Sounds a wee bit pretentious to me. But then, my daughter won’t start learning Latin until fourth grade so I don’t have to worry about that for the moment, and I’ll just speak English. The Trivium is a three part educational process, progressing from Grammar (employing Observation and Memory) to Dialectic (employing Formal Logic and Discursive Reason) to Rhetoric, in that order, because that order corresponds very well with the three stages of natural child development: “Poll-Parrot, the Pert, and the Poetic.”

“Huh?” you might ask. (I did.) The first stage (poll-parrot) is when it is “easy and, on the whole, pleasurable” to learn by heart, but reasoning is more difficult. In modern education, there seems to be some putting of the cart before the horse. We ask children to build towers before giving them more than a smattering of blocks. We don’t give them a city full of blocks because we are told that “rote” learning is terribly boring and mind-numbing and uncreative and should be avoided in schools. Yet we forget how much very young children enjoy reciting nursery rhymes by heart, how they love to show off whatever they happen to have accumulated in their little, sponge-like brains. We forget how much easier it is for them to memorize as children than it is for us to do so as adults, and we let this precious stage of absorption slip by before the sponge is even one-tenth full.

In the poll-parrot stage, “it is as well that anything and everything which can be usefully committed to memory should be memorized at this period, whether it is immediately intelligible or not.” The point is to gather together material for use in the next state. That next stage, the pert, is “characterized by contradicting, answering back...and by the propounding of conundrums. Its nuisance-value is extremely high.” (Sound familiar, teachers and parents?)

The third stage (poetic) is a “self-centered” time when the child yearns to express herself. It is an age that “rather specializes in being misunderstood; it is restless and tries to achieve independence.”

Now, I’m not entirely convinced of the value of making young children learn Latin. Yes, I understand English has many Latin roots. But it has many roots in other languages as well. Yes, I understand learning Latin will help children to learn grammar. But so will learning any foreign language. I suppose I am one of those people with what Sayer calls “a pedantic preference for a living language.” Also, I’m not sure about the precision of the Trivium’s correlation with development, though I think it a generally better method of education than the modern tendency to expect abstract thought even before memorization. There may be too much overlap in the poll-parrot stage and pert stage to be able to distinguish them. When should you move to the second stage of the Trivium? “Generally speaking,” answers Sayer “so soon as the pupil shows himself disposed to pertness and interminable argument.” Well, my daughter’s been so disposed since at least the age of three, but she still has a lot of poll-parrot opportunity left in her.

Keesa says

This tiny book is a clarion call to return to a time when children were taught to think and learn for themselves. I recognized much of my own homeschool education in its pages, although there were other parts that were not part of my curriculum that I would have loved to have (how delightful to be *taught* Latin as a small child, and how much easier than trying to *teach* oneself Latin as a teenager!) I desperately wish more schools taught like this...considering the current cultural and political situation, the ability to think and reason for oneself is tragically necessary.

I will definitely be re-reading this book, probably several times, in the future.

Mary says

If I hadn't known it was written in 1947, I could have easily assumed this lecture was given today. Many of the problems in education Dorothy Sayers was already seeing in her day have continued and I daresay gotten worse. So few students are being taught how to learn. Debates over technology in the classroom entirely miss the point. This confirms my desire for my children to have a classical education.

Anthony says

This book was a great defense of how we should educate our children from infancy to their late teens. Dorothy Sayers herself was privileged to have a father who was the chaplain for Christ Church at the University of Oxford. Sayers was born in the nineteenth century in a time when women were still not allowed to receive college degrees from Oxford. Despite that, I love how her father had a vision for his daughter to be educated. It obviously affected her. She passionately argued for a return to how humans use to be educated for centuries. On page three she writes, 'If we are to produce a society of educated people, fitted to preserve their intellectual freedom amid the complex pressures of our modern society, we must turn back the wheel of progress some four or five hundred years, to the point at which education began to lose sight of its true object, towards the end of the Middle Ages.' The Trivium, taught throughout ten to twelve years, was broken into three parts: Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric. The book goes into detail about the content of these subjects and even recommends ways to teach these subjects age appropriately so students get it. Sayers believes that the standards have become too low for students (and to think this was written in 1948)! I have truly become convinced that what she writes is true. Now being a father and wishing I personally had a classical education growing up, I will be raising my son in this approach. Read this book!

Scott Guillory says

Excellent
