

Liberal Arts Education



The Classical Academy

Liber. Latin for “free.” But what does it mean to be free? Certainly this idea, being free, conjures up all manner of thoughts in our brains. Who is free? What does freedom really consist of? Is freedom an illusion? Is anyone free? Are we all free? In today’s America, we have a diminished view of freedom as freedom *from* all constraints, and thus as *license* to do as we wish. However, when we look at Latin, it has a different word for “freedom from” or “license,” *licentia*, as opposed to the idea of freedom, or *libertas*. The difference is key, for true freedom, *libertas*, is not freedom *from* but freedom *to*, or at least is not freedom from what we think of as limiting us today. True, classical, freedom serves to free us from our own misunderstandings and misapprehensions so we can choose the good, not to free us to do whatever we want. This positive freedom (freedom to) is the basis of a truly free society and is a necessary part of an exemplary citizen; and so, an education in the “arts of freedom” (Latin: *artes liberales*) lays the groundwork for such citizenship.

The idea of a Liberal Arts education is an ancient and well-traveled one, stretching back at least to Classical Athens, with some refinement in Rome, further clarification in the Middle Ages, and is still with us today. Rather than examining how the Liberal Arts have been taught at various times or what they consisted of (for instance, the Medieval concepts of trivium and quadrivium), I would like to focus on why a Liberal Arts education is important and valuable, especially in developing exemplary citizens. The Roman philosopher Seneca had much to say about the topic, but his ideas are best summarized here in his 88th *Moral Epistle*: “Only one study is truly liberal: that which gives a person his liberty. It is the study of wisdom, and that is lofty, brave and great-souled.” Once again, we notice the focus on Liberal Arts for the purpose of acquiring liberty or freedom; wisdom, in this conception, frees us from our ignorance in order to pursue truth, beauty, and goodness, for this is where our focus truly belongs. Wisdom, along with truth, beauty, and goodness, however, are such broad ideals, with such wide-ranging applications, that they do not fit neatly into one specific area. This is where we can see the value of a Liberal Arts education, one that serves to free us to pursue the good.

For a Liberal Arts education does not prepare one for a specific job or career; this is the purpose of vocational or technical training. Ideally, it does not even prepare one for anything specific other than the pursuit of truth, beauty, and goodness, through freeing one to pursue these in a variety of ways. Thus, from John Henry Newman’s *Idea of a University* we can agree that: “This process of training, by which the intellect, instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific

trade or profession, or study or science, is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its own highest culture, is called Liberal Education..." We should notice that the reason for studying the Liberal Arts is the Liberal Arts themselves, for when we succumb to the temptation to instrumentalize our teaching or learning and give it some immediate, practical purpose, we have lost the larger view of *liber* as free; we must be truly free to pursue the highest truths, not have our learning sacrificed to the immediate.

What does this look like for our broader curriculum and in our day to day lives and classes, then? How to carry out a Liberal Arts education well? I propose several keys/reminders. First, we study Liberal Arts *for their own sake*. I stress this point because modern society constantly forces upon us the perceived need to give some practical, utilitarian explanation for why we teach or learn anything. The terms are nearly ubiquitous: career ready, 21st Century preparedness, practical skills, and the like. This is not to say that a Liberal Arts education does not provide such things; however, none of them can be the purpose for such an education, rather when we study the Liberal Arts we do so because of the intrinsic value of what they are.

Second, the Liberal Arts introduce us to foundational thought and ideas. Through reading and study of classic (not only Classical!) works of philosophy, history, music, science, mathematics, or any other area, we have the ability to grapple with the best that has been said, written, or made. In our mission to build and to be exemplary citizens, exposure to influential prior thinkers is invaluable. As Matthew Rose writes, "Liberal education examines the greatest works of philosophy, history, art, and literature because they lend themselves to be studied in a special way--as enactments and depictions of the activity of human intelligence itself."

Third, they teach us how to think. Returning to Matthew Rose's quote about "the activity of human intelligence itself," through careful reflection upon such great works, we see the best of human culture in action, which helps to shape our own thinking and intellectual development. Should we agree with all anyone we study has said or done? Certainly not! But should we look to them as exemplars of *how* to approach the process? Indeed we should.

Fourth, they are *holistic* and interconnected. This aspect of a Liberal Arts education is the greatest challenge I see from the perspective of a high school teacher. Much like the temptation to commodify learning, the temptation to compartmentalize it is also ever present. However, when we undertake the ideal path of the Liberal Arts, we learn to make connections between and across disciplines. What historical influences inspired John Locke to write his *Second Treatise on Civil Government*? What was the intellectual

environment in Russia when Dostoevsky was writing *The Brothers Karamazov*? What impact might Euclid's *Elements* have had on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (see the article *Lincoln and Liberal Education* by Christopher B. Nelson)? An education in the Liberal Arts prepares one to seek the true, good, and beautiful wherever they may be found, not merely in one area of study, and as such opens up possibilities for deeper thought and reflection across the curriculum.

Fifth, the Liberal Arts help us cultivate curiosity. Did you find yourself wondering whether you knew the answers to the questions above? When we really learn to think through our various areas of study, we should strive to discover how one idea relates to another, or even better, how they all relate to one another. While this may come more naturally to some, I would hope that the more we learn, the more we want to learn; thus, the more connections we make, the more we want to try to make further connections. This approach to learning, while it might not give us the practical knowledge to perform a specific task, is actually as useful as it gets, for through it we develop a clear method of thinking and the ability to learn new things.

Finally, I would like to return to the idea of the freedom acquired through a Liberal Arts education. I began with the thought that this type of education should free one from ignorance and misunderstanding to allow the pursuit of the true, the good, and the beautiful. I would like to finish with the idea that it also has the practical side benefit of freeing one to pursue further any education, work, or personal interests without being limited by a specific path or skill set. Or, as Robert Harris puts it, "Thus while a liberal arts education may not teach you how to take out an appendix or sue your neighbor, it will teach you how to think, which is to say, it will teach you how to live. And this benefit alone makes such an education more practical and useful than any job-specific training ever could." We of course should not seek a Liberal Arts education for this purpose (I hope I have made that point clearly enough!), but what a side benefit to have!

Further Reading/Sources of Inspiration:

Robert Harris "On the Purpose of a Liberal Arts Education"

Christopher B. Nelson "Lincoln and Liberal Education"

John Henry Newman *The Idea of a University*

Matthew Rose "Liberal Education for Freedom"

Lucius Annaeus Seneca *Moral Epistle 88*