

Dr. Rollin Lasseter
On Liberal Arts Education

The old Trivium began a student at about age five learning the alphabet and its sounds and its use to write the words of Latin, the language of the schools, the common language of international life in Europe. Students learned Latin stories, Latin songs, Latin poetry, chiefly Virgil and Ovid, and memorized large portions of Latin literature and the Bible. They learned the psalms for use in the Office, the prayers of the Mass, and a conversational spoken language used by all educated men and women. At about age 11 or 12, they began the study of Logic, the shape and relevance of argument, and the fallacies of logic that throw an argument into nonsense, and the pleasure, as Dorothy Sayers points out, in her important address, "The Lost Tools of Learning," of tripping up their elders in an argument. They learned to listen, critique, and debate each other and to dispute fine points with their fellows and with the masters, and then about age 14 they studied the same literature they had read and memorized earlier, this time for its persuasive power and its sonority. They learned to make a persuasive argument of sound logic and impressive style. And then, when ready, they presented their mastery of the Rhetorical Art in a public oration on some set topic well known and often too familiar from over-use to allow for much novelty, but demanding much creativity and ingenuity to make the familiar interesting. The best of the successful at this public test went on to the Quadrivium.

Of course, they would not be just beginning to learn their numbers or their ciphering when they reached the Quadrivium. That study was a part of the Grammar years. They would be learning the application and meaning of numbers, the connection of arithmetic and simple geometry to greater questions and problems of the nature of the physical world. The movements of the stars and the techniques of measuring great distance and approximating spaces. And last, the meaning of the affect of those tunes and hymns they had memorized and been singing from the beginning of the Grammar years, the meaning of ratios and intervals. They learned Music Theory, music philosophy, the art of discovering harmony in the world around them. They were then expected to present that learning to the public in a discourse on meaning that would decide their worthiness to go on to the "higher subjects" of history, philosophy, and theology.

The Quadrivium, taken up after the Trivium, in the old schooling, was concerned with achieving numeracy, the skill of understanding number, both practically in ciphering, and philosophically in measuring and accounting for the ratios of being, relativity and relationship. The quadrivium takes the mind into the abstract and hypothetical realm that number names, away from the particular and the concrete, the imaged, and carries the soul toward the imageless and eternal Divine. Even in its simplest and non-philosophical form, The Quadrivium is no less important than the Trivium for our commercial times and the manipulation of statistics and computer-driven culture, not to mention the all-pervasive sound of the rock band....

The educational reformers, all Protestant, turned to the new experiment in Germany, that had started state schools under the Prussian Kings before the Napoleonic era. There, the old Liberal Arts had been "modernized," not dropped, not abandoned but "reformed." The Germans had

designed a more "scientific," a more "efficient" way to impart the Liberal Arts, a way that would take into account the new shape of European society, the needs and prominence of the new middle class, of commerce, and of bureaucratic government. Of course, the Prussians were not concerned with making a "free" citizenry, but they were concerned with making a prosperous citizenry, and so the system was designed to enable a businessman to do his accounts, a lawyer to master the civil codes, and a clerk to file his dossiers. As the growing new sciences demanded, the German system gave early prominence to numeracy and natural philosophy as equal weights in the grammar years with language study, which in the German schools became French and English studies, not native German yet. Students could be expected to learn a set body of material in a year, matriculate to the next level, repeat the process, and so be turned out on a fairly standardized model at the end of the process, all knowing the same things and qualified by a common standard, approved and certified by the State....

Please do not think that this reformed liberal arts curriculum was not a Liberal Arts curriculum, it was and is. The changes had to do with the loss of Latin and foreign language in favor of the grammar of a standardized American English, the equal weight given mathematics and language studies in the early years, the standardization of history and geography studies into separate "subjects," and the invention of the now-standard "subjects," Reading, Spelling, Grammar, Composition, Arithmetic, and Geometry, History and Civics, geography and Science -- in which teachers were encouraged to "major" or specialize. In the older Liberal Arts curriculum, those "subjects" had all been taken up, but usually not distinguished as subjects in themselves but interconnected as the year progressed....

But there was in the reform, from its earliest roots, a certain anti-traditional, secularizing, even revolutionary spirit. The search for efficiency, the demand for equality, right and good though they are, carry with them a tendency of absolutism, of immediate gratification, that can bring the whole house down around us. The American educators were always trying new arrangements and new experiments to make the system either more efficient, or more equal, or just plain more interesting for the teacher to teach. That's when the 1960's intervened.

Educationists today distinguish five major approaches to curriculum presently accepted in American schools. The first, called by the educationists "academic rationalism," (they shy from remembering the term Lib. Arts), includes all those curricula that we would call Liberal Arts curricula, emphasizing the learning and mastery of a set body of knowledge and skills derived from the past, a love for the good and the true, and the character formation necessary to accomplish that mastery. The other four, (cognitive process development, instruction as a technology, social reconstruction, and self-actualization), all fall in one way or the other into the category of social engineering, whose concern is not acquiring skills and knowledge, or self-control, but formation (or deformation) of the pupil's personality and character to some model preconceived and prescribed by the authorities. They are methods not of education, but of imposition of the teacher's will on the student.