

AMERICAN HERITAGE CHARTER SCHOOLS

# FUNDAMENTALS READER

A COMPILATION OF WORKS THAT  
CAPTURES THE EDUCATIONAL  
PHILOSOPHY OF OUR  
ORGANIZATION



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AHCS Fundamentals Reader; First Edition  
Current as of 2023-10-10

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## **OUR MISSION**

IS TO **DEVELOP** THE  
**HEARTS AND MINDS** OF  
OUR STUDENTS THROUGH  
A **RIGOROUS CORE**  
**CURRICULUM**, WITH  
A PERSPECTIVE THAT  
CHERISHES **TIMELESS**  
**VIRTUES** AND THE  
**AMERICAN SPIRIT.**



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## DEFINITIONS

- **Classical Learning:** Our approach; The lens through which we view education (see Big Ideas)
- **Cultural Literacy:** The stories and ideas that will create the common language and cultural structure of AHCS.
- **Truth:** That which corresponds to the way things actually are.
- **Goodness:** That which fulfills our purpose as human beings.
- **Beauty:** The experience of goodness and truth through our senses.

## BIG IDEAS (ASSUMPTIONS)

of Classical Learning

- **There is an order** to the world students encounter
- **People can achieve great things:** students are able to recognize order, analyze the past, look forward to the future, and strive to better themselves.
- **The journey of education is never finished:** educators are life-long learners.
- **Educators are mentors,** who guide students in living good and meaningful lives.
- The goal of education is to help students recognize what is **good, true, and beautiful** and guide them in bettering themselves.

## AHCS CULTURAL LITERACY

is built from the following:

- Amplify Curriculum/Core Knowledge Sequence
- The Great Conversation (Junior High/High School Humanities framework)
- Common language, skills, and expression of problems or ideas

## LEARNING STAGES (TRIVIUM)

**Goal:** help educators recognize the role they play and how we've organized the curriculum in the overall mission of AHCS.

- **Grammar;** *the foundation of learning* (TK-5): learn raw material; the symbols of language/math, memorize (not analyze) important stories and ideas
- **Logic;** *the organization of learning* (6-8): order the raw material of language and math; use logic in thinking processes, practice higher order thinking, expression, and analyze important ideas.
- **Rhetoric;** *the application of learning* (9-12): take the raw material they've learned in the Grammar Stage and have ordered in the Logic Stages and use it to solve difficult problems, become self-aware, and express their own ideas through speech, papers or in groups.

## LITERACY

**Definition:** The ability to independently and competently use knowledge and skills in a particular area.

- **We are teaching Cultural Literacy:** AHCS has a core body of ideas and stories that will create a cultural commonality for our students, both for this immediate community and as American citizens.
- **We are teaching Language Literacy:** Reading and Writing are fundamental skills for all subject areas, since mastery of the written word is the mastery of language, and students become full participants in society through language literacy
- **We are teaching Math Literacy:** The ability to understand and apply mathematical and scientific concepts reinforces one's ability to communicate in a coherent and logical manner.

## VIRTUES AND WISDOM

form students' hearts as well as their minds

- **Virtue** is living in accordance with what is good.
- **The pursuit of virtue begins with formational habits.** We provide character education for students that is reinforced through opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom.



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ON  
CULTURAL LITERACY

# Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (Excerpt)

—//—  
E.D. Hirsch

*In 1988, E. D. Hirsch, a professor at the University of Virginia, wrote a bestselling book which argued that progressivist education with its focus on experience had let down America's students by neglecting knowledge in the form of a shared body of information. The book included a list of 5,000 facts, dates, famous people, works of literature and concepts that every American should know. Hirsch was later to call this 'core knowledge'. Hirsch makes a contemporary case for the teaching of canonical knowledge.*

“The theories that have dominated American education for the past fifty years stem ultimately from Jean Jacques Rousseau, who believed that we should encourage natural development of young children and not impose adult ideas upon them before they can truly understand them ... He thought that a child's intellectual and social skills would develop naturally without regard to the specific content of education ... In the first decades of [the twentieth] century, Rousseau's ideas powerfully influenced the educational conceptions of John Dewey, the writer who has most deeply affected modern educational theory and practice ... Dewey strongly seconds Rousseau's opposition to the mere accumulation of information: 'Development emphasizes the need of intimate and extensive personal acquaintance with a small number of typical situations with a view to mastering the way of dealing with the problems of experience, not the piling up of information' ...

Dewey assumed that ... education need not be tied to specific content. [However, in so doing he] placed too much faith in children's ability to learn general skills ... and too hastily rejected 'the piling up of information'. Only by piling up specific, communally shared information can children learn to participate in complex cooperative activities with other members of their community ...

[It is a] universal fact that a human group must have effective communications to function effectively, that effective communications require shared culture and that shared culture requires transmission of specific information to children. Literacy, an essential aim of education in the modern world, is no autonomous, empty skill but depends upon literate culture. Like any other aspect of acculturation, literacy requires the early and continued transmission of specific information. Dewey was deeply mistaken to disdain 'accumulating information in the form of symbols.' Only by accumulating shared symbols, and the shared information that the symbols represent, can we learn to communicate effectively with one another in our national community ...

Cafeteria-style education, combined with the unwillingness of our schools to place demands on students, has resulted in a steady

diminishment of commonly shared information between generations and between young people themselves. Those who graduate from the same school have often studied different subjects, and those who graduate from different schools have often studied different material even when their courses have carried the same titles. The inevitable consequence of the shopping mall high school is a lack of shared knowledge across and within schools. It would be hard to invent a more effective recipe for cultural fragmentation ...

To be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world ... That children from poor and illiterate homes tend to remain poor and illiterate is an unacceptable failure of our schools, on which has occurred not because our teachers are inept but chiefly because they are compelled to teach a fragmented curriculum based on faulty educational theories. Some say that our schools by themselves are powerless to change the cycle of poverty and illiteracy. I do not agree. They can break the cycle, but only if they themselves break fundamentally with some of the theories and practices that education professors and school administrators have followed over the past fifty years ...

It is true that, under our present curricular arrangements, academic achievement is heavily determined by family background. But we cannot conclude from the present state of affairs that deprived children would be predestined to low achievement under a different school curriculum ... Literate culture is the most democratic culture in our land: it excludes nobody; it cuts across generations and social groups and classes; it is not usually one's first culture, but it should be everyone's second, existing as it does beyond the narrow spheres of family, neighborhood, and region.

To withhold traditional culture from the school curriculum, and therefore from students, in the name of progressive ideas is in fact an unprogressive action that helps preserve the political and economic status quo. Middle-class children acquire mainstream literate culture by daily encounters with other literate persons. But less privileged children are denied consistent interchanges with literate persons and fail to receive this information in school. The most straightforward antidote to their deprivation is to make the essential information more readily available inside the schools.”

*<https://newlearningonline.com>*

*Hirsch, E.D. 1988. Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. New York: Vintage Books. pp. xiv-xv, xvii, 20-21, xiii, 115, 21, 23-24.*



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ON  
AMERICAN ORDER

# The Many Roots of American Order

Lee Edwards

Nearly four decades ago, Catherine Bowen wrote a delightful little book about the Constitutional Convention of 1787 entitled *Miracle at Philadelphia*. The “miracle” was that a diverse group of strong-willed, political leaders could, within a few months, produce a document that has served as the foundation for the most successful and enduring experiment in democracy in human history. British Prime Minister William Gladstone described the American Constitution as “the most wonderful work ever struck off, at a given time, by the brain and purpose of man.”

America itself is a miracle. While other nations have declined or fallen over the centuries, America has survived economic upheavals, civil wars and world wars, racial and ethnic divisions, and a virulent counterculture to become the most powerful and envied nation in the world.

What is the source of America’s strength and endurance? Its abundant, natural resources? Its educated, highly skilled people? Its fortuitous geographical location midway between Europe and Asia? Its national will? Whence comes our limited government, individual freedom, free market system, and fundamental values?

In *The Roots of American Order*, first published in 1974, Russell Kirk provides a convincing answer: America is not only the land of the free and the home of the brave but a place of ordered liberty, which made its freedom and prosperity possible. Using the device of examining five cities—Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, London, and Philadelphia—Kirk traces the roots of American order to long-standing traditions in human history.

First came the Hebrews, who recognized “a purposeful moral existence under God.” For the prophets, the hill-town of Jerusalem was the eternal city for salvation. Next came the Greeks who strengthened the roots with their philosophical and political self-awareness. Athens was where Western philosophy was born, and from it came the Western views of science and the conviction that all areas of knowledge are within the ability of the mind of men. There followed the Romans, with their emphasis on law and social awareness. Rome was the seat of a great empire, and its political administration and stability echoed down the centuries. The roots of these cities were intertwined “with the Christian understanding of human duties and human hopes” and were joined by medieval custom, learning, and valor.

The roots of order were then enriched by two great political experiments in law and liberty centered in London and Philadelphia. But they did not come to pass overnight. Indeed,

the British contribution was made possible by six-and-a-half centuries of political experimentation from the Magna Carta in 1215 through the Glorious Revolution of 1689.

The first part of the British experiment took place during what are so often called, erroneously, the Dark Ages. In *The Roots of American Order*, Kirk lists the contributions of the Middle Ages: our system of common law, the essentials of representative government, our language, our social patterns, and the foundation of our modern economy. Too often forgotten today, they illustrate Kirk’s view that political order reflects custom, mores, and belief.

According to the French political philosopher Montesquieu, the only “grand change in the art of government” since Aristotle was representative government. And its first sign was the Great Charter, the Magna Carta, which the English barons extracted from a reluctant King John. Its lasting principle is simple and yet profound: The law is supreme and must be obeyed by all, even the King.

The Middle Ages was followed in swift and often chaotic succession by the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation. Man proposed a new “humanism,” Kirk writes, driven by ego and enlightenment. Protestant reformers returned to the stern teaching of St. Augustine: man loving himself above everything can only be saved by the grace of God.

Out of the Protestant Ethic, Kirk says, came self-reliance, self-examination, endeavor in the secular world, and democracy. England, thanks to Richard Hooker and others, found a middle path between warring factions on the continent and passed it on to America: It consisted of law, liberty, and tolerance. But the passage was not an easy or swift one, in part because of the conflicting ideas of philosophers like Hobbes and Locke.

Hobbes has been called the father of modern political philosophy (although not by Kirk), but his is the politics of authoritarianism. Hobbes argued that the individual’s motives in society are not love and loyalty but self-interest and fear. There is little in Hobbes, Kirk says, of Madison’s idea of carefully calibrated checks and balances. Hobbes would have rejected the moral precepts that Madison and other Founders insisted were essential for a Republic.

Locke is a more relevant influence on America, Kirk writes. His *Second Treatise on Government* is really an attack on Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. Locke emphasizes the Social Contract between the governed and the governors and stresses the natural rights of life, liberty, and property. But Locke was an ardent apostle of

individualism, Kirk points out, and had no deep affection for the Christian concept of a “community of souls.” There is no warmth in Locke, no sense of consecration. “Utility, not love,” Kirk remarks, “is the motive of Locke’s individualism.” And the Founders of the American Republic, Kirk insists, had a vision beyond mere self-interest and utilitarianism.

The last Englishman that Kirk mentions, and with obvious affection, is the Anglo-Irish statesman, Edmund Burke. Burke, he says, went far beyond John Locke’s utilitarian Social Contract to talk of an eternal contract between the dead, the living, and the unborn. Burke argued that we all participate in this spiritual and social partnership because it is ordained of God.

Before leaving London and traveling to Philadelphia, Kirk underscores the importance of the Bill of Rights drawn up in 1689 and the fruition of English constitutional development during the preceding four centuries. Much of the language of the English Bill of Rights appears in the first ten amendments of the U.S. Constitution.

The author then takes up the first of America’s founding documents—the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration was a revolutionary document, Kirk says, a bill of particulars for going to war against George III, but it was not an open-ended justification of revolution under any and all circumstances. It was, in fact, primarily a political document, meant to set forth grievances against the King and the justifications for the political separation of the colonies. Among its 27 specific complaints, not one touched on social and economic conditions.

The Declaration was a conservative document in that it spoke of changing the “government” but not the “state.” As Kirk points out, “government” implied the ministers and other temporary possessors of political power while “society” meant the establishment of civil social order. Still, the Declaration was a radical document in the sense that it reasserted a political autonomy rooted in the North American continent ever since the landings at Jamestown and Plymouth.

Eleven years later and now citizens of a new nation, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia met to revise the Articles of Confederation. They wound up producing a whole new constitution. It was a practical document, says Kirk, attempting to resolve the conflicting demands of freedom and order. Its composition demanded balance, firmness, and yet a willingness to yield because the delegates had to (a) uphold order but not reduce true liberty, (b) produce a reasonably strong national government while not reducing the states to mere provinces; and (c) provide for an effective chief executive who could not, however, become a king or dictator.

Montesquieu would have applauded America’s brand of federalism, Kirk writes, and its careful separation of powers within the national government. The delegates assembled in Philadelphia

had formed a government of laws, not men.

The Declaration and the Constitution are complementary, not conflicting, documents. In Martin Diamond’s words, the combination of the Declaration’s “heady rhetoric of revolution and freedom” and the Constitution’s “necessary forming, constraining and sustaining system of government” produced our uniquely successful form of government.

“Whatever the failings of America in the eighth decade of the twentieth century,” Russell Kirk wrote thirty years ago in *The Roots of American Order*, “the American order has been a conspicuous success in the perspective of human history.” As he summed up: “Under God, a large measure of justice has been achieved; the state is strong and energetic; personal freedom is protected by laws and customs; and a sense of community ensures.”

Would Kirk be so generous, so optimistic today? I am not certain, as the heritage of these five cities has been badly battered. But I know he would draw strength and confidence from the lessons of Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, London, and Philadelphia and from the observation of a president he much admired, Ronald Reagan, who once said to a group of student leaders:

“My young friends, history is a river that may take us as it will. But we have the power to navigate, to choose direction, and make our passage together.”

*Lee Edwards is a Distinguished Fellow in Conservative Thought at the Heritage Foundation. He is currently writing a short biography of William F. Buckley Jr.*



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ON  
RESILIENCE

# In Defense of Stress

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Tim McIntosh

Dear student,

I heard that you believe that the assignment I gave you is too difficult—that it is beyond the training you’ve received in class and could even result in your failure. In short, the assignment “stresses” you.

People often use the word “stress” for unfocused anxiety. For example, much of ordinary American life is driven by a frenzied sprint to accomplish an innumerable series of economic tasks without relational or emotional resources. I googled the word “stress” and discovered that mention of stress in letters, newspapers, and books has skyrocketed since 1800. Stress is on the rise in modern life. And no one likes to be stressed.

My assignment is not intended to create anxiety. (You probably have enough of that already.) If I wanted to increase your anxiety, I’d hand you a screaming baby and six-figure debt.

My assignment is intended to create a very specific stress. By “stress,” I mean a state of mental or emotional strain that comes from adverse or demanding circumstances but which is intended to promote growth. My assignment was designed to create a specific, focused stress that can be overcome. If you overcome this stress with industry, intelligence, and courage, you will receive a high grade. Furthermore, you will expand your ability to overcome future stresses.

Think of my assignment like a trainer adding five pounds to a weightlifter’s maximum lift. Adding this weight creates a new goal that, with training, can be accomplished. But without adding those five pounds, the weightlifter will remain in “homeostasis”—that is, his ability will tend to remain at the same level.

Mark Rippetoe, one of the most decorated strength-training coaches in the United States, is fond of repeating a simple truth: The only way an organism grows stronger is by overcoming stress. Stress “disrupts homeostasis” and demands that the organism “adapt to the new requirements imposed by change.” Rippetoe reminds his weightlifters that they will only get stronger by attempting to lift more weight than ever before. A weightlifter with a maximum deadlift of 200 pounds will remain in homeostasis unless he attempts to lift more than he has ever lifted. To move from homeostasis—to get stronger—the lifter must add weight to the bar.

My assignment adds weight to the bar. Your past assignments have proven you are strong. Now it’s time to grow stronger. By

attempting to lift slightly more weight, you will. Indeed, receiving and overcoming stress is the basic transaction behind all quality education.

If overcoming stress is the basic task of learning, homeostasis is the biggest obstacle that stands in the way of a meaningful education. And what is a meaningful education? It is not accumulated knowledge; rather, it is knowledge that leads to a life of good action. David Hicks, a leading light in the world of classical education, is right to argue that “the end of education is not thinking, it is acting.” As your teacher, my hope is that you will not just believe true things, but that you will become a first-class learner and that your knowledge will manifest itself in good actions: you will love your neighbors, pursue justice, and resist evil.

And so, I do not hesitate to put a stressful assignment into your life. I recognize, however, that the stress I have described is uncomfortable. Homeostasis—that tendency toward a stable equilibrium—is comfortable. We all prefer to remain in homeostasis. In homeostasis, the water isn’t too cold or too hot. The world is predictable, comfortable, known. But homeostasis suffocates a basic principle of life: If you are not growing, you are fading. The only time an organism achieves lasting homeostasis is by dying.

Do not mistake homeostasis for harmony. Harmony comes from the Greek word *harmos*, meaning “joint.” Living “in-joint” with others and yourself is one of the great joys of human life. Singing in harmony with family, friends, or even enemies, results in a beautiful sound. But those who have achieved *harmos* have learned from stress, not avoided it. The husband and wife who live in *harmos* have faced the truth that they are different people with conflicting temperaments, hopes, and wounds. The husband and wife achieve *harmos* by avoiding homeostasis and learning from the stress caused by conflict. Likewise, the violinist fails many times before achieving harmony with the cellist. If the violinist remains in homeostasis, she will not achieve *harmos*.

You’ve told me that you don’t like my assignment because it requires you to make your work public. Your paper will not just be seen and graded by me. It will be seen and assessed by others. This means that if you fail, others will see.

Because my assignment is harder, you are in greater danger of failure. Based on your past performances, I do not believe you will fail. But you might. Any time you attempt something new and more difficult, the risk of failure increases. I’d love to assure

you that you won't fail, but I can't. By risking failure and working hard, however, you can succeed and grow.

Public failure hurts, and I recognize how scary risking failure is. I still recall my own public failures. In college, the basketball coach publicly posted a clipboard listing the team roster. My name wasn't on the clipboard. Not only did I not make the team, but I was embarrassed that everyone knew it.

Few things frighten like the possibility of failure before others. Some people believe that all our moral stances are actually attempts to be accepted in the eyes of our peers. They say that we tell the truth, not because it's what God wants or because it creates harmony in the soul, but because our moral actions are driven by a deep-seated need to justify ourselves among networks of allies. In Plato's *Republic*, Glaucon argues for this very point. He claims that virtue and justice are social-constructions. Instead of pursuing true, eternal norms of goodness, humans are motivated only by a deep desire to maintain their reputation.

Public failure on my assignment could result in disapproving whispers among your friends. I recognize how deeply these disapproving whispers might hurt you, but if you seek to achieve peace by constantly negotiating your reputation, you will not achieve the deep harmony you desire. Although Glaucon's philosophy rightly describes much of human moral behavior, it does not lead us toward peace. Without a peace that springs from deep inside you, Glaucon's philosophy will create greater anxiety by locating the source of your peace in the gaze of other people. In other words, if your value is dependent upon others, you will be their slave and will only feel free when others think highly of you. No matter how spotless your record, your reputation ultimately lies beyond your control.

The world's great teachers align with Socrates, not Glaucon. Socrates recognizes that genuine *harmos* cannot be found by seeking to preserve our reputation. Likewise, Marcus Aurelius warns against "the emptiness of applauding hands" and the people "who praise us," because they are "capricious" and "arbitrary." Jesus teaches against being like the Pharisees who "pray on the street corners to be seen by others."

My assignment calls for your work to be seen and assessed by others. If your value depends upon that assessment, you will only feel at peace if others approve of you. But this peace will not last. Life is a series of ongoing grades, public tests, and trials issued by other people. Many of these people will be fickle. Others will be confused. Some will be evil. Why would you depend upon them? ...

....I designed my assignment to produce a stress that can bring about growth. If you rise to the challenge of the assignment, you will earn a good grade, and, more importantly, you will grow in knowledge and skill.

But there is a lesson deeper than the assignment's lesson. It is this: Life will present you with a constant succession of distractions—a constant series of bribes. These bribes are intended to move your gaze toward homeostasis, toward your reputation, toward your performance—anywhere other than a *harmos* of soul. As your teacher, I write against these bribes and in support of seeking peace through your soul's disposition.

*This article first appeared in "Colloquy" (formerly News and Views) Vol. 37 No.2, published by Gutenberg College in March of 2017. Tim is a former tutor of Gutenberg College, and is currently a playwright, a lecturer for Circe Institute and a professional speechwriter for both for-profit and non-profit organizations.*





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ON  
FINDING WISDOM

# The Wisdom Deficit in Schools

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Michael Godsey, writing for *The Atlantic*

When I was in high school, I chose to major in English in college because I wanted to be wiser. That's the word I used. If I ended up making lots of money or writing a book, great; but really, I liked the prospect of being exposed to great thoughts and deep advice, and the opportunity to apply them to my own life in my own clumsy way. I wanted to live more thoughtfully and purposefully. (Also, I hoped literature would help me understand girls.) Now I'm a veteran English teacher, reflecting on what's slowly changed at the typical American public high school—and the word *wisdom* keeps haunting me. I don't teach it as much anymore, and I wonder who is.

As a new teacher at San Luis Obispo High School in California more than a decade ago, I asked my principal about his expectations for my students' Advanced Placement scores. He said, "Just make sure the kids are ready for the next part of their lives. They're going to be on their own soon, and forever. Prepare them for that. Literature can help." His idea of how to prepare kids for their futures was significantly different, in both meaning and tone, from how teachers are now being informed by the Common Core State Standards—the controversial math and English benchmarks that have been adopted in most states—and the writers and thought leaders who shape the assessments matched to those standards. It all amounts to an alphabet soup of bureaucratic expectations and what can feel like soul-less instruction. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium—referred to in education circles simply as "SBAC"—is the association that writes a Common Core-aligned assessment used in 25 states, including mine. The consortium has established four of what it calls "major claims"; the first purports that students are "college and career ready" if they "can read closely and analytically to comprehend a range of complex literary and informational text." The word *wisdom* keeps haunting me. I don't teach it as much anymore, and I wonder who is.

That's hardly what my principal was talking about. The Common Core promotes 10 so-called "College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards" for reading that emphasize technical skills like analyzing, integrating, and delineating a text. But these expectations deal very little with ensuring students are actually appreciating the literature at hand—and say nothing about the personal engagement and life lessons to which my principal was referring. Kate Kinsella, an influential author who consults school districts across the country and is considered "a guiding force on the National Advisory Board for the Consortium on Reading Excellence," recently told me to "ditch literature" since "literary fiction is not critical to college success." Kinsella continued, "What's represented by the standards is the need to analyze texts

rather than respond to literature.

As a teacher working within this regimented environment, my classroom objectives have had to shift. I used to feel deeply satisfied facilitating a rich classroom discussion on a Shakespearean play; now, I feel proud when my students explicitly acknowledge the aforementioned "anchor standards" and take the initiative to learn these technical skills.

But as a man who used to be a high school student interested in pursuing wisdom, I'm almost startled to find myself up late at night, literally studying these anchor standards instead of *Hamlet* itself. I'm making plans to teach the students how to "evaluate the sufficiency of the evidence" instead of asking them, "Who here sympathizes with Hamlet, or Ophelia, or any character, and how so? It's not a personal shift—I'm still me, still interested in wisdom for the same reasons. And my principal cares deeply about the spiritual well-being of our students. It just feels like a very slow, gradual cultural shift that I don't even notice except for sudden moments of nostalgia, like remembering a dream out of nowhere. Eighty students making a long trip to see live theater—a rather adult-themed Tom Stoppard play. A long session of students complaining about Briony from *Atonement*. A courageously deep discussion on Hamlet's strangely reasonable musings on suicide. Teenagers feeling a peculiar affinity for Meursault; teenagers expressing a deep, deep hatred of Meursault. A lesson on both love and education from *Wuthering Heights*.

I get it: My job is to teach communication, not values, and maybe that's reasonable. After all, I'm not sure I would want my daughter gaining her wisdom from a randomly selected high-school teacher just because he passed a few writing and literature courses at a state university (which is what I did). My job description has evolved, and *I'm fine with that*. But where are the students getting their wisdom?

One might argue that the simple solution is religion—namely, biblical texts. The problem, though, is that I doubt religion is on most kids' minds. When I recently shared a poem that included the phrase, "Let there be light," hardly any of my students, who are high-school juniors, could identify the allusion. As a staunch believer in the separation of church and state, I don't feel comfortable delving into the Bible's wisdom. Even if I did, the environment is far from conducive to these discussions—students are generally embarrassed to reveal their spiritual beliefs. A fellow teacher recently cited a biblical reference in a standardized test as "evidence of institutional bias," and the community was

generally shocked; some people, meanwhile, were outraged a few years ago when a valedictorian's speech personally advised his peers to "love God above self."

With all this in mind, I recently read the line "Fools will be destroyed by their own complacency" in *The Book of Proverbs*, and I thought of my students at the cusp of young adulthood. I considered how deeply profitable this kind of advice could be for those about to be on their own—and I don't mean profitable in the way that the advocates of "career readiness" generally conceive it. I'm not saying teachers should include the Bible in their classes in any way, but it feels strange to bite my tongue and instead teach simple skills like "interpreting words and determining technical meanings." Meanwhile, research suggests that a significant majority of teens do not attend church, and youth church attendance has been decreasing over the past few decades. *This is fine with me*. But then again, where are they getting their wisdom?

My job description has evolved, and I'm fine with that. But where are the students getting their wisdom?

I'm not talking about *my* child, or *your* child. I'm absolutely positive that my daughter will know the difference between Darcy and Wickham before she's in eighth grade; and it's likely that people who would gravitate toward this story would appreciate this kind of thinking. I'm talking about American children in general—kids whose parents work all day, whose fathers left them or whose mothers died. These could be children whose parents are unwise or don't read any literature because they're proudly working with their hands instead, assuming trained humanities teachers are responsibly and professionally inspiring their kids to appreciate literature. And even for the parents who do prioritize the humanities in their households, I'm not sure that one generation is actually sharing culturally relevant wisdom with the next one—not if the general community doesn't even talk about what that wisdom specifically means. Each family can be responsible for teaching wisdom in their own way, and *I'm fine with that*. But then, does the idea of cultural wisdom get surrendered in the process?

Secular wisdom in the public schools seems like it should inherently spring from the literature that's shaped American culture. And while the students focus on how Whitman's "purpose shapes the content and style of his text," they're obviously exposed to the words that describe his leaves of grass. And that's good. But there is a noticeable deprioritization of literature, and a crumbling consensus regarding the nation's idea of *classic* literature. The Common Core requires only Shakespeare, which is puzzling if only for its singularity. (A respected colleague recently called this stipulation "offensive," immediately rejecting "the audacity of elevating any of [Shakespeare's] plays over anything ever written by anybody else.")

The country's disregard for the institutional transfer of cultural

wisdom is evident with this single observation: None of the state assessments has a single question about the content of any classic literature. They only test on reading *skills*, so teachers now prioritize these skills over content. This arrangement, in theory, allows students to read the literature on their own, when they get their own time—and *I'm fine with that*. But then, where are they getting the time and space to appreciate the deeper lessons of classic literature, to evaluate its truth and appropriately apply it to their own lives?

This year I introduced my students to *Serial*, a podcast recently produced by the public-radio show *This American Life* that told a riveting story over 12 episodes. I used the series as a primary text instead of anything written by Shakespeare, and the feedback was 98 percent positive. *Serial* was great for teaching the Common Core anchor standards (better than Shakespeare), but the lessons in wisdom were not as apparent. The protagonist at one point finally admits, "I never should have let someone hold my car. I never should have let someone hold my phone. I never should have been friends with these people. Who can I blame but myself?" That's a nice collection of lessons—but it doesn't seem to pack the same punch as one of Hamlet's soliloquies. I remember when, 10 years ago, my students spent an hour sharing their favorite lines from Father Zossima's sermon in *The Brothers Karamazov* and how and why it affected their own lives. One student was visibly moved by the idea that suffering for a loved one might be a blessing available only in a life on Earth, not in heaven. A few different students called it "their favorite class ever." This morning, my student-teacher—a college student I'm training to be a classroom educator—used a hip-hop poem as a primary text and started the class by saying, "Today we're going to practice Reading Standards 1, 2, and particularly 4" in reference to the anchor standards that the students had on their desks. If this sounds a little dry, I'm partly to blame—for a month, he's been watching me ask the students to explicitly reflect on their progress in each of these technical areas. In any case, with habits like these, he's sure to land a permanent job in the fall.

Admittedly, nothing about the Common Core or any modern shifts in teaching philosophies is forbidding me from sharing deeper lessons found in Plato's cave or Orwell's *Airstrip One*. The fine print of the Common-Core guidelines even mentions a few possible titles. But this comes with constant and pervasive language that favors objective analysis over personal engagement. Achieve the Core, for example, an organization founded by the lead writers of the standards, explicitly encourages schools to teach students to "extract" information so they can "note and assess patterns of writing" without relying on "any particular background information" or "students having other experiences or knowledge." This emphasis on what they call "text-dependent reading" contributes to a culture in which it's not normal to promote cultural wisdom or personal growth; in fact, it's almost awkward.

Inspired by what can only be called Writing Standard 6 ("Use

technology to collaborate with others”), I did a mini-lesson about Twitter; a few students started following me, and I rewarded them with a follow-back. As a result, I knew why one sophomore girl looked so exhausted, empty, and hungover one morning. As I prepared to give a lesson on “determining where the text leaves matters uncertain,” she looked at me miserably, and I had a feeling she knew that I had read her tweets from the night before. I felt like my silence was somehow condoning her choices, but I didn’t know what to tell her. With nothing to say, I knew I would have to quietly unfollow her.

Later, a kid who reminds me of the teenager I was in high school—a boy who is at different times depressed, excited, naive, and curious—asked me why I became an English teacher. I smiled in self-defense, but I was silent again, not knowing what to say anymore.

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ON  
TEACHING

# What is Socratic Teaching?

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Circe Institute

You probably have heard that Classical education emphasizes “Socratic dialogue,” a mode of teaching often (vaguely) associated with teaching via discussion and named after the famous Greek philosopher Socrates. In the world of Christian classical education “socratic” has become a sort of buzz word, something to hang your hat on—maybe even a good tool for promoting a school or curriculum. After all, we all have a general sense that learning by interacting with actual human beings can be effective if not transformative. But what exactly is Socratic dialogue and why is it such a powerful tool?

## Definition of Socratic Teaching

You may have heard that Socratic teaching is “question-driven instruction.” We tend to envision it being a group of students asking and answering questions. But for Socrates it looks a little bit different.

Socratic teaching derives from the Socratic dialogues, conversations in which Socrates discusses grand questions or big ideas with various people as recorded by Plato. Many of these dialogues are well known, at least by name if not by content: Republic, Meno, Gorgias, and Phaedrus. In each of them, Socrates engages in conversation with another person, typically referred to as an “interlocutor.”

When Socrates engages in dialogue with this interlocutor, he does so via one-on-one conversation. Other people were often present, listening and occasionally interjecting, but the majority of the conversation occurred via a back-and-forth between Socrates and one other person. In some dialogues, that person changes from time to time, as in Gorgias. When that happens, however, Socrates always continues the conversation with just one person at a time. He turns his attention, and thus the conversation, to the new interlocutor.

This one-on-one approach is difficult, of course, for today’s teacher, especially for the instructor who has a whole classroom full of students, as in a traditional school setting. She risks losing her other students to daydreams, side conversations, or doodles. Yet to teach in a truly Socratic fashion, she needs to at least consider the strengths of the one-on-one dialogue. After all, the unique benefits of this approach far outweigh the challenges.

## The Heart of Socratic Teaching

At the heart of Socratic teaching are four convictions:

- Truth exists.
- Truth is knowable.
- Truth can be discovered.
- Truth is ultimately one, in the sense that all things fit together into a harmonious symphony of being.

Socrates was confident Truth can be known, but he knew that it is hard to see it and that we spend most of our time living in error. So he engaged in and shared a means by which truth can be perceived called dialectic thought.

In the simplest sense, dialectic thought examines a thought in order to remove contradictions and inconsistencies. This is what Socrates refers to when he famously says, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” as recorded in the Apology. When inconsistencies of thought are examined and then removed, individuals can move forward to new insights, often using analogies and comparisons from what they already know.

Socrates’ dialectic approach, when fully realized, passes through two stages:

- the ironic
- the maieutic

In the ironic stage, Socrates asks questions that help his interlocutor recognize the contradictions and inconsistencies in his own thoughts. If the student is willing to see what Socrates shows him, then he will say those magic words: “I don’t know.” He has reached what Plato calls *metanoia*, the Greek word for repentance. It means “a change of mind.” The person who accepts his own ignorance, Socrates argues, is prepared to see the truth.

In Meno, Socrates brings his interlocutor (Meno—the dialogues are often named after the interlocutor) to this point, but Meno is unwilling to say the magic words; he is unwilling to admit he doesn’t know. Instead, he complains that Socrates is behaving like the torpedo fish, that Socrates has so befuddled him, numbing him as the torpedo fish does its prey, that he can no longer respond. So Socrates switches gears. They begin discussing the nature of knowledge, and Socrates

asks to speak with one of Meno's slave boys.

Socrates asks the boy a series of mathematical questions, to which the slave boy responds incorrectly, all the while thinking he knows the right answers. It isn't until Socrates walks the slave boy through the Ironic Stage of dialectic thinking, — when he has come to see that he doesn't know the answer and can no longer answer Socrates' questions—that he admits his ignorance and says the magic words, "I don't know."

At this point, Socrates turns to Meno and, together, they see that the slave boy was unable to learn the truth until he realized that what he thought he knew to be true was in fact false. Once the slave boy understood this, he was able to walk alongside Socrates in pursuit of the truth. Before that, he had no need to pursue the truth, because he thought he already had it. This is when Meno is able to realize the next step. As painful as it might be: he admits his own ignorance.

Socrates then begins that second stage: the maieutic stage.

Here he helps the student remedy his ignorance. Whereas the goal in the first stage was to demonstrate the disharmony of the student's thought, the goal of the second stage is to restore harmony within the student. To do this the teacher must teach "mimetically." That is, she must incarnate the truth (or lesson) to be learned... the teacher incarnates the logos of her lesson so that the students might know it. She should place analogies or examples of the lesson before her students, and ask them to compare those analogies or examples in order to discover the truth of the lesson. When students draw the wrong conclusion from the analogies or examples, as happens sometimes, the teacher then adds more to clarify.

For example, when teaching a group of students the mathematical skill of addition, a teacher might place three examples before the students:

$$2+2=4$$

$$3+1=4$$

$$4+0=4$$

After asking the students to contemplate the examples, she might hear that single-digit addition always equals four. This, of course, is incorrect. So how might the teacher correct this error? She could present more examples, such as three and three make six, and five and two make seven.

Teaching mimetically in the Maieutic Stage invites the student to re-enter into a state of harmony with the truth he or she is attempting to perceive.

### The Main Thread

One of the challenges of Socratic teaching is maintaining the

main thread of the conversation—of keeping the focus of the dialogue on the Truth or logos being contemplated. Think of the main thread as the trail Socrates and his interlocutor are traveling along. As they journey, they may take side trails (known to some of us as rabbit trails, of course) to consider various other ideas, but these ideas typically connect back to the main trail. They become temporary investigations that serve to inform the main investigation of the dialogue.

In the Meno for instance: Meno originally asked Socrates whether virtue can be taught. Socrates, however, takes Meno down an extended rabbit trail in which they seek to first define virtue. The rabbit trail is necessary, for how can one determine whether virtue can be taught if one doesn't know what virtue is? They then continue down other rabbit trails, but Socrates is always attentive to the main trail—the main thread—of the conversation.

Indeed if we consider Socratic teaching as just "asking questions," we can end up without a main thread at all, particularly if we are asking questions for the sake of asking questions. In group discussions, students may not be aware of a main thread and if they are, they may not all agree that it should be the main thread and some students may attempt to transform their own preferred rabbit trails into the main trail. As any teacher knows, this can lead to confusion and chaos. Students won't always be interested in the same threads, or they may not want to approach a thread from the same perspective. As the plurality of students pulls the thread in opposite directions, it can easily be lost. Whatever ultimate idea was being pursued may be lost in a multitude of ideas, none of which become the focus of the conversation.

But the strength of the one-on-one dialogue is that it allows teachers to overcome this kind of chaos through orderly contemplation. Through it, Socrates can maintain the focus of the conversation on the main thread, pulling it through until truth is discovered.

### The Opposition, Past and Present

Remember those four Truth-based principles at the heart of the Socratic mode? The Sophists, Socrates' intellectual adversaries, denied each of these convictions. Truth doesn't actually exist, they argued; and even if it does, you can't know it; and even if you could, you can't communicate it to someone else. Consequently, according to the Sophists, there is no principle of harmony (no logos) to guide inquiry.

The late nineteenth century saw the widespread triumph of Sophistry in the American school. Whereas Socrates tried to deconstruct a student's thoughts in order to bring healing, the modern Sophist moves in a very different direction. Socrates sought to expose contradictions. The Sophist seeks to debunk. Socrates sought to bring healing by remediating his disciples' ignorance. The Sophist seeks to condition. For when there is no

truth to seek, all a teacher can do is influence students. Debunking and conditioning are not stages of education that encourage the pursuit of truth.

That's why, for classical educators who seek to cultivate wisdom and virtue in students, Socratic teaching is a meaningful, useful, and even necessary approach. For only a student who learns to seek Truth relentlessly can be truly wise and virtuous. And only a teacher who seeks it can be anything other than a tyrant.

The teacher who is a Sophist cannot restore harmony in her student because she has no truth to turn to by which the student can be brought into harmony. However, any teacher who teaches in a truly Socratic fashion, can restore a student to a state of harmony. Once a student has acknowledged his own ignorance, the student and teacher can work together in pursuit of the truth.









