

Education Systems: Classical vs. Jeffersonian

Jennifer Bolt

In his lecture on October 3, 2005, Dr. Dan Lang contrasted the ideas of classical education against Thomas Jefferson's plan for education. Classical education emphasized respect for authority, the importance of subordinating personal good to the greater and common good, the subjection and inferiority of the present in comparison to the past, goods of the soul being the key to happiness, and leisure as a way to gain wisdom (Lang 2005). Jefferson's plan of education was the antithesis of classical education. He believed in a public education that should be locally supervised and in teaching practical subjects, such as arithmetic, rather than speculative subjects, such as theology and philosophy (Lang 2005). He also believed that education should be republican, reinforcing the form of government (Lang 2005). Both forms of education offer benefits and include disadvantages, as evinced through the critiquing of both. In today's world, as education systems are constantly being challenged and reformed, the question of which system provides a better education is often raised. By utilizing the differences between the two, a balance between the classical system and the Jeffersonian system creates the best education system.

Jefferson was completely against the classical system of education. While some of his critiques of the classical system are well founded and perhaps valid, he dismisses some parts of the system too quickly. One of these ideas is that the best or happiest life comes to those who possess good souls. This idea inevitably advocates the study of philosophy and theology or religion. Jefferson disagrees with this idea because he believes that religion is a private matter and should not be part of a state-sponsored education system (Lang 2005). The practical should be taught, not the reflective, making people "lovers of science" and lovers of subjects that are useful and concrete in everyday life (Jefferson 200). Certainly Jefferson's idea of application and practicality is appropriate, but reflective subjects, such as philosophy and theology, ought not to be dismissed as worthless. In fact, those studies should be considered important and should be included in the system of education. The world today is constantly moving towards globalization; the more globalized it becomes, the more important it is for people to understand the cultural and religious beliefs and values that are vastly different from their own as they will work and deal with them regularly. It is through these religion classes that students can gain exposure to various belief systems, which will aid them practically in life because they will know how to better work with people who come from completely different perspectives. Therefore, a combination of Jefferson's practicality and the classical system's reflective courses would create a more suitable and overall better education system.

Though some of Jefferson's critiques of the classical system may be somewhat unfair, his ideas and plan for an education system are valuable. An important idea he emphasizes is that knowledge should be "[diffused] . . . more generally through the mass of the people" (Jefferson 200). He argues that everyone ought to be educated in basic subjects, including arithmetic, reading, and writing (Lang 2005). This basic education is important so that "every citizen [has] the information he needs for the transaction of his own business, . . . his duties . . . , [and] his rights" (Jefferson 205). The United States mirrors this value of having the masses educated, evinced through free public education. The classical system did not allow for this public education, as only the elite could participate in education since leisure time was necessary for education (Lang 2005). Jefferson's plan is certainly a better system in regard to this point; however, leisure time is also important in education. Without leisure time, students will not have time to process the large amounts of information they encounter each day and may become overwhelmed. Therefore, a balance between the Jeffersonian system and the classical system would be best as it would

continue to provide a free public education to the masses, which would help them function as individuals and part of society, and allow for leisure time pursuits, which are significant to personal and academic development.

As these two systems come together in balance, a system of education will develop that is stronger than either can be on its own. For example, Jefferson's idea that the schools should be locally supervised is important, because problems can be addressed without having to go through bureaucratic red tape and because the community is more involved, resulting in a strong support system for faculty and students and a quality education. At the same time, however, students who move from one area or state to another may experience difficulties because of local differences. Often students are promoted a grade or pushed back a grade because of differences in curricula in certain grade levels. Sometimes their grades suffer as grading scales and even criteria differ immensely. Some national standards that would apply everywhere without regard to specific locality could assist in allaying this problem. The idea of national standards is somewhat connected to the classical idea that the greater good for the greater number should be promoted. Therefore, if the Jeffersonian idea of local supervision were balanced with the classical idea of the greater good for the greater number, every student in the nation would have not only the same basic skills but also the benefits of local involvement and enhancement. The balance of the two systems would create the best form of education.

Both systems clearly have benefits to offer as well as disadvantages. By fusing these two systems together, their advantages can be multiplied and their disadvantages minimized and offset by one another, allowing for a strong and effective system of education. Many education systems, from high school to colleges, already include elements of both systems. As education systems are further improved in years to come, a balance between the classical education and the Jeffersonian education will more than likely prove to be the best education system.

Works Cited

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