

A Tradition of Learning

Memorizing the classics gives students roots and wings at the same time.

By Michael Knox Beran

If there's one thing progressive educators don't like, it's rote learning. As a result, we now have highly-educated people in their thirties and forties who are unable to recite half a dozen lines of classic poetry or prose. Should we care? Are exercises in memorizing an archaic curiosity, without educative value?

As educators have known for centuries (but recently forgot), both the act of memorizing poetry and the poetry itself deliver unique cognitive benefits, benefits that are of special importance for kids from homes where books are scarce and the level of literacy low. In addition, such exercises etch the ideals of their civilization on children's minds and hearts.

Memorization and recitation of the classic utterances of poets and statesmen form part of a tradition of learning that stretches back to classical antiquity, when the Greeks discovered that words and sounds — and the rhythmic patterns by which they were bound together in poetry — awakened the mind and shaped character. The Greeks made poetry the foundation of their pedagogy.

Athenian schoolboys learned by heart the poetry of Homer, through which they gained mastery of their language and their culture. More than a millennium later, in a grammar school in Stratford-upon-Avon, the mind of the young Shakespeare was formed by similar educational methods.

From *The Cat in the Hat* on up, verse teaches children something about the patterns and relationships that bind together the words of which it is composed. Poetry sets up an abstract system of order and harmony; the rhythm and the rhyme scheme are logical structures that a child can comprehend even before he understands the words themselves, just as he can grasp the rhythmic and harmonic relations of a piece of music.

What the child discovers, in other words, is not only aesthetically pleasing, but also important to cognitive development. Classic verse teaches children an enormous amount about order, measure, proportion, correspondence, balance, symmetry, agreement, temporal relation (tense), and contingent possibility (mood).

Mastering these concepts involves the most fundamental kind of learning, for these are the basic categories of thought and the framework in which we organize sensory experience. Memorization is a kind of exercise that strengthens the powers of the mind, just as physical exercise strengthens those of the body.

No less important, memorizing poetry turns on kids' language capability. It not only teaches them to articulate English words; it heightens their feel for the intricacies and complexities of the English language — an indispensable attainment if they are to go on to speak, write, and read English with ease.

It also stocks children's bins with a generous supply of the English language's rich accumulation of words. Research suggests that the size of a child's vocabulary plays an important part in determining the quality of his language-comprehension skills.

All these benefits are especially important for inner-city kids. To kids who have never known anything but degraded English, literary English is bound to seem an alien, all-but-incomprehensible dialect.

Students who haven't been exposed to the King's English in primary school at home will have a hard time, if they get to college, with works like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Moby Dick*. In too many cases, they will give up entirely, unable to enter the community of literate citizens — and as a result will live in a world of constricted opportunity.

It is not only the form of poetry — its rhyme and meter — that endows it with unique educative properties. Just as crucial is its content. Poetry's power makes it the ideal medium to introduce kids to their cultural inheritance as members of western civilization and citizens of a particular nation.

The content of the poetry fosters what education reformer E.D. Hirsch, Jr. calls "cultural literacy" in the kids who get it by heart, since great poetry is so often a pithy expression of the culture's accumulated wisdom.

For progressive educators, to require students to recite "Daffodils" or memorize the Gettysburg Address is a relic of a "drill and kill" culture that inhibits the development of the self and is the educational equivalent of a chain gang.

But the progressives' educational philosophy is only superficially a philosophy of liberty. The constructivist approach, whereby the learners construct their own knowledge, does little to free kids' selves.

The older techniques, by contrast, are genuinely liberating. This kind of memorization does not impose upon young minds a single dogma, nor does it exalt, as the Islamic madrasa does, a single text above all others.

If anything, it is the progressive liturgies — with their diversity drills and cult of self-esteem — that embody a narrow and intolerant ideology, one that imprisons kids in the banal clichés of the present and puts much of the past off limits.

A knowledge of one's own culture does not repress or enslave: it enlarges and strengthens and frees.

(Adapted with permission from "In Defense of Memorization", City Journal, Summer 2004. Mr. Beran earns his living with his pen (well, his keyboard). His latest book is Jefferson's Demons: Portrait of a Restless Mind.)