



Teaching the Great Books with Josh Gibbs

Lesson 7: Classroom Habits and Practices

Outline:

What Makes Students Remember

- Problem: Students are regularly asked to memorize things that they soon forget.
- When asked what they remember from past years, most students mention two aspects:
 - Group Memorization - “WE memorized it.” Students remember the things they memorized as a group. It is far more difficult to memorize things by yourself and have it stick.
 - Ritual Memorization - There was a regular way, place, and time that they studied the thing. Students remember things that they learn by ritual.
- Group Memorization must be Ritual Memorization. When you are by yourself, you have no use for a ritual because you can do the work whenever you want, but, as a group, you must organize and be orderly to memorize as a group.
- In a group, the importance of the memorization is increased (because meeting is an ordeal).
 - The importance produces a sort of weight that pushes the thing memorized deeper into the mind.
 - Memorization as a group and with a pattern is like a group of people walking on an area of ground over and over until there is a path.



“The Journey of the Magi” by Sassetta



- A student who learned by and ritual and one that did not may both get an A, but the one who learned by ritual will be more likely to remember it for the long term.

A Method for Ritual Memorization: The Catechism

- When you examine your class material, there is set of raw facts that you want student to memorize.
 - To get students to retain these facts, write a catechism.
- Catechism: “A sequence of questions and answers that contains all the most vital information that students will have to memorize for the class.”
 - Science Class: questions about sets of physical theorems or animal classifications.
 - History Class: a list of kings.
 - Theology Teachers: attributes of God.
- Information in the catechism ought to be the information that you want them to remember for their whole life.
 - This is a great way to analyze the class and classify it in terms of what is important.
 - If you cannot think of anything to remember for life, you probably should not be teaching that class.
- (See example catechism)
- 50 questions or so is good. Make it a manageable size.
- Students say catechism every day after the prayer (in Gibbs’ class).
- Once you have a daily catechism you can promise students benefits from it:
 - Students do not have to work to memorize facts. (Students will accidentally memorize them.)
 - Students will know the information by the end of the year even without a test of these facts.
 - Tests will be open book and note. (Once students know the raw facts by catechism, there is no need to test raw facts so the test questions can be deeper.)
 - The sort of tests real life and God give us are deeper than raw facts. They do not cut us off from the notes, but allow us to rely on the insight of others. Teachers ought to give the same sort of test.
- You must sell students on the catechism’s value - they will not like it at first. The promises that come with the catechism set students at ease.
- Have students write out the catechism (along with the class decorum rules, grading rules, and prayers).
 - Provide a notebook in which your students will do their writing.
 - Writing helps studies learn by embodiment - they have produced the words with their own hand.
 - Writing it out is a monastic practice that can help students gain a Medieval mindset especially beneficial for Medieval history classes.

- The catechism orders the classroom in a liturgical fashion.



“To Krifó Scholió” by Nikolaos Gyzis

- Having a longer catechism (5-9 minutes, but 9 is pushing it) gives the words time to seep in. As students race into class, the catechism slows them down and settles them into learning.
- If you require silence as students enter the class, this can also help.
- Saying the Catechism exhausts the students so that students are calmed for the next task.
- The Catechism IS the syllabus. It tells all the important information to be taught.
- You must require the catechism be said every day or you will be communicating that it is a mere inconvenience to the students.
 - When the catechism is daily it will become routine and nobody will notice it is happening.
 - You will get a better use of time anyway because they do not start the class in disruption.
- The catechism helps students respect the class — it sets the level of expectation and they get to recite great passages and ideas daily.