Choosing Curriculum

Curriculum Indecisions
By Susan Reynolds, Director of Instruction & Curriculum

My family and I have started The Knowledge Exchange to highlight the books we've found most useful in our own homeschooling journey, and those books that would support the classes others are willing to teach in our store.

I'm a home schooling mom of 3 children ages 10, 12, and 14. Ten years ago I began my homeschooling journey. As I was looking for curriculum, I tried a couple of different approaches. As a certified teacher, I only knew how to “do school.” So I began my daughter in a ‘school’ setting at home, beginning as soon as she could sit up in a chair at a little wooden desk, and standing to say the pledge. But that's not all I wanted for my children. I chose homeschooling to instill in them values from the Bible. I wanted my children to be educated at home, and I felt like I could get them there.

But I wanted to investigate all the options. There are a lot of choices! Speaking of choices reminds me of those feelings of confusion and being overwhelmed when figuring out what to have for dinner!

I walk into my kitchen and I just don’t know what to have for dinner. There I’m faced with choices! Do I use what I already have, or do I go to the grocery store and buy something different? Do I make a “tried and true” recipe or do I go online and make a meal from the Betty Crocker website, or do I just pull things from my pantry, refrigerator, and the freezer to make something totally…….new? Well, the way I cook, it all tastes like mac ‘n cheese.

It was the same way with picking the right curriculum for my family. Do I pull together all the resources I have or look for a complete curriculum package or do I go with the “tried and true” that the Christian school uses? Well, I decided it wouldn’t hurt to look online for additional products. Then I collected catalogs; I even went to in-home seminars. I was overwhelmed with choices! It all sounded so good.

There was the classical approach with its chronological history, and unit studies, where everything is tied to a theme. Or, there's a literature based curriculum with all those good books I never had a chance to read. But our Christian school uses…and we need to include that so they don’t fall behind. Then my friend suggests...Aaah! Read on if you’d like to know how I came to my conclusions.

Combine Three Approaches

Once I initially chose and purchased a curriculum in my early years of home schooling, the doubts started coming. Hey, Emily can’t sit still! School is taking all day….and I’m only teaching one child! Emily hates Latin, chronological history is taking too long and neither one of us can remember the facts for the hands-on projects. And besides, the preparation takes too long, and I’m only teaching one child! So the search starts over again mid-year, with a new curriculum and new approach. If I keep this up, I don’t know what kind of education my child will end up with.

So I researched different home school approaches. Here’s what I found about 3 different approaches and how to combine them effectively. They are the classical, Charlotte Mason and unit studies approaches. I will explain how to take the best of each and have a curriculum that is Biblically-based, low prep, and flexible enough to use with the whole family. After the brief overview of these different approaches, I'll share how My Father’s World puts them together.
In the classical education there are two main ways to go about it. There’s the Hebrew way—which is God-centered. But most classical is done the Greek way—man centered. The Greek way starts with man’s understanding of himself and the universe. It doesn’t start with the Old Testament. It focuses on man’s understanding of the truth. So Homer is very important in the Greek way of classical education. Classical educators studied Latin because that was the primary language for what they read—it was a usable language...for them. The rest of the world is not learning Latin and Greek here in the 21st century; they are learning English. For some parents, a classical education is chronological history, with three sweeps through history following the stages of the Trivium. Those stages are the grammar, logic, and rhetoric stages in which the student moves from gathering information toward abstract thinking, and finally, to learning to persuade others of the truth they’ve learned by communicating well. Classical education may be a good general direction, but often it is time-consuming and, in some ways, impractical.

Someone who took the classical approach and did it in a practical way was Charlotte Mason. She lived in England in the late 1800’s. She believed in treating children as real people who were capable of intelligent thought. She said children need essential ideas, not dry facts, to feed their growing minds. Therefore, the Charlotte Mason method uses—literature or living books versus textbooks, and emphasizes “quality rather than quantity”. Narration involves having the student retell what they’ve just heard or read. Copywork is used for handwriting from literary examples. Spelling and grammar is found modeled in literature. Nature observation is the primary means of early science. Literature, poetry, art and music give children’s minds beautiful ideas to feed on.

Charlotte Mason had a one room schoolhouse that is a practical model for homeschoolers. She squeezed “twaddle” or busy work, classroom seat work, out of the curriculum. She could cover many subjects in a short period of time before the child burned out by switching subjects every 15-20 minutes. The student would work hard in the morning, a structured morning in order to enjoy the free, unstructured afternoons.

Charlotte Mason Approach
- Living Books
- Narration
- Copywork
- Nature Observation

Afternoons are a time for crafts, nature walks, and letting the child be a child.

A different approach is unit studies. Unit Studies emphasize themes. That theme becomes the focus of science, art, literature, music, history, etc. Sometimes this includes math and language arts. For example, if the theme is the Roman world, the student may write in Roman numerals for math, have a Roman feast, without forks, for history. The next unit or theme may be the country of Brazil. So the student would learn about Brazilian music, art, and food; along with studying the Brazilian rain forest. Parents, along with their children, often pick and choose which topic will be studied next and complete many hands-on projects.

I used strictly a unit study approach the one year I didn’t use My Father’s World curriculum. I was concerned with how little transition or flow there was between units, and our studies were often very disjointed. One week we studied dogs, the next, queens and knights. I wondered if I would be able to cover all of history and major science topics this way. There was little, if any, review of previous work. We’d study dogs as our first unit, then kings the next. How can you tie dogs to kings unless you say something about how the kings would take their dogs on hunting trips? It was also very time-consuming, especially in the preparation stage. I realized that even with my teaching experience I couldn’t make the material relevant to a young student all the time. Besides, I was also pulling together a phonics program to teach my child how to read. I decided I didn’t want to become a curriculum junkie, jumping around trying to pull things together. So one morning in October, after crying out to the Lord for wisdom, I typed in an internet search. It began with “homeschool, Biblical (which was important to me), “multi-grade” (because I wanted to duplicate this for my other children), and “character development”—which we needed help with. What I found is described on the following pages.
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My Father’s World Curriculum

Here’s how My Father’s World curriculum tries to unify the preceding approaches while removing the weaknesses and adding a strong Biblical foundation. My Father’s World incorporates the Hebrew method of classical education that focuses on God’s Word and faith.

Starting in Kindergarten, the student is given daily exposure to the Bible. A lot of the copywork comes from Bible memory verses or other great literary sources. My Father’s World adds significant and meaningful Bible exposure that is interwoven throughout the curriculum, from reading and memorizing, to starting from a Biblical perspective for history. That doesn’t mean that first graders are studying ancient Egypt or Greece; instead, they learn God’s truth. They are in that early developmental stage of grammar, or knowledge gathering in classical education. They study God’s Word in their own Bible reader that correlates to their phonics study.

For 2nd and 3rd graders that are the oldest in the family, there is the Adventures program that gives the students an overview in early American history. Still your 7&8 yr. olds are not being exposed to an understanding of the world religions, but getting what is developmentally appropriate with the 50 states overview, patriotic symbols and the names of Jesus tied to the science topics. Their hands-on projects include making a history notebook. My children love to look back to their “memory books”, as they think of them.

As I mentioned before, My Father’s World is developmentally appropriate for each level of your children’s education. More information about a Charlotte Mason education can be found in the book, “For the Children’s Sake” by Susan Schaeffer Macaulay, available at The Knowledge Exchange. It emphasizes the need to learn about the world around them. MFW does this by starting with a year of geography.

MFW provides the plans for well-connected units that flow through the classical sequence of history.

Year One in the My Father’s World curriculum is designed to give the student the context of where things are in the world before they begin learning what happened there in history. This year is called Exploring Countries and Cultures, and that’s what is done. Students explore the different cultures and countries by completing mapwork, hands-on projects including cooking, and reading about the missionaries that worked in those cultures. When we read about Nate Saint, the missionary in Ecuador, we read about the rain forest in South America, we also studied about the animals that live in the canopy, and forest floor. When we located Egypt and the Nile River we defined “the mouth of a river” and its “delta”. The following year in Creation to the Greeks, when we talked about the Egyptians and the crops that were harvested by the Nile River, my children will already have a concept they learned about that geographical location and terms.

Years 2 through 5 cover history in a chronological order. The period in history becomes the unit, the Bible provides the framework. MFW provides the plans for well-connected units that flow through the classical sequence of history. This year in “Rome to the Reformation”, when we reached the time when Galileo was alive, we studied astronomy. My children complete a timeline and history notebooks starting from Creation, now through 1850. A child using MFW would be in 3rd through 8th grade. MFW combines a couple of paragraphs from textbooks, such as Streams of Civilization, and stories from living books, and does a project or two to develop the topic.

Next, I’ll describe how this curriculum lets you teach all of your children Bible, science, and history together!
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The Family Cycle

My Father’s World is a low prep curriculum that combines grades to include the children in the family cycle. When my youngest child was a kindergartener and 1st grader, she worked on her own work—learning to read. She had not joined the cycle yet. Looking at the diagram on the right, she was stepping up getting ready to join her older siblings in the cycle. But in the early year, teaching them to read is the most important thing we do. But once she was in second grade, she joined her brother and sister already in the cycle no matter where they were. My children who are in 2nd, 4th and 8th grade work together on their science, Bible, and history and geography. For example, I teach to the oldest. She learns geography, and the younger ones are getting something: joining in to color flags, play a geography game and listen to the music.

Since my oldest daughter started the program when she was in the third grade, she went through part of the cycle again before high school. When that happened, she had additional assignments that are only given to those in the upper grades of the cycle of the years she repeated. She was able to get a lot more depth out of the study then she did when she was younger. My son started in the third year of history but he has studied those years again before high school. So your students continue moving through the cycle until high school, when they move to doing their work independent of the family cycle.

Multi-grade Assignments

MFW offers assignments in many different ways so each one of your children may understand in their best learning style, and develop skills in their weakest areas. There is the visual learner who likes to see the words you read, draw pictures to illustrate the summaries, and enjoys adding color and pictures. The auditory learner likes to hear their information. These are the children that do well with narration. Then there’s the kinesthetic learner; the child that learns by doing, touching, tasting. Wouldn’t you know that I have one of each! MFW really touches on each of these learning styles so each of my children is exposed to doing their assignments in different ways, hopefully challenging their weak areas. For example, my second grader usually colors pictures then glues them into her notebook and may identify what is in the picture. My 4th grader copies sentences from the board he dictated to me to add to his illustrations. My 7th grade daughter, who is the visual one, draws borders on her pictures, labels part of the picture and writes her own paragraph or more about the topic.

Most programs make the student read, read, read everything themselves. What is happening is they are learning to hate to read! Don’t hand them the books. Instead have them learn to love to read by giving them a lot of good literary works to listen to, and provide a book basket with books to look at. My Father’s World uses a book basket that is filled with books with lots of pictures, non-fiction books with captions to scan, and all with lots of information about a topic of study.

By the time they’ve reached the “learning by reading” stage in high school, they’ve learned how to enjoy books and find the information from the books. In the high school program, they will receive a credit in Bible, history, and literature.

My Father’s World packages, including the teacher’s manual and other supporting materials are available in The Knowledge Exchange. There are a lot of living books, as well as other subjects that can be integrated into your home school setting!