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Plato’s Dialogues and Active Learning: building and scaffolding underprepared college students’ lower-order Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing Skills

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Once Upon a Time

- A graduate student who had been studying with other grad students
- Had excelled in and enjoyed learning
- Had been taught, read, discussed, puzzled over Plato.
- Saw something attractive in Plato’s dialogues, desired to study them further
- Starting out teaching undergraduates, wanted to communicate or introduce what found so captivating, so desirable
But what is teaching undergraduate students like?

• Students are all too often underprepared for college-level work
  – Intellectual/knowledge
  – Emotional/affective
  – Moral/practical

• Lack scaffolded skills needed to adequately understand platonic dialogues
  – Reading
  – Critical Thinking
  – Writing

• Provide us with clueless, ill-informed, uncritical, poorly written products

• Professors often don’t grasp what difficulties students will have
  – Often set sights too high
  – Expect students to be motivated
  – Expect students to have some idea what they’re doing

• Professors assume material is fairly easy to grasp and work with
  – It was easy (for them) in terms of lower-order skills
  – It was challenging (but possible for them) in terms of higher-order skills
Active Learning and Passive, Underprepared Students

• When Platonic dialogues taught well, they model dimensions of active learning to students
  – Argument
  – Desire to know, to test, to find out what is true, good, beautiful
• Passive attitude on student’s part is very common obstacle to engaging teaching and learning
  – Expecting to be given answers rather than work one’s way towards them
  – Unused to active attitude of learning, feel it to be uncomfortable, perhaps even painful, feel themselves at a loss, resourceless
  – Lack of responsibility, ownership over one’s learning and education, lack of direction
  – Even the most engaging pedagogies do not work with passive students who are not successively engaged on multiple levels
• What do we do about deep-rooted student passivity?
Professor’s Danger of *Misomathy*

- Plato’s discussion of *misology* (Phaedo)
- How does one become misanthropist?
  - Unwarranted trust placed in person after person
  - Get let down by them
  - Decide everyone will let one down
- One becomes misologist in the same way
  - Logos = reason, argument, rational account
  - Unwarranted trust placed in rational accounts
  - Get let down by them
  - Decide every rational account will let one down
- Misologist hates reasoning

- *Misomathy*: hate or distrust of students (Gr: *mathetes*)
- Same dynamic
  - Unwarranted trust placed in the possibilities of students grasping texts, doing work
  - Get let down by them time after time, class after class
  - Decide everyone will let one down
  - Quit trying to reach students where they are
- Basic failure inherent to all of these
  - Cognitively: wrong assumptions, not based on observations
  - Emotionally: immature attitude
  - Morally: failure to plan, to consider means and ends
Taking a cue from Plato’s Student

- Plato is gesturing upwards, towards the heavens, higher things
- Aristotle is gesturing downwards, towards the bases, lower things
- What do the gestures tell you?
- Here, let’s take an Aristotelian approach to Platonic dialogues (APD)
Teaching our students lower order skills

• Platonic dialogues are primarily designed to engage, develop, and orient students into what we recognize as higher-order skills
• Before they can engage in higher-order skills (e.g. writing close reading papers),
  – Students have to develop, practice, understand lower order skills
  – Multilayer, mutually supporting scaffolding
• Plato and Aristotle
  – Aristotle:
    • Need solid basis to build on progressively
    • Have to understand and shape desires and emotions
    • Students eventually need to be able to conceptualize where they are going
    • Alternately coaxing and impressing further form to already formed matter
  – Plato: desire leading to higher levels still beyond
• We can eventually lead some students to be able to fully engage with Plato’s dialogues – the way we like to and would like to be possible for them
We should remember Plato’s cave

- Prisoners took time to adjust, had to make small, incremental steps – gradual, scaffolded improvement
But Why Platonic Dialogues Then?

• Plato is part of cultural heritage of world literature
• The corpus of Platonic dialogues and possess intrinsic value
• Instrumental / Pedagogical value to Plato’s dialogues
• All of this makes Plato ideal as object and dialogue partner for lifelong learning for our students
If we want lifelong learning.

• Setting Down a Base: help students learn and practice basic skills using Plato’s texts
• Building Confidence: show them they can understand Plato in progressive stages
• Scaffolding Skills: we design course engagements to build lower-order skills into higher order skills
• Generating Friendship: we have to deeply familiarize our students with Plato’s dialogues
• Awakening Desire: show our students (a little) there remains yet more valuable for them to learn by continuing to engage Platonic dialogues
So. . . Which Lower-Order Skills?

- Take a moment and think about:
- Which lower-order skills *can* be focused on using Plato’s dialogues as content?
- Which lower-order skills *should* be focused on when Plato’s dialogues are being studied?
- Which lower-order skills are most useful in moving students towards sets of higher-order skills we’d like to see them be able to bring to studying Plato?
Practicing Lower Order Reading Skills

• Take a passage in a dialogue in class
  – Read passage aloud / have student read it
  – Ask students to explain what is being said in passage on literal level

• Identify characters, speeches and positions
  – In dialogue, have students read it as dialogue
  – Ask students to identify who is saying what speech
  – Ask students to determine positions of interlocutors
  – See if students can determine attitudes of interlocutors towards each other
Practicing Lower Order Reading Skills

• Understand significance of passage
  – Have students identify main theme(s) of passages
  – Have students focus in on really key portions, even words of passages
  – Ask students to label the genre of the passage (is it argument, joking around, a myth or story, background information?)

• Compare passages for patterns
  – Ask students to note recurring patterns from one passage to next
  – Discuss how passages lead into each other – narrative progression
Types of sample reading assignments

• Have students try to discern key themes in passages
  – Republic, bk. 1: Cephelas’ speech (old age, desire, wealth)
  – Crito, Socrates’ first main speech (wise vs. many, whose opinion we should care about)
  – Apology, first speech (why there is prejudice against Socrates, who has knowledge)

• Have students discuss what kind of people they think Socrates and the other interlocutors are
  – Identify ethos/character type
  – Explain what cues in the passage give that impression
Practicing lower-order writing skills

• Writing useful notes on readings
  – Sequentially
  – With notecards
• Quoting or paraphrasing another person accurately
• Writing a coherent paragraph
  – Summarizing main points in a passage
  – With a position in mind, generating new examples to illustrate a point, or to test a case
  – Compiling short passages that provide coherent understanding of the ethos of an interlocutor
  – Journaling about a passage and one’s understanding, evaluation, attitude, reaction
  – Comparing or Contrasting two people’s points of view on one topic
One type of sample writing assignment

• Pick striking images or ideas, have students focus on them and write
  – Cite passage and document properly
  – Explain literal meaning of the idea or image
  – Discuss broader significance of idea or image
  – Write about one’s own reaction to it, or reflections on it

• Examples:
  – Republic book 2, Ring of Gyges
  – Crito, the Laws of Athens arguing with Socrates
  – Apology, Socrates’ divine “sign”
  – Symposium, Aristophanes’s Speech
Practicing lower-order Critical Thinking skills

- Shorter, less complex arguments
  - Identifying the main claims made by interlocutors
  - Connecting the other claims made by interlocutors to support main claims
  - Reconstructing or summarizing the structure of arguments made
  - Evaluating the arguments

- Grasping Socrates’ examples as examples illustrating larger points

- Handling and connecting information provided in passages

- Articulating one’s own positions
  - Providing justification for positions one takes on passages
  - Applying arguments, distinctions, concepts to other situations

- Thinking reflectively about one’s own life, actions, relationships, habits
Progression towards higher-order skills and associated activities

• Multiple forms of assessment: peer, self, instructor
• Integration and furthering of lower-order skills
• Assignments should be designed to lead suggestively beyond themselves
  – Opening new vistas or vantage points
  – Making connections which need to be followed out
  – Raising and addressing seeming contradictions
• Getting students to think and wonder about how philosophical positions and associated ways of life play out in the long run
• Show students that passages might have more than one theme, require more than one key idea
• Discuss function of Socratic irony with them
Dee Fink’s Six Dimensions of Significant Learning

- Foundational knowledge
- Application
- Integration
- Human dimension
- Caring
- Learning how to learn.

Dimensions stressed by the APD Approach

• Integration
  – Progressively linking together developed lower-order skills enabling students to start learning, practicing higher-order skills

• Human dimension
  – Finding their own places among the character’s positions in the dialogues
  – Recognizing attitudes of others in the dialogues

• Caring
  – Moving away from passive to active, engaged attitude
  – Becoming interested in understanding the subjects of the dialogues

• Learning how to learn
  – Learning what lower order skills need to be worked on
  – Learning how to progressively move into Platonic dialogues
Questions?

• Fuller treatment of these matters available (only in part at present) on portion of my faculty website devoted to Close Readings
  http://faculty.uncfsu.edu/gsadler/Close%20Reading/CL.htm

• My general faculty website: http://faculty.uncfsu.edu/gsadler/