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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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# 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

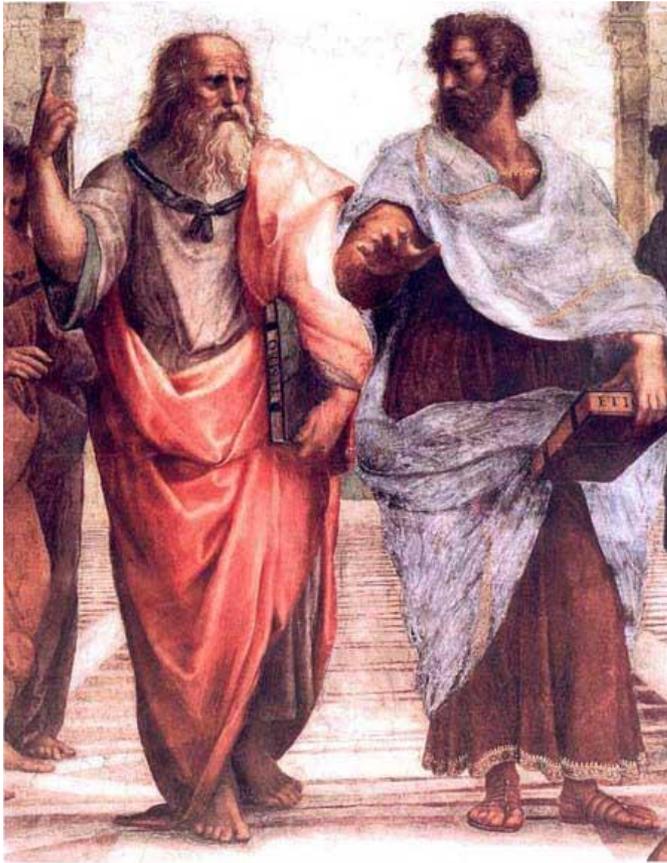
# Active Learning and Passive, Underprepared Students

- 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



Detail from facing page: Plato the teacher, in the likeness of Leonardo da Vinci and holding his *Timaeus*, strides alongside Aristotle, his greatest pupil, on our right and holding his great work: *The Ethics*.

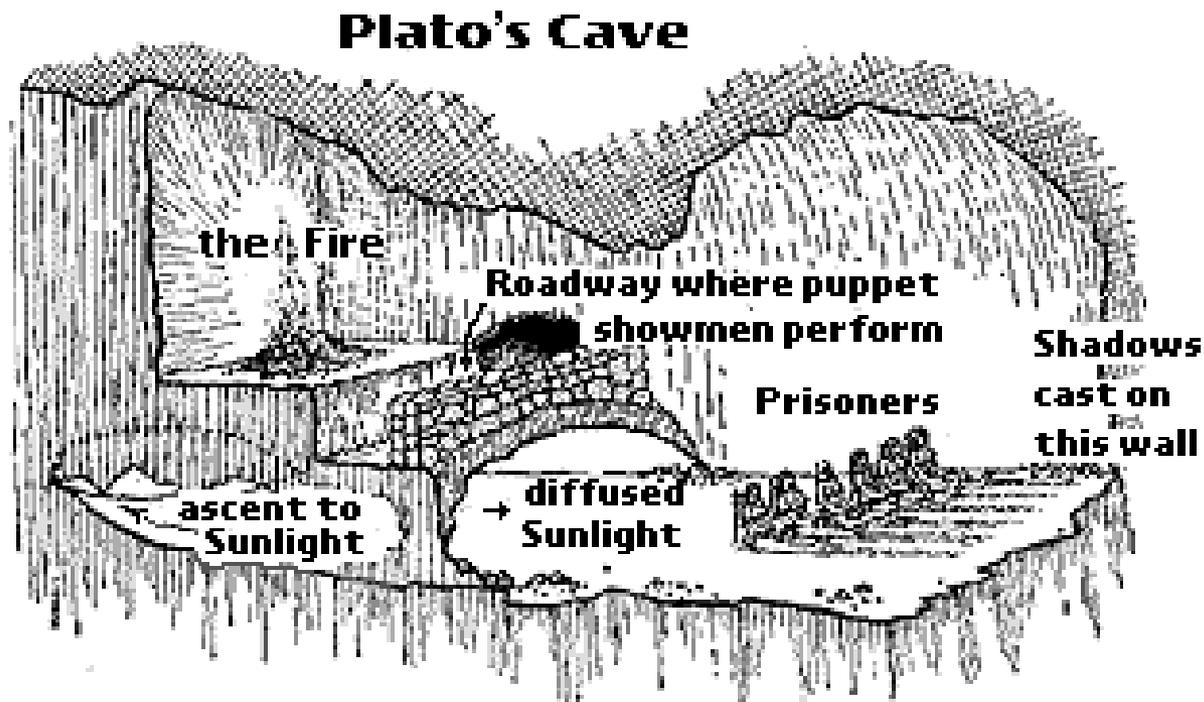
- Plato is gesturing upwards, towards the heavens, higher things
- Aristotle is gesturing downwards, towards the bases, lower things
- What do the gestures tell you?
- Here, let's take an Aristotelian approach to Platonic dialogues (APD)

# 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: Cephalas' 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.

*Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses (2003)*

# 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/>