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Introduction

Education—what it means to be a teacher, what it means to be a student—was a central concern for Plato in a way that is rare for great philosophers. Perhaps only Confucius and John Dewey make education as central to their overall philosophy. Yet, despite Plato's immense influence on philosophy, there has been little effort in contemporary times to apply his philosophy of education to the teaching of philosophy itself. Discussion of the best practices for teaching and learning are left largely to education specialists working in separate schools of education. This has been a loss for both the scholarship of teaching and learning and for Plato scholarship. Education specialists frequently have found themselves reinventing models of education that were pioneered by Plato long ago. Plato scholars, on the other hand, are keenly aware of the importance of education for Plato, but they have not always had the advantage of thinking about his educational ideas in the light of living educational practice.

Consider, for instance, Paolo Freire's famous discussion of the "transmission" or "banking" model in education. In chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire complains about rote teaching, where teachers simply recite a narrative or litany of facts that the students receive passively. On this model of education, the task of the teacher "is to 'fill' the students with the contents of his narration."[1] Freire complains that students on this model are transformed

> into "containers," into "receptacles" to be "filled" by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are.[2]

The error of the transmission model should be familiar to scholars of Plato, because that is also how he characterized the idea of education he was opposed to. In the *Republic*, during the cave analogy, Socrates says, "Education isn't what some people declare it to be, namely putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes" (518c).[3] In the *Symposium*, Socrates laments that education does not follow a simple transition model,

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> How wonderful it would be, dear Agathon, if the foolish were filled with wisdom simply by touching the wise. If only wisdom were like water, which always flows from a full cup into an empty one when we connect them with a piece of yarn (175e).

Plato knew as well as Freire that teaching does not consist of knowledge moving from teacher to student. Moreover, everything about the model of Socrates as a teacher is designed to counteract the same flaws in the banking model that Freire was concerned about. Freire chafed at the idea that "the teacher knows everything and the student knows nothing."[4] Plato gives us a teacher who claims to know nothing and who is only a midwife to the knowledge that his interlocutors are birthing for themselves. Freire wanted teachers to engage students in liberating dialogue. Plato depicts Socrates as doing just that.

The essays gathered here draw rich connections between Plato's concept of education and contemporary ideas in educational theory, all the while giving concrete advice for how to practically apply these theories in your classroom. Rebecca Scott's essay, "Learning to Love Wisdom," offers a reading of the educational philosophy developed in the *Symposium* that links it to contemporary theorizing about the role of affectivity and creativity in education. But the essay doesn't just point out that what is being said now was already said by Diotima; it offers up classroom activities for teaching *The Symposium* that embody that philosophy. The connections between current and past philosophies of education are made alive by practical ideas for working teachers.

Glenn Rawson's essay, "Critical Thinking in Higher Education, and Following the Arguments with Plato's Socrates," also argues that Plato anticipated ideas in contemporary theories of education and presents a technique for teaching Plato that lives up to those ideas. But the model of Platonic education that Rawson is concerned with is explicitly not the creative and affective model in *Symposium*. It is the more basic model of education as promoting critical thinking using student-centered, active-learning techniques. The teaching technique presented is based around writing, presenting, and discussing arguments from a Platonic dialogue. This gives us a picture of how to teach more like the analytic Plato, and less like the romantic Plato of the *Symposium*.

Patrick Lee Miller's essay, "Leaving Plato's Cave," offers the boldest vision of Platonic education: education as conversion. Here the main source for thinking about Plato's theory of education is the *Republic*. In our discussion of Freire above, we quoted the famous line from the *Republic* that education isn't like putting sight into blind eyes. Miller begins with Socrates's follow up to that comment: Education is like turning someone to face the light, in a situation where you can't just turn their eyes. You must turn the whole body. This idea of education as complete transformation is repeated in the contemporary teaching literature, for instance, in L. Dee Fink's idea of creating "significant learning experiences."[5] Here, as in Scott's essay, the student activities presented ask students to tap into their lives and experiences, this time

relating them to ideas in the *Republic*. This practical connection indicates a link between the models of education presented in the *Symposium* and the *Republic*.

Other essays in the volume do not explicitly link Platonic and modern theories of education, but they do pursue distinctly Platonic goals and link those efforts with contemporary efforts to pursue those goals. In "Ideals vs. Definitions," Robin Weiss goes into battle against a classic Platonic foe: relativism. In the contemporary classroom, this relativism is less likely to be advocated by cunning sophists and more likely to come from students who believe that it is actually a necessary component of the virtue of tolerance. Strategies for dealing with "student relativism" have been the subject of many papers in the journal *Teaching Philosophy*. (See Weiss's bibliography.) In "Ideals vs. Definitions," Weiss proposes teaching a specific interpretation of the theory of the forms as a tool for combating student relativism. This is brought out largely dialogically, as a conversation you can have with students using a sequence of examples.

Audrey Anton's essay, "Teaching Plato's Cave through Your Students' Past Experiences," also addresses the issue of how to get students to understand the theory of the forms. As the title says, the activity presented here asks students to relate the Allegory of the Cave to their own experiences. In this sense, Anton's essay superficially resembles Miller's essay. However, the goals of the two exercises are very different, and this means that the assignments are structured very differently. In Plato's terms, Miller was trying to effect fundamental change in the students' souls by asking them to reflect on their selves and their lives. Anton is interested in getting students to understand the content of the theory of the forms and the details of the relationship between the images of the sun, the line, and the cave. As a result, her activities focus less on self-scrutiny and more on finding detailed connections between the students and the parts of the analogies presented in the *Republic*. For Anton, this is an example of what the contemporary education literature calls "experiential education," which actually has a different emphasis than Fink's "significant learning experiences" discussed by Miller.

Robert Colter and Joseph Ulatowski develop a model of Platonic teaching by considering differences in Socrates's behavior across many dialogues. They argue that Socrates carefully calibrated his teaching style to fit his audience. He is combative with people who need to be brought down a notch, but nurturing to those who need to be lifted. Unsurprisingly, the nurturing Socrates turns out to be a more effective teacher than the combative Socrates. What's more interesting, though, is that the nurturing Socrates again anticipates many important trends in educational theory. Socrates's conversations with people like Theaetetus and Meno's slave boy show careful use of what we now call "scaffolded learning," "controlled failure," and "active learning." Unlike other authors in this volume, Colter and Ulatowski do not provide us with particular classroom exercises. They do, however, provide the most detailed comparison of Platonic and modern pedagogy.

Carla Johnson's essay, "Finding Philosophy in Plato's *Apology*," on the other hand, is rich in practical advice. She offers a sequence of exercises that allow students to explore their ideas about what philosophy is and how they relate to the images of philosophy that Socrates presents in the *Apology*. Like the essays by Scott, Miller, and Anton, "Finding Philosophy" emphasizes the importance of tapping students' prior knowledge and experiences. Johnson invokes contemporary scholarship on teaching and learning to show that doing this increases student engagement, critical thinking, and depth of understanding.

The last essay that offers practical teaching strategies linked to contemporary scholarship on teaching and learning is José Haro's "Teaching the Trial and Death of Socrates." Haro is interested in placing Socrates in the larger historical and cultural context and describes an assignment where students visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see a marble bust of Socrates and the painting *The Death of Socrates* by Jacques-Louis David. The students then write an essay where they imagine giving someone a tour of the Met and showing them these works. This exercise is situated in the work of Paulo Freire, specifically Freire's bottomless respect for the dignity and ability of the student. Haro does not draw a connection back to Plato's own pedagogy here, but readers of Colter and Ulatowski's essay can. Although we more often hear about the combative Socrates, Plato's dialogues are also filled with descriptions of a more nurturing, collaborative Socrates who would fit right in with Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed.

Plato's dialogues offer us both philosophical subject matter and an image for how to teach philosophically. Hopefully the essays in this volume will make us better teachers of Plato and better Platonic teachers.

J. Robert Loftis
Elyria, Ohio

Notes

1. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 71.
2. Ibid, 72.
3. All passages from Plato are taken from *Plato: Collected Works*, ed. John M. Cooper.
4. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 73.
5. Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences.*

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