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## Platonic Dialogue in Cyber Age: Implications for Higher Education

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### Abstract

There have been numerous theories about the teaching methodologies, ranging from the old time Grammar Translation Method (GTM) to the modern communicative approaches. It is intriguing that the modern theories of learning that emphasize the cognitive aspects of knowledge and its inculcation seem to have their precedents in the Greek masters' pedagogical practices. One cannot fail to notice that, unlike the controlled atmosphere of modern-day classrooms, Socrates used a much more open and fluid methodology to inculcate knowledge in the minds of his pupils. That 'dialogic' imagination not only transferred the existing knowledge but also, in the process, transformed it through the raising of questions and their multiple/possible answers.

What are the implications of that method in our era of postmodern uncertainties and cyber-space states of flux? How can we benefit from the Platonic dialogic methods without sounding too ancient or archaic? Is Platonic dialogue still applicable in this 'dot.com' era is the question which will be addressed in this paper.

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## Introduction

### Method in Madness (Fragmentation or Integration?)

For the modern mind, it would seem insane to suggest the idea of the unification of knowledge. The phenomenal growth in all branches of knowledge, and its classification into so many sub-fields led to the emphasis on the specialization and expertise in one field or subject for one scholar.

Now it is unimaginable to dream of becoming a master of philosophy, medicine, mathematics, logic, rhetoric, etc., all rolled into one person. The age of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Avicenna, and Averroes is long over. The ancient philosophy and medicine believed in the wholeness and oneness of reality, whether of the cosmos or the human body. Therefore, the idea of the unification of knowledge prevailed.

In the postmodern decentered universe, everything, including knowledge is fragmented. The Socratic Method and Platonic dialogues were meant to harmonize various branches of knowledge. There was a subtle method in that apparent madness. It is apparent that one way traffic of the flow of knowledge from the teacher to the student has no space for communication, analysis and required skepticism in raising questions and developing understanding about a given subject.

In contrast to the present day strict demarcation of subjects into the categories of arts, science, engineering etc., Plato emphasizes on keeping a balance in the subjects he recommends to be taught. For example, when he talks about music, he warns that too much of it can be as dangerous as too much athletics. To be merely an athletic is to be nearly a savage and merely a musician is to be ‘melted and softened beyond what is good’ (410).

Then talking of integration he says as reported by Durant (1985) that music should be used to ‘provide attractive forms for the sometimes unappetizing contents of mathematics, history and science, there is no reason why for the you these difficult studies should not be smoothed in verse and beautified with song’. Music and gymnastics have a wider meaning here. ‘Music’ means everything that is the province of the muses and as wide as what we call culture – to be devoted to making men ‘gentlemen’ as interpreted by Russell (1991).

Plato’s subtle soul found a new joy in the ‘dialectic’ game of Socrates, it was a delight to behold the master deflating dogmas and puncturing presumption with the sharp point of his

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questions (Durant 1985). This question-answer session was not a mere debate but a careful analysis and fruitful discussion. The creation of ‘Socratic dialogues’ was an inescapable necessity for him.

## **1.1. Socratic Method in Platonic Dialogues**

To understand Plato’s method of instruction we need to know the objectives he set for education, the subjects he recommended to be taught and their integration, prerequisites, qualities of human behavior, his philosophy and evaluation required for such education as has been explained below.

### **1.1 Objectives**

The objectives Plato had defined for his method of instruction were to discover the wisest and the best men and then to enable and persuade them to rule. Plato was astounded at the folly of leaving at the mob's caprice and gullibility, the selection of political officials. He says when we are ill we do not want a handsome or an eloquent physician but a competent one. When the whole state is ill, should we not look for the service and guidance of the wisest and the best. ‘To devise a method of barring incompetence and knavery from public office and of selecting and preparing the best to rule for the common good’ was the purpose of his life as stated by Durant (1985).

### **1.2. Subjects**

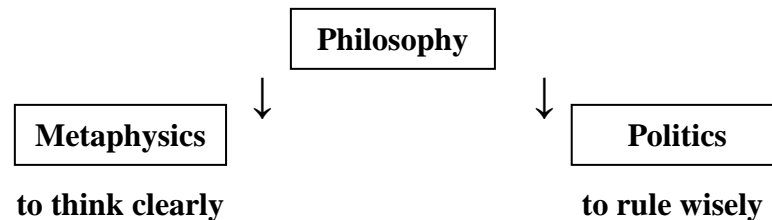
Khalid (1998) reports that the moral traits of character, such as whole-mindedness, temperance, subjection of passion to reason, patience, courage and consideration for the right and wrong was developed through gymnastics, in the world of Plato.

After the initial period of gymnastics, Plato recommends the study of music to prepare a gentle nature which has also great courage. Through music, the soul learns harmony and rhythm and even a disposition to justice, for, ‘can he who is harmoniously constituted ever be unjust? (401 Protagoras 326).

Mathematics is another subject which he thought was an indispensable prelude to philosophy and its highest form. On the door of his academy was written, ‘Let no man ignorant of geometry enter here’. It seems to us unwise to have insisted on teaching geometry

to the younger Dionysius tyrant of Syracuse, in order to make him a good king, but from Plato's point of view it was essential. He was sufficiently Pythagorean to think that without mathematics no true wisdom is possible.

Plato also advocates the teaching of philosophy and calls it 'dear delight philosophy' meaning two things:



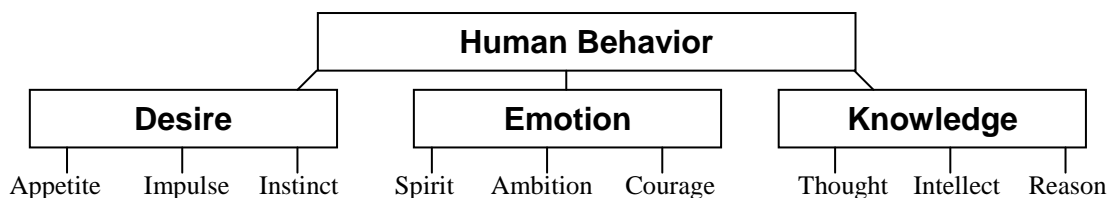
Plato recommends arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and harmony not to be pursued in any utilitarian spirit, but in order to prepare the learners' minds for the vision of eternal things.

### 1.4. Prerequisites

Contrary to the current prerequisites for entry into the institution of higher education, Plato proceeds by giving the prerequisites of education, that a young man is selected on the ground of a combination of intellectual and moral qualities. He must be just and gentle, fond of learning, with a good memory and a harmonious mind.

### 1.5. Human Behavior

The sources of human behavior according to Plato are as follows.



There are only a few people with the third type of human behavior i.e., knowledge and these are the ones '... whose delight is in meditation and understanding; who yearn not for goods, not for victory, but for knowledge who leave both market and battle-field to lose

themselves in the quiet clarity on secluded thought; whose will is a light rather than fire. Whose heaven is not power but truth' (Durant: 1985). Gravity, decorum, temperance and courage seem to be the qualities mainly to be cultivated through education. Decorum demands that there should never be loud laughter.

## **1.6. Knowledge & Philosophy**

Plato draws a distinction between 'knowledge' and 'opinion'. According to him, 'those who see the absolute and eternal and immutable may be said to know, and not to have opinion only'. How to express an opinion might be part of some of our courses but there is no training imparted on actually having and building an opinion based on knowledge. In his opinion, philosopher is a man who 'loves the vision of truth'. Philosophy is not purely intellectual, it is not merely wisdom, but love of wisdom. Anyone who has done any kind of creative work has experienced, in a greater or less degree, the state of mind in which, after long labour truth or beauty appears or seems to appear (Russell:1991).

Plato also explains the difference between clear intellectual vision and the confused vision of sense perception. He proclaimed the rights and necessity of free thought. To him good meant intelligence and virtue meant wisdom.

## **1.7. Evaluation and Examination**

Contrary to the present examination system, in which the students start getting tested from class one, Plato suggested the age of twenty for the first test. But then it was not merely an academic examination, it had practical as well as theoretical part, 'there shall be toils and pains and conflicts prescribed for them' (413). The test was impartial and impersonal.

Those who passed their first test would receive ten more years of education and training in body and mind and character. Then they would face a second test far severer than the first. On getting success in the second test they received further education in philosophy and would be the guardians and rulers of the state, ultimately.

## **1.8. The Dialogue**

Plato is the creator of the genre of dialogue. Today's man of the fast food taste finds the quick to-and-for flight of its shuttlecock, difficult to follow and he prefers ideas to be expounded directly. Plato adopted it because discussion by conversation was the method of his most favorite and reverend teacher, Socrates, and in his opinion the best safe guard of

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clear thinking. We have the impression of Socrates not as a mere producer of philosophical theory, but as a man talking dramatic value. The problem and issues discussed in dialogues arise naturally in the course of conversation, instead of being dragged into the foreground by an author who wishes to argue about them. For instance, in the Crito an ordinary talk between friends leads to a discussion of the rights of the state in an admirably natural way and in the Phaedo to a debate on Immortality.

## **2. The Platonic Dialogue has the following Characteristics:**

### **2.1. Openings**

Openings of these dialogues are marvelous yet simple. Nothing could be more masterly than the grace and naturalness of the opening of a Platonic dialogue.

### **2.2. Representation of the Society**

These dialogues present a vivid picture of the urban, educated society.

### **2.3. General Construction**

The general construction of the dialogues is pretty admirable; particularly in the Phaedo, the breaks and pauses in the conversation, the development of the argument and its successive steps are perfectly managed.

### **2.4. Truth**

When Plato came to the hard business of discussion, he was not concerned with variety or art but with truth. During this period his conversation took the most direct road to a conclusion. Socrates is only interested in bringing the truth to light, not in winning an argument. (Gorgias 457 E)

### **2.5. Inquiry and Discovery**

Plato describes in Apology, 'Going about in the world, obedient to the god, I seek and make inquiry into the wisdom of citizens and strangers, whether any one of them appears wise. And if he is not wise then in the vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise' (23 B)

To educate means to evoke knowledge. But knowledge is not something which in communicating pipes, 'runs from the full to the empty' (Symposium 175 D). The perennial principle of education here is what the individual can discover himself. A person will say the

right things if one can put the right questions to him. This is the kind of dialogue that does not simply conquer and discard the opposing elements, but gives concrete expression to the struggle and conquest itself in the work of art.

## **2.6. Process of Change**

About the process through which the guardians of the state will be produced, Plato says, ‘the process ... is not the turning over of one oyster-shell, but the turning around of a soul passing from a day with little better than night to the true day of being, the ascent from below, which we affirm to be true philosophy ‘(521C: Republic).

## **2.7. Theory of Recollection**

Recollection is central in the dialogue form. The loving teacher, the ‘midwife’, produces his own formal approach. The dialogue through which the pupil finds the way to truth is a process of continuous, critical affirmation and negation.

## **2.8. Accidental Elements**

The Platonic dialogue mirrors Socratic conversation but it necessarily differs from the latter, in the final analysis. Plato could not tolerate any accidental elements in his work. He was compelled to select the participants and to integrate them into the work according to aesthetic requirements to attune the surroundings to the inner content, to strip the natural setting of accidental factors so that it could become an effective agent in the total work. Such teaching demands concentration for long hours and seclusion where such dialogues can take place without disturbance.

## **2.9. Entrance Exams**

Then what Plato says about the ‘Selection of participants’ clearly relates it to the requirements of entrance examinations for various courses.

## **2.10. Physical Setting of Classroom**

Plato placed the encounters with his pupils in the gymnasia, or even in the Apodyterion as in the Euthydemus and the major part of the Lysis – to provide an appropriate setting for the mental gymnastics and a concrete image of the intellectual undressing with which he liked to play, or possibly to represent his own educational ideas through a parallelism of physical and intellectual discipline.

### **2.11. Motivated Learners**

Plato only selected such participants and situations as promised to be fruitful. They had to be highly motivated, committed and dedicated to the pursuit of truth and willing to undertake pains.

### **2.12. Comparison with Buddha**

The educational conversation and competitive debates of the Platonic dialogues, in which Plato's characters are indulged in discourse with Socrates, are closer to the sermons of Buddha who communicated to the monks in conversation the dogma of suffering, the origin of suffering, and the right path, to attract keenly debating opponents to doctrine.

### **2.13. Lengthy Dialogues**

Plato has been criticized for very lengthy dialogues in which one keeps teaching and the interlocutor is restricted to the comments like 'Yes' or 'No', and 'What do you mean?' The people with such criticism do not see the depth of the philosophical rhetoric and gullibly compare it to technical rhetoric. The beginning of the Theaetetus would be sufficient evidence that he was perfectly clear even in theory, about the basic principles of the dialogue as an art form. Just as he makes the reporter repeat the conversation in its dramatic simplicity in order to avoid the cumbersome interlocutory remarks, so he would not have hesitated to cut out interruptions by the participants altogether. But his inner need for dialogue conquered all objections.

### **2.14. Need Based Education**

Plato believed that there is no ready-made knowledge simply transferable from one person to another. Philosophy is an activity, level of which is invariably determined by one's partner involved in the activity either the peer or the teacher. Every philosophical conversation conducted by Socrates in Plato's dialogues is new and different, according to different partners. Philosophical rhetoric is conducted from a constantly changing perspective that reveals different heights and breadths and different aspects of the total horizon. What the Greeks discovered long ago we are still way behind and struggling to find the right system! Today we have a number of universities around us, however, there is still a dire need for the introduction of need based education.

### **2.15. Ready-made Answers**

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In Platonic dialogues the teacher does not provide ready-made answers. The students find them by asking various questions that are not simply open ended questions to which the teacher responds. The questions are framed in such a manner so that understanding of the concepts is enhanced through one's own queries. Then we also observe that everything may not have one correct answer. For example in the first half of the Theaetetus, a definition of 'Knowledge' is tried to be established. But the dialogue ends without arriving at any but a negative conclusion; several definitions are proposed and objected, but no definition that is considered, satisfactory is suggested.

### **3. Application in the Present Education System**

Now that we have briefly looked into the rationale, objectives, philosophy of education subjects to be taught along with their pre requirements and need for integration and the characteristics of the Platonic dialogue, the question arises, whether this form of instruction is applicable in the present system of education?

Well, the present system of education in the world, especially in Pakistan, is inclined towards producing the first (skilled) and the second (soldiers) category of the people that Plato mentioned, whereas the ultimate aim of his method of education was to produce the third category – the wisest, the rulers. This is the category of the people which is direly needed in countries like Pakistan, who are trained to think, who do not come up with a ready made answer like a machine but are able to look at an issue from various perspectives enhancing and developing their vision as well as of their interlocutors.

Out of his recommended subjects, music in its broader concept and mathematics are still considered important especially in the first ten years of education. Philosophy has lost attraction to many however astronomy has got popularity in the form of aerospace.

Although his objectives differ – from ours, his concept of human behaviors and search for knowledge and truth is still practicable. Next, his idea of providing need-based education has been picked up by many and even included in the Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2000) of Pakistan. Plato's thoughtful selection of the participants of his dialogue is reflected in its basic form in the present entrance examinations of many educational institutions. The only difference is of the objectives which is a big one.

Then the strict measures and high standards of the examination suggested by Plato is something that we need to implement as our examination system has many weaknesses and loopholes. Moreover, it tests only memory and not ‘knowledge’ as explained by Plato.

So far as the dialogue itself is concerned, it will rather be too much and too difficult to adopt it in its original form because of the time limits, curriculum constraints, large classes, emphasis on skill based learning and untrained teachers. Never the less, this method can be adapted according to the various needs and situations of the learners just like Edge (1991) who has based his idea of ‘Collaborative Development’ on the ‘inquiry’ and vision of truth’ of Plato.

#### **4. English Language Teaching and Platonic Dialogue**

In the contemporary studies, there is a tendency to consider classical rhetoric exclusively as a public art in which formal speeches are delivered to an assembly. Although the modern ideas of giving presentations, Shehzad (2003) and Reinhart (2002) are almost similar to Plato’s use of the five Greek canons of delivery, the psychology of discourse (memory), invention, arrangement and style but differ in the ‘interdependent exchange of ideas and emotions, the push and pull of spiraling intellectual and psychological inquiry’, Welch (1988:10). Jowett (1928:306) further supports this view, ‘The art of disputation, then is not confined to the courts and the assembly, but is one and the same in every use of language’.

One-to-one dialectics is based on philosophical rhetoric involving inquiry. Here passivity precludes dialectic. For example, the literary characters of Phaedrus, Alcibiades and Thrasymachus presented in *Phaedrus*, *Symposium* and *Republic* not only interact with Socrates but also with the environment they populate. These active interlocutors dare to challenge Socrates and are challenged back. This verbal interchange of persuasion and belief contradicts with the everyday available ELT books based on role plays.

However as Welch (1988:11) warns that ‘ this kind of movement, and emphasis on individual responsibility in the rhetorical, dialectical act is not an easy to capture, to codify, even to prescribe, as rhetoric before a large audience whose interaction must by its very nature be difficult to assess’. A great deal of care and planning is needed to introduce the Platonic dialogue in our education system. So a top-down approach is recommended, i.e., starting from the university students. Plato, according to Lunsford and Ede (1984:43) studied the power of the mind to gain meaning from the world and to share meaning with others’. A

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strong relationship between the language courses and power of the mind needs to be established. Hence a great work awaits the materials designers and curriculum developers.

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that Platonic method of instruction is feasible, partially, in the present education system, the basic difference of the objectives of education remains there. We want knowledgeable, skilled and good citizens for sustainable development whereas Durant (1985) reports, Plato wanted those, that survive, scarred, sobered and self-reliant, shorn of scholastic vanity by the merciless friction of life, and armed now with experience, culture and conflict can cooperate to give – these men at last shall automatically become the rulers of the state. In the present political scenario it would suffice to say that if only we could have such training of our leaders, we wouldn't be far behind the advanced nations.

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