



POP IDOL JUDGES UNDERSTAND PLATO

Neither Einstein nor Shakespeare was original, so why are children told that's all that matters, asks Edward Ingram.

First some philosophy. This is what Plato (427-347 BC) said: “Truth is absolute. Today two plus two equals four; yesterday two plus two equaled four; tomorrow two plus two will equal four.” That two plus two equals four is an eternal truth in the Platonic Realm.

Mathematical truths are not alone in the Platonic Realm. All human ideas—ideas of morality, art, science, technology—have eternal counterparts, and all are perfect. “Somewhere,” Plato said, “there’s a perfect table in the sky.”

So if you accept that two plus two equals four, you’re a Platonist. Schools, though, do not accept that two plus two equals four.

The situation in the humanities illustrates the problem. Students believe they must be creative. They must express themselves. They must be original. As long as they are original, creative, and they express themselves, the students believe, their work is good.

You can't blame the students. They get assessed on nothing else. "Don't worry about grammar," teachers advise students of English. "Just say what you feel." "Come up with something new," teachers advise students of art. "Forget about the facts," teachers advise students of history. "What's your opinion?" Et cetera.

You can't blame the teachers either. If a teacher says to a student something like, "Your paintings aren't bad, but it's time you learned about linear perspective and how to mix paints," the teacher is chastised by the local education authority.



I'm sorry, Ms. Greer, but I can't function under this kind of scrutiny.'

And if a teacher dares tell a student that his or her work is bad, the teacher gets the sack. Telling students that their work is bad is equivalent to telling them that they lack what it takes, that they are not quite human. Teaching today, you see, is not teaching; it is psychotherapy.

Creativity is cheap. All you need do is concoct a stupid idea—that Venusians invented marshmallows, for instance—and you'll be creative. As for self-expression, you express yourself every time you break wind.

For this reason, no decent artist worries about originality. Shakespeare cribbed his plays from everyone from Plutarch to Marlowe; we remember Shakespeare, not for his originality, but for his craft. Raphael produced the most lovely paintings of 15th-century Florence, but not one of them was original—Raphael merely did what his teacher, Perugino, did, except that Raphael did it better.

Michelangelo confessed that he never created a statue; he released his statues, he said, from pre-existing forms encased in blocks of marble.

Bob Dylan wasn't original; he took his ideas from every songwriter and poet whose work he could get his hands on.

The Rolling Stones weren't original. Bach wasn't original. Einstein wasn't original. Show me someone who is original, creative, self-expressive, and I'll show you someone who is boring.

Originality, creativity and self-expression dumb people down. Platonism dumbs people up. Platonism is the biggest dumbing-up exercise in the history of civilisation.

Think in terms of the Platonic Realm. Say you are painting a picture. The picture exists in the Platonic Realm. It is a perfect picture, and it is beautiful. Your job is to depict it as best you can. For you to do this demands that you be a technician—you must know how to use paints, know about perspective, and so on.

It demands that you paint selflessly. It demands that you paint objectively. Originality doesn't come into it. The picture was there before you existed.

I don't care if Platonism is metaphysical moonshine. The point is that all human achievement revolves around Platonism. If you haven't got a sense of "getting things right", of "realising perfection"—of doing things, not to please teachers, impress neighbours, or pass exams, but to please God—you can forget about being a decent artist, mathematician, painter, gardener, plumber—a decent anything. Instead, you'll be a philistine, and a stupid, lazy one, too.

That is what is wrong about our educational system. It has thrown away Platonism. The result is that most school leavers, through no fault of their own, are dimwits.

Things aren't all bad. This is because Plato didn't invent Platonism. He got it from his mentor, Socrates, and Socrates got it from the Pythagoreans. And the Pythagoreans got it from just about everyone—the Egyptians, the Babylonians, maybe even the Jains.


Platonism is too good an idea to go away. So people discover it for themselves, all the time. I've heard Eric Clapton talk pure Plato

when talking of playing guitar, and I've heard Carlos Santana talk likewise.

I see talent shows on television—singing contests, dancing contests, music contests—and the young participants in them display every sign of understanding Platonism: they work at their talents. And the judges understand Platonism, too.

You can see this because the judges, unlike teachers nowadays, are vicious; they demand absolute standards, and very high ones. And the young participants listen to the judges. They take the judges' criticisms.

So I've got hopes. But in the meantime you can ponder why Platonism is dead in those institutions that are supposed to serve our young. You can ponder why talented youngsters seem to know more about education than do education authorities.

And you can ponder why education in this country has ceased to be education. It has become therapy. And not very good therapy, at that. 

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THE PARADOX OF OUR EDUCATIONAL SCORE-KEEPING

Mortimer J. Adler

The grades we give students on the basis of tests or examinations they take is our way of keeping educational score.

The scores we record largely determine whether students pass or fail and whether they graduate from this or that phase of their schooling. For those who do graduate, it determines their rank or standing in the class and the honors they deserve to receive.

The greatest part of this score-keeping measures the amount of information or knowledge acquired. A much smaller part of it measures a second product of learning—the degree of skill developed,

mainly in the use of the English language and in performing mathematical operations. Little or none at all measures a third kind of learning—the extent to which a student’s understanding has been increased, understanding of the information and knowledge acquired and of basic ideas and issues.

The foregoing distinction of the three kinds of learning that should go on in our schools and colleges and should be measured lies at the heart of *The Paideia Proposal*. It has been generally accepted as an insight that should control any reform of our schools that seeks to improve the quality of the education they give.

It is also important to note that the first kind of learning (acquisition of information and knowledge), aided by didactic teaching with teachers talking for fifty minutes, occupies more than 75 percent of classroom time in elementary and secondary schools, and in our colleges as well.

The second kind of learning (development of skills) is aided by coaching, which has dwindled to a bare minimum in most of our schools and colleges. The third kind (increase of understanding) is aided by Socratic questioning. This is almost totally absent from most of our schools and colleges; when present, its presence is peripheral and slight.

In the light of what has just been said, it would appear to be both natural and reasonable for educational score-keeping to place the greatest emphasis on the first kind of learning, the kind that predominates; much less emphasis on the second kind of learning, the kind that has dwindled to the minimum in our schools; and little or none at all to the third kind of learning that is totally absent, or peripheral and slight when present.

Nevertheless, there is a paradox here. The first kind of learning is the least durable of all three. The information and knowledge acquired in order to pass tests and examinations is highly transient and evanescent.

I have asked innumerable adult audiences in the last few years, which I have addressed about educational matters, how many of those present could now pass the examinations that enabled them years ago to graduate from one or another educational institution and to earn the diplomas, certificates, or degrees they then received. Without exception their response has been that they could not do so now.



"Is this test to find out what I know, or to find out what I don't know?"

Should we not be sorely perplexed by this fact? What is the lasting educational significance of the scores made on tests and examinations of information and knowledge acquired, if much of such information and knowledge (most of it a matter of verbal memory) is not long retained after the tests and examinations have been taken?

Skills developed, being habits, not verbal memories, are much more durable than verbally memorized information or knowledge. Yet in our score-keeping we place much less emphasis on our measurement of these accomplishments.

It should be noted that habits are durable only on the condition that they are continually exercised. Not exercised at all, they atrophy. Exercised infrequently, they weaken.

For this reason, language skills are the most durable developments for all students. Mathematical skills are durable only for those whose professions or occupations require them to use these skills regularly.

Finally, we come to increased understanding. Of all three kinds of learning, this is the most durable. More than that, it is also *unconditionally* durable.

Unlike verbal memories, something understood does not need to be exercised in order to be retained. This, then, is the kind of learning

that lasts for a lifetime and is of the greatest importance in the use of our minds and in the conduct of our lives. Yet we do not measure it at all or to any significant extent in our educational score-keeping.

Why not? Because this kind of learning is the most difficult to measure. It cannot be accurately assessed by standardized tests or by essay questions to be answered in blue books. The only way it can be sensitively appraised is by an extensive oral examination. This is time consuming and requires great skill in probing the mind of the student—a skill as special as the surgeon's skill in probing the body.

The other two kinds of score-keeping, especially the first that dominates the process, are much easier to employ. The easiest way of doing it, of course, is by standardized machine-scorable tests, but this is also the poorest and least reliable measure of educational accomplishment.


It would be easy to get clear-cut empirical verification of this. Give a class of students in May a series of examinations to test the amount of information and knowledge they acquired during the academic year just ending, or even the last semester of it. Then, when they return to school in autumn, give them without any advance warning the same series of examinations. Their scores would show plainly how little they retained over a three-month period. How much less they would retain ten years later!

What do such educational scores measure? Certainly not the possession of anything of permanent value. What, then? Suppose we grant that they register the willingness, effort, and ability of students to bone up for examinations in order to pass them and get high scores. What of it?

Since their getting through the years ahead will depend on such willingness, effort, and ability, the scores have prognostic value for success in their academic futures, but for almost nothing else. If such success consists in acquiring more information and knowledge that they will not long retain, what is the meaning of it for their nonacademic futures? That they should be able to look up information they have forgotten and use books to obtain knowledge that cannot be recalled. But what will serve them most is their ability to use their minds to solve problems and to employ their understanding of ideas to direct their lives and to deal with life's harsh realities.



"He does the meaning of life. I do the meaning of aptitude tests."

The best that can be said for educational score-keeping that relies heavily on tests of information and knowledge acquired is that it may indirectly measure a student's ability to learn. But that certainly is of minor significance when we acknowledge, as everyone does, that much of the information and knowledge learned is soon forgotten. 

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