

# Some Reflections on the Great Teachers of the Past

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When one looks back upon history, many of the most influential figures were teachers. Plato, one of the pioneers of modern philosophy, was also one of the greatest ancient teachers. Among his most famous pupils was Aristotle, another of the major pillars of world philosophy. Aristotle, widely known for his acumen and astonishing versatility, was also the tutor of the young Alexander the Great. Confucius, upon whom Chinese civilization can arguably be said to rest, was, in his lifetime, a teacher. A brief journey through the great teaching of the past is enlightening for the modern scholar/teacher.

Great historic teachers share an awareness of the connection between teaching, learning, and the human predicament. Confucius consistently refused to discuss questions which had no bearing on life and practicalities, claiming he simply wanted to know how to live a better, more useful life. From this simple desire came some of the world's most profound statements on ethics, morality, family, and politics. To know whether men were wise or good, he said, you simply had to watch how they acted, how they applied their knowledge over time as opposed to a limited set of circumstances. His model of the superior person was a model which was accessible to everyone, and founded upon the notions of balance, order, and harmony.

Even those traditions founded upon contemplation recognized a role for the active life. The Rule of Benedict, at the heart of the western monastic tradition, enjoined the monastic to treat everything as if it were a "vessel of the altar," which is to say, in part, that a spirituality confined to abstractions and divorced from action is one not fully developed. Like Confucius, Benedict found the extraordinary in the ordinary, and insisted upon a life of balance and moderation in which work, prayer, and study were understood as complementary aspects of the spiritual quest.

The humanists of the Italian Renaissance realized that effective communication of knowledge meant persuading

an audience of one's point of view, and so involved an understanding of who was listening, their needs and biases. The humanists rejected medieval scholasticism, which they saw as too and abstract, in favor of rhetoric, a discipline which addresses the needs of the learner. Petrarch pointed out that while Aristotle was a brilliant philosopher, his words often fell upon empty ears, for they "...lacked the power to sting..." Although Erasmus of Rotterdam might have written a scholastic treatise criticizing the theology of his age,

he chose instead to rely upon his acerbic wit and to disseminate his message through satire. The very entertaining *Praise of Folly* did not "lack the power to sting," and opened tremendous philosophical debate. Folly literally spoke to the people, and lambasted customs and practices with which they could identify. Humanist thought was also noteworthy for leaving the debate open-ended, as they refused to designate any one idea as "The Truth."

Although Plato was much more comfortable than the humanists with the idea of "Truth," he shared with them the belief that the audience is

crucial in the learning process. He, and Socrates before him, argued that the task of the teacher was to draw out the knowledge already lurking within each student. Socrates and Plato never lectured, but probably stimulated more thought than any other figures in the history of humankind. Socrates and Plato provided a context within which thought could and had to occur. The efficacy of his method can be seen in his student Aristotle, who departed from his master on many issues, and was one of the greatest critical thinkers of all time. How proud Plato must have been to have produced not a mirror image, but a student who could offer his master as much as he had received.

Modern teachers would do well to remember these lessons of the past, and to apply them to their own teaching. Good teaching is not a one-sided delivery of material, but it is the communication of one person's thoughts and knowledge to another, such that one is empowered to apply it.

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The task of an educator is not simply to fill that “empty void” who comes through the door with factual knowledge, but to teach students how to think in such a way that they can meet any difficulties which might arise. The pace of the information explosion means that much of today’s knowledge will be obsolete in five years. One must enable students to use whatever information they have in a way that will enable them to navigate an ever more complex world.

The humanist and Confucian insistence that knowledge be made relevant to experience can be captured in the modern classroom. Use of active learning and collaborative learning has been shown to increase retention and understanding of material, as well as awareness of other points of view. In place of the standard lecture on Japan, I require students to write a haiku poem, and to present it to the class. After discussing the symbolism of each poem and entering into the contemplative framework of Zen Buddhism, the

full of English soil, he remarked: “I have come to England and taken her with both hands!” He was a man who conquered unbelievable odds in order to succeed, and instructors should provide students with the same opportunity to turn failure into success. If we do so we will be providing students with the tools they need for success in the world outside of academia.

These programs also provide a context in which students may begin to develop their own thoughts and reactions to texts. The hypertext primary sources are based upon the Socratic elenchus, and many links provide no instructor generated commentary but rather the opportunity for students to develop their own thoughts. Some of the Socratic modules require students to enter textual responses, such as the one on The Torah. Here, students examine three conflicting passages from Genesis on the great flood, and respond first to questions regarding content, and then to comparative and analytical questions. Finally, they arrange the

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class participates in a Japanese Tea Ceremony, during which they contemplate some of the same images they wrote about in poetry. After these active learning exercises, students are better able to master the intricacies of Zen Buddhism and its influence on the samurai code of bushido. As a final test of their mastery, I ask students to design a Zen landscape, and to include detailed commentary which makes reference to the sources and concepts they have studied. Such activities help students not only to see the connections between poetry, literature, and history, but also to life itself. How often my students have told me that they learn more from the silence of the Tea ceremony than they ever dreamed possible! They have learned that the classroom has some relevance to their own quest for balance, order, and harmony.

Active learning can also be encouraged through the use of technology. Software that allows one to create interactive applications, such as Authorware, helps to create a context within which students can explore ideas and test the implications of hypotheses. I have created several modules for use in my world civilization classes, which have interactive chronologies, maps, glossaries, and primary source texts, such as the Rig Veda and the Tao te Ching. These modules allow students to repeat material as often as they like, and provide immediate feedback for improvement. When William The Conqueror landed in England in 1066, he fell flat on his face. Characteristically, he turned what could have been his most embarrassing moment into one of history’s greatest ones. When he stood up with both hands

passages in their probable order of composition. These Socratic modules develop critical ability and also prompt users to consider major issues before they are influenced by an instructor’s commentary. Such hands-on methods show phenomenal success. When grades on critical essays for classes using the modules are compared to those which did not use the modules, they show a mean difference of fourteen points. Individual grades increase between five to thirty percent when comparing grades before and after use of the modules.

These reflections remind us that the best teaching develops students beyond what they were when they walked in the door. We must provide a context within which students can grow, by stimulating their own creative input, and allowing them to apply the material they encounter. As educators, we convey much more than the simple content of our disciplines. Truly effective teaching fosters self-realization and empowers students to surmount any obstacle they may later encounter. Like Confucius and Benedict, modern teachers may contribute to a more balanced, ordered, and harmonious life for our students. May we all continue to be, as were Plato and Aristotle before us, still philosophers, lovers of wisdom in all its forms. Like those who have gone before, may we continue to point our students towards the path out of the cave and share with them their journey into the light. •