

Lecture: 0.3.2. Sokrates vs. Machiavelli on the Educational Process



Machiavelli:

I... put on the garments of court and palace... step inside the venerable courts of the ancients, where, solicitously received by them, I nourish myself on that food that alone is mine and for which I was born; where I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about the motives for their actions, and they, out of their human kindness, answer me. And for four hours at a time I feel no boredom, I forget all my troubles, I do not dread poverty, and I am not terrified by death...

Niccolò Machiavelli (1513): *Letter to Francesco Vettori* <<https://github.com;braddelong/public-files/blob/master/readings/letter-machiavelli-vettori.pdf>>

Sokrates:

The creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence.... [Words] once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not... and they cannot protect or defend themselves.... Would a husbandman... take the seeds... and in sober seriousness plant them during the heat of summer?... The serious pursuit of the dialectician... finding a congenial soul, by the help of science sows and plants therein words which are able to help themselves... and have in them a seed which others brought up in different soils render immortal, making the possessors of it happy to the utmost extent of human happiness...

Plato (-370): *Phaedrus* <<https://github.com;braddelong/public-files/blob/master/readings/book-plato-phaedrus.pdf>>



Our Difficult Task

How do we duplicate—online—the “active learning” components that the in-person university does as a matter of course?:

- MOOCs did not cut it...
- The people who could learn from MOOCs are the Machiavellis—the people who turn their books into sub-Turing class instantiations of the books’ authors, and have conversations with them
- Thus a MOOC, for those who could learn effectively from it, was little better than and a lot more expensive than a book
- We need a plan for those of you—which is most of us—who are not Machiavellis, but rather like Sokrates’s students
 - People who really need a tutorial...
 - A professor, a GSI, a roommate, a classmate, a study group...



2:45 audio

Why Do Books “Reply” to Niccolo but Not to Sokrates?

Your professors are—often—not good guides:

- We are genuinely world-class at this: if we were not, we would not be here, doing what we do...
- We are very good at learning from books, curled up in a chair...
- We are very good at sitting in front of a screen, issuing commands and looking at the numbers that come back, in order to try to grasp in our minds the multi-dimensional shape of a dataset...
- And for us it is largely *unconscious*...
- If this is going to work for you, you need to do consciously what we do largely unconsciously
- Universities are good settings for that to happen
 - But at a university like Berkeley, the “active learning” component happens largely by accident, as a byproduct of the formal educational process of large classes, lectures, & exams



2:15 audio

Read with *Intent*

If you just skim, say, Dasgupta: *Economics: A Very Short Introduction*:

- You will then forget it—and you will have wasted an hour and a half
- Our brains are very good at forgetting irrelevant information
- And information we do not use and reuse is irrelevant
- I want you to do what I do:
 - I am rarely just reading.
 - I am generally also analyzing, compressing, synthesizing, and summarizing.
 - I am taking notes—but very brief, synthesizing and summarizing notes.
 - And I am generally asking myself questions—and then answering them.

