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4. IS THE AUTHORITY IN THE DIALOGUE? A MEMORANDUM

> And is this not the most debased ignorance, to think one knows what one does not? (Plato, *Apology*, 29b)[1]

> Then, since we agree that it's our duty to seek after what one does not know, is it fitting that we try together to find out what virtue is? (Plato, *Meno,* 86c)

> It's time for me to go now. But you go persuade Anytus, our fellow, of the things you have been persuaded of so far, that he might become gentler. If you can do this, you will do something good for the Athenians. (Plato, *Meno*, 100b)

Empire State College used to sponsor many discussions about mentoring – what it is, why, how to do it. Usually, these were inconclusive. We didn't decide, at least not with much detectable consequence in policy or practice, what mentoring is and isn't, why it's a good thing to do or not, and how to do it and how not to.

This was both delightful and frustrating. It was delightful because endless fields of educational exploration and creation opened before us. It was frustrating because of the indefiniteness: At best, it was hard to know if our efforts to learn had any consequence in policy and procedure; at worst, we habitually failed to act responsibly toward the educational discoveries we made, especially about the practice of mentoring itself. Forty-five years ago and now, we want to know what to do. And so do our students. They and we want to *know*. Otherwise, being here at ESC is pointless.

Yet, repeated, endless discussion – among ourselves and, as I learned, with our students – was somehow what the place was all about: dialogue. By "all about," I refer to the qualities that made Empire State College distinctive and wonderful. But those qualities have had to coexist with their near opposites: Then and now, students come here to get degrees, sooner rather than later, to get on with their lives, equipped with knowledge and certifications that qualify them to compete and thrive in an often brutal, changeable world. From the beginning then, the College comprehended a terrific tension between transmitting knowledge and sustaining dialogue. Gradually, and within the recent decade, more swiftly, it has poorly cared, at every level, for this complexity. Dialogue is less and less our currency and character. Increasingly, we fit Stanley Aronowitz's (2001) description of a "knowledge factory."

During one of those College discussions about mentoring, the small group I'd joined wrestled the question of who's in charge in the mentor-student relationship,

K. Jelly & A. Mandell (Eds.), Principles, Practices, and Creative Tensions in Progressive Higher Education, 93–109.
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especially when mentor and student disagree. We'd made our way to understanding that mentoring had much to do with equality, with collaboration, with sharing authority. We knew that mentors ought therefore surrender, set aside, let go of some of the authority teachers and professors customarily exercise over students. But, how much, how, when … and then what?

At a particularly intense moment during the discussion, the College provost and academic VP at the time, John Jacobson, walked by. He paused, listened, and then intoned: "Authority? The authority is in the dialogue."

Really? What does this mean? How does that meaning coexist with the basic obligation of professional educators, including ESC mentors, to help their students learn and to certify the learning they achieve? Whatever our delight in egalitarian, inconclusive dialogue, we are responsible for legitimating the learning of our students by naming, assessing, and grading it. How has this tension between the dialogical learning process and the assessable achievement of results played out in the history of ESC?

This chapter will explore answers to those questions. It will do so with frequent reference to a similarly puzzling history: the figure of Socrates.[2] He created dialogical education, but insisted that he was not a teacher. He considered the search for truth a duty, but never finally answered, in his view, any of the questions he asked. He claimed that self-examination through the dialogue was the best way for humans to care for themselves, but pointed to no evidence of good results. Indeed, many of his interlocutors came to no good at all. What therefore could such a person offer us, or we, inspired by him, offer our students?

To begin, what is "dialogue"? It has to do with talking, talking something through, talking something through in a reasonable way or reasoning something through in words. The word comes from the Greek, *dialegesthai*, a verb (Liddell & Scott, 1968). It means talking, reasoning, examining something through for oneself but usually with others. It's conversation-as-learning, both internal and social. The activity doesn't necessarily imply a beginning or an end, just as we do not necessarily attribute a beginning or an end to thinking. Both the social and internal forms of such conversation are not hierarchical. No one is really in charge. Everyone's ideas and questions are important. That's how we learn what we do not know. It's also how we treat our own and others' intellects with respect, as capable of learning. These political and ethical aspects of what might seem to be a simply cognitive or academic transaction are the essence of what Jürgen Habermas (2001) calls "communicative action."

This essential equality and openness of dialogue at ESC are very close to the dialogues in which Socrates engaged.

Even as shapely written representations of the real thing, Plato's Socratic dialogues have a "by the way" quality at the beginning, as though they'd spontaneously begun from matters the participants had been thinking about already. And nearly always they end with a reminder of inconclusiveness. There's more to say, more to ask, and much more to be understood: The knowledge the participants believe they have acquired remains provisional. Very good photographs have this quality. Something

leads your eyes beyond the image; something makes you ask a question, wonder, what's going on beyond the image, which the thing before you cannot answer. You want to see more; you want to know more. Thus, a good photograph evokes wonder, as does a good conversation.

Perhaps most importantly, every participant's ideas and assertions, no matter how seemingly perverse, are examined. Why? Because any willing participant might have something to contribute to everyone's learning, even a cheeky question or a willful demand. In this way, dialogical inquiry is inherently democratic and egalitarian. No doubt, Socrates is conducting the show. And he's often accused of being "ironic," in the sense of saying the opposite of what he really means. Nonetheless, I've never been able to find any compelling evidence that Socrates isn't completely honest – however jestingly – when he claims "I do not know" and that every participant, no matter how hostile, is his "friend" or at worst his fellow human, a potential inquirer after wisdom.[3] Socrates never proffers himself as an authority on anything – except "love matters," which always take the lovers, especially of the intellectually questing kind, toward truths which are absolute, wondrous and indefinitely just beyond our complete and final grasp (Herman, 2004).

We also know that Socrates so cherishes dialogical inquiry that he's happy to die rather than give it up. In fact, supremely happy: There just might be an afterlife in which he gets to continue asking and seeking for all eternity:

> It would be the greatest thing, doing there just as here, searching out and questioning people, anyone who is wise and anyone who thinks so, but isn't. (*Apology,* 41b)

The inquiry goes on and on because human beings don't have the wisdom of gods, who know things absolutely. We continue to inquire – at least we ought to – because that's how we learn more, understand better. Ironically (yes, here, the word is right), human wisdom, the very best human knowledge, turns out be discovering one's ignorance (*Apology,* 21d–23c) and then continuing to search (*Meno*, 84a–d). Socrates believes that evoking such perplexing discoveries and the perpetual desire to learn in himself and others (80c–d) is very great service: It is the care of the soul (*Apology,* 29d–e). Moreover, he believes that engaging himself and others to such inquiries is a duty placed upon him by the gods (e.g., 23b). Ironically, this defendant against a capital charge of *im*piety believes that his disturbing inquiries are in fact *pious* acts.

We can never finish, can never justly say, "Now, at last, I am wise." And yet, paradoxically, Socrates insists that we can do nothing better than continue dialogical inquiry. By default, it would seem that the dialogue itself is the very best thing humans can do. It is caring for oneself and others, a duty. But participation in the dialogue, the activity itself, *is* the good life we seek, the happiness of perpetually provoked curiosity. It is the most fundamental liberal art of all, for it frees us from the self-abuse of thinking that we know what we do not (*Apology,* 29b). Who would deny the authority of living well?

Yet how remote this seems from Empire State College, let alone a conventional one! ESC's student-centered and adult-friendly ways hardly include preaching the care of the soul to our students. How odd and presumptuous it would be for ESC mentors to speak to their students as Socrates does to his fellow citizens:

> Are you not ashamed [Athenians], giving so much attention to things, money, status and honor – as much as you can get of them – that you do not attend to or think as much as possible of what is truest and of the very best in your soul? (*Apology,* 29d–e)

Forty-five years ago and now, students come to ESC for worldly, pragmatic reasons. From the very first *Empire State College Bulletin* (Empire State College, 1971–1972) on, we have asked students to define their own purposes or, as the Bulletin calls it, "objectives" (pp. 17ff). Learning contracts asked students to define their "General" and "Specific" purposes. Early degree program forms asked students to do the same. Defining one's own purposes is a major learning goal of the Educational Planning study and a necessary part of the degree program rationale every student is required to write. The name the College gave to the faculty role of engaging students in these discussions was "mentor" (Empire State College, 1971–1972, p. 32). When mentors ask students what they want to learn, we also ask them why. If the answer is something like "I just want to get a degree as soon as possible to get a better job," we do *not* criticize, let alone shame that. Indeed, although we faculty may go on a bit now and then about how valuable a liberal arts education is, we are proud that we can help our students fulfill *their* goals as *they* define them.

Not surprisingly, Socrates didn't work in a school. He didn't lecture, give quizzes or assign grades. He took no money for his service. He was poor. He produced no scholarship. And he insists that he doesn't teach anybody anything (even when it looks very much like he does exactly that in helping a young slave learn how to geometrically construct a square double the area of another (*Meno,* 82b-85c). If dialogical learning is about caring for the soul, and that necessarily means devaluing the pursuit of worldly good things, then that's not what we do at Empire State College.

Nonetheless. …

Dialogical learning is exactly what ESC offered instead of fixed curricula, required and off-the-shelf courses, and a rigid academic calendar. We were not about transmitting our expertise to students, and requiring them to accommodate their educational purposes to what we believed we already knew and considered important. Following the old teaching cliché, we start from where the student's at – each and every one.

How do you do this?

You ask questions.

"What do you want to learn? Why? How? What do you think you know already? How did you learn it? What does it have to with what you want to learn now?"

(Herman & Mandell, 2004, pp. 44–67). We do this at orientation. We do this at the beginning of each enrollment, in beginning the design of an entire degree program, in collaborating with a student to design an individual study. We ask questions like these about what students read, hear, see and write. And, we take their answers seriously. Does this mean we take their answers as absolute, final truths? Certainly not. More questions follow. But it does mean the students' answers are at least as important to consider as carefully and thoroughly as we would our own. Their considered, thoroughly explored answers – yes, this requires time, often a lot of time – make their way onto reading lists; they form essay topics and revisions, and topics of entire studies. Their answers create the content of their degree programs, including the courses they transfer from other colleges, the experiential learnings they seek to be evaluated for academic credits, and the contents of the ESC studies, the new learnings, they choose to do.

Their answers help us learn what they are learning and how well. Their answers lead to the next reading or rereading, the next essay topic or revision. Their answers enable us to evaluate and grade the learning they have achieved. Their answers stimulate us to learn what next questions to ask and suggestions to offer. Our conversations with students are collaborations. And the results determine the content and process, in every aspect, of the State University of New York education our students achieve: "The authority is in the dialogue."

These questions, "What do you want to learn? Why?" and the rest, are not as apparently grand as the questions Socrates and his interlocutors take up: "What is justice? What is courage? Can virtue be taught? What is virtue? What is knowledge? What is love?" Our students do not very often come to ESC to study philosophy.

Yet if we simply let the dialogue flow, so many conversations with our students open philosophical questions, questions about the care of the self and others, and about a good life:

> You want to get a degree as soon as possible. Studies in what area will help you do that?
> Business.
> Why business?
> To get a better job.
> 'Better' means what to you?
> More money, for sure. Also, work I enjoy more.
> More money? …
> For me and my family to live well, of course!
> Living well. OK. And how about work that's more enjoyable?
> Just more interesting to do, not zombie work, and where I'm respected, not just a machine part.
> And what do you and your family enjoy, just, you know, for the enjoyment?
> Well, our kids of course, just loving whatever they do. And our home, being there and also going new places, just to see.

> So more interesting and respected work and workplaces, and doing kid things and traveling around just for the pleasure of it? Are these things you'd like to learn more about too?
> What do you mean?

In reality, a conversation like this might occur over weeks, months, even longer. Have we arrived at formal philosophical study and taken stock of the soul straight on? No. But meshed in with hard granules of everyday pragmatic living, there are strands of wonder about things for their own sake. Where do they lead? At the beginning, we students and mentors don't precisely know (Herman & Mandell, 2006). For some students, these ends-in-themselves may be the contentment and sheer fascination with the work they do: running a business, making things to sell, helping others, writing poetry, nurturing children. It may be a kind of recreation: bass fishing, coaching soccer, traveling, gardening, reading history. It may be the enjoying of simply being with one's family. Any or all of those things. We don't know; we inquire together, discover and decide. But "ends in themselves," construed in terms embraced, often generated by the student, are now on the table. Even though we don't at first know the exact names or the content, they become topics of learning. And through our collaborative conversation, they are legitimated by both of us: "The authority is in the dialogue."

And in another way, our students and we are not so far from Socrates. Both our questions and the students' uncertainty are honest and important. They are necessary conditions to begin the inquiry and to continue it. Our conversation about what is to be learned, why, what is already familiar and valued requires that we – students and mentors – are ready to acknowledge our ignorance. What a mentor presupposes might be the best answer to common student questions may turn out not to be for any particular student. And the answer that the student supposes might have been good enough may turn out to be not so clear, and not so reliable or satisfying as it first seemed to be. To learn better answers, both mentor and student need to be ready to recognize their ignorance. We become practitioners of Socrates' merely human wisdom: learning that we do not yet know what we'd believed we had.

Becoming absorbed in these conversations, we – students and mentors – are no longer entirely working in a knowledge factory, no longer entirely encased in a system of cognitive acquisition governed by money and power. Engaging in the dialogue, we do not presume that we know what is good for the student. We need them to tell us and, together, we find out more about it. We are line operators in a knowledge factory, a system of production governed by money and power. Instead, in the dialogue, we join our students in what Habermas and others call "the lifeworld" (Habermas, 1985; Mandell & Herman, 1999). This is the dimension of experience in which human beings live a life they have reasons to value for its own sake (see Sen, 1999). As a liberal arts college, Empire State did not offer a canon of the knowledge most worth having, the prescribed content of an institutional curriculum. Instead, we offered the experience of engaging in dialogical inquiry. The authority of the dialogue is that it is simply a good way to live.

The strange and difficult thing about ESC is that it offered this dialogical learning within a public academic institution: It was a complex, bureaucratic system of knowledge transmission organized to sustain and certify a means of learning that was also a way of living.

We said to students, “Come here. Tell us what degree you want and what you want to do with it. We will honor your purpose by conversing with you: We’ll help you learn what you need to know, plan how to do that, and complete the degree as quickly as possible. All the along the way, from orientation through your final study, we’ll ask you a lot of questions about what you think you have learned, what you need and want to learn, and why. We’ll take your answers seriously by assessing and certifying the knowledge you already have, and by connecting you with the people and materials that will help you learn what you need. When you’ve completed your your plan, we’ll give you a diploma publicly certifying your education.”

Those conversations, comprising what we called the “mentor-student relationship,” we offered as a necessary means to the ends students sought. But, that instrument – dialogical inquiry – engaged our students and us in an activity profoundly gratifying in its own right. The collaboration of mentor and student is pragmatically stimulated. It is undertaken to discover what is to be learned and why, as well as to recognize what is already learned and not learned – whether about the content of an entire degree plan or the meaning of a few pages in a statistics text, a few lines of an Emily Dickinson poem, or a few sentences in a student’s essay. In this collaboration, mentor and student are both inquirers. In this way, they are equals. Further, in order to gain the benefit of each other’s questions and understandings, they need to treat one another respectfully. The intellectual, ethical and political gratifications afforded by this activity become cherished. To simply follow the dialogue where it leads is to embrace a kind of freedom in giving up certainty about things and control over others. It means that learning is not bounded by degrees or expertise; it becomes lifelong. Bureaucracies exist to organize efforts to efficiently produce intelligibly consistent and tolerably uniform results. It is remarkable that ESC existed and flourished at all when its core activity was to nurture fruitful uncertainty.

Socrates pursued his dialogical inquiries outside any formal institution except the city-state itself. Plato’s versions demonstrate how difficult they can be to sustain by themselves, and how readily such freewheeling, critical inquiry disturbs political sensitivities. We can then understand better how improbable it was that dialogue could be sustained at Empire State College.

For example, Meno, in Plato’s dialogue of the same name, wants to know from Socrates if “virtue” is teachable. Meno’s curiosity is pragmatic and very ambitious.

Socrates says he doesn’t know if virtue is teachable, because he doesn’t know what virtue is. Sensibly, he suggests that if he and Meno learn first what virtue really is, they can then find out if it’s teachable. Grudgingly and unreliably, Meno agrees. The ensuing dialogue includes several failed attempts to define virtue and ascertain its teachability. Confusion and inconclusiveness abound.

In a famous passage (*Meno,* 80a-d), Meno complains that Socrates has paralyzed his mind as a cuttlefish paralyzes its prey. Socrates, however, thinks things are going very well. He shares Meno's perplexity. He doesn't know what virtue is either. He asks Meno to continue to collaborate with him in their dialogical search. And Meno responds with a "gotcha" paradox of his own:

> But how will you seek something, Socrates, which you absolutely don't know what it is? […] Or, even if you stumbled on the very thing, how will you know that it's what you didn't know? (80d)

Socrates says he thinks this is a trick argument. But, most remarkably, he takes up Meno's lead and they pursue the inquiry into how it might be possible for human beings to learn anything at all (pp. 81a ff).

In *Meno*, we travel quickly from practical pedagogy, to philosophical ethics, to metaphysics and epistemology. At the beginning, Socrates tries to cajole the curriculum: the move from "Is virtue teachable?" to "What is virtue?" But Meno's curiosity is persistent. The new topic – the nature of knowledge and learning – is not so far from what he really wants to know. Moreover, it's a topic, as the ensuing dialogue demonstrates, in which the two of them have a common interest. They are led to consider the immortality of soul, and the possibility that all learning is simply recollection, implying that there is really no such thing as "teaching" at all, except perhaps the teaching one does within oneself. Socrates tries to demonstrate his odd idea by helping an unschooled slave boy (Meno's servant) learn to use geometrical construction to double the area of any square. Socrates gently prompts and asks questions. He insists he's doing no teaching but merely stimulating the boy's recollection (*Meno*, 81a-c). With less metaphysical ambition, perhaps we can agree that good teachers are enablers: They help students teach themselves, an activity ESC calls "mentoring independent study."

Socrates' notion that learning is the immortal soul remembering what it's always known, is merely a provisional assertion. It's not relied on later in *Meno*, nor does it appear, without significant modification later in Plato. Nonetheless, provisionally held, it's an idea that Meno and Socrates can share for now. Having been refreshed with a break from being questioned and with the proffer of an idea that excites him, Meno is now eager to join the inquiry again.

What happens next is stunning, briefly leaving Socrates as confounded as Meno had complained Socrates had left him. Meno does agree it is necessary to try to learn what one has discovered one does not know. Socrates asks then, "Does it seem right that … we should try together to search for what virtue is?" Meno replies, "Absolutely!" And then, with barely a pause:

> But … Socrates, but really, the thing I first asked about, that's what *I* would really want to look into and hear about [i.e., whether virtue is teachable]. … (86c)

Socrates nearly loses it here: "Now Meno, if I controlled not only myself but you as well. …" Yet he continues, not without a little dig,

> Since you are not trying to control yourself – you so want your freedom – I will try, I will control myself, and I will give way and join you. (86d)

Socrates leaves go of where the logic of the inquiry has led in order to embrace the object of Meno's willful curiosity. In other words, sustaining the dialogue trumps a logical lesson plan. That's taking "the authority is in the dialogue" very far indeed. Imagine a whole college running this way.

But there's more. Socrates is not simply humoring Meno. Off they go, trying to find out if virtue is teachable. They return briefly to geometry. They review what geometers mean by "hypothesis," namely an assertion taken to be *provisionally* true in order to test if it really is so by the logical or empirical results that follow. Socrates proposes to test the hypothesis that virtue is teachable by looking for the results one would expect if it were so (86–87b). He and Meno agree on two results that would follow if virtue is teachable: If virtue is teachable then there should exist actual teachers of virtue; and, there should exist virtuous people who have actually learned virtue from others who already know what it is.

Neither result seems to be true. Adducing a number of instances, Socrates indicates that many Athenians renowned for their wisdom, raise children who are *not* virtuous (87c-94e). And, taking up a somewhat popular prejudice, he claims that the sophists (some of whom claim that they can teach anything, virtue included) turn out, upon examination, not to know what they say they know (95a-96e). No teachers of virtue, no students who've been taught it; therefore, virtue is not teachable.

But the inquiry continues. Socrates and Meno explore the distinction between knowledge and "right opinion" (97bff). The latter, while corresponding to the truth, does so by lucky accident rather than understanding. The conversation ends with a new hypothesis: Whatever apparently unteachable virtue itself really is, it might be something that comes to humans as a gift from the gods:

> In all this reasoning so far, if we have inquired and discussed well, virtue would be something that comes neither by nature nor teaching, but by divine fate, without understanding, to those for whom it might come. … (100a)

Confusing, surprising? We know that this is not how Meno expected things to turn out. He's orated before, "hundreds of times" to "large audiences" about the nature of virtue (80b). For the sake of his business, he wants to believe that virtue is teachable. And Socrates? He insists throughout that he doesn't know what virtue is. So maybe it's just some incomprehensible thing that comes by divine grace. Maybe. Socrates reminds Meno at the very end of the dialogue that the nature of virtue remains to be discovered (100b). And we might be reminded to consider that if humans cannot *learn* virtue (perhaps an entirely separate matter from teachability?), Socrates' entire quest – to seek virtue through inquiry, his effort to care for his own soul and those of others through demanding intellectual activity – would be a waste of time, a fool's errand. Just as paradoxically, this conclusion would fly in the face of Socrates' own

very persistent belief that this very task, dialogical inquiry, has been laid upon him by the gods themselves (*Apology* 23b).

Such is the delicate, intricate, bewildering play of dialogue. It offers provisional propositions, importunate and important questions that are seemingly unanswerable. Anyone can participate, but must do so freely: None can "govern" another; each is bound to speak honestly. Everyone's curiosity and ideas matter; none is immune from questions from another. Further, the dialogue requires the participants to believe, no matter how confused and uncertain they become, there are in fact truths governing the activity and drawing it onward. One of course can willfully avoid the dialogue, but not on the basis of the claim that nothing can be demonstrated to be either true or false. That would paralyze our minds even more thoroughly than Meno's cuttlefish: for of course such a claim, that there are no demonstrable truths, would have to include that very assertion. Dialogue offers the wonder of discovering new ideas and prospects and questions: the nature of teaching and learning, what makes one's life worth living, how shall one raise one's children or do justice to one's fellow humans. But it also inevitably yields somewhat maddening experience of realizing as we learn more and more, the absolute truth of the matters we most desire to fully understand remains persistently, seductively beyond our grasp. We never quite finally know the things we want to know the most. We are left to choose to live an examined life or a mindless one.

Consider an academic institution – awarding credits and degrees, employing professors, enrolling students – that placed this tempestuous, inclusive experience at its core. *Every* distinctively defining feature of Empire State College essentially requires dialogue. In the learning contract, we collaborate with our students to define a topic of learning, its purposes, means, and outcomes. Educational Planning – the one single course required of every ESC matriculant – is simply a meta-version of a learning contract: Mentor and student seek to discover what learning (prior, current and future) will serve the purposes of the individual student, helping to make a life she or he has reasons to value for its own sake. In prior learning assessment (PLA), student and mentor collaborate to identify what extra-academic learnings the student may have achieved and articulate those for academic evaluation. Throughout these distinguishing educational activities, the Socratic mentor engages each student, one at a time, in dialogue about what the student has learned and intends to learn, and why. The mentor does not presume to know what the student needs until that emerges from their dialogue. The students learn to tolerate and to use their discoveries of ignorance, to seek new learning. Importantly, they sometimes discover that they knew more than they'd realized; and often, they discover that they are more academically capable than they'd supposed. Dialogue, with all its disruptive, unpredictable potency, is the heart of the College. From the beginning, this is the venture ESC made.

And also from the beginning, precisely because it is an academic institution and not only an *agora* of profound conversation, ESC imposed policies and procedures, and tolerated customs that obstruct and smother dialogue.

One of the basic functions of the academy is deeply conservative: preserving and transmitting knowledge. This does not easily coexist with fostering inquiry. Faculty have to be scholars, experts who can make original but expertly accepted contributions to currently accepted knowledge. This is the traditional, intellectual basis of our authority with peers and over students. It is also the rationalization of our coercive authority: the power of the academy to control access, through admission and graduation, to other forms of social power beyond its gates and walls. Viewed cynically or not, no culture can function without canonical knowledge and without a recognized community of literates, almost exclusively authorized to possess and discretionarily transmit that knowledge. Such a community can hardly welcome the idea that the most important kind of knowing of all is discovering one's own ignorance.

Accordingly, students cannot be justly faulted for demanding the knowledge and expert professorial services they've worked hard and paid much to possess. They expect ESC to be like what they know, for better and worse, as "school." ESC, along with its growing number of competitors, markets its services as a necessary way to get ahead. We thus contribute to the commodification of learning; and we ought not be distressed if students are suspicious when we interminably respond to *their* questions with *our* questions and with murky advice like, "Well, it depends on what you decide. What do you think?"

From this unavoidable, institutional view, knowledge is a complete, certain and stable acquisition. In contrast to the provisional and flowing nature of dialogical learning, this academically canonical knowledge is particulate, firmly apprehensible. It can be acquired from texts, lectures, standardized curricula and courses, courseware, and learning objects. It can be consistently assessed and marketably certified through competency tests. Since the beginning, ESC has offered all of these kinds of things. They are far more familiar, easily recognized and convertible to academic and social capital than dialogue.

This particulated learning is delivered and managed by systems. These are the operational protocols of all large, complex, formal organizations, including Empire State College. Transcending the inherently idiosyncratic personhood of employees, students and other "stakeholders," organizations endure through repeatedly and uniformly applying impersonal policies and procedures controlling decisions, behaviors and resources. Simply, this is what it means to be "organized." An academic organization made of these features generates a budget, enrollment targets, curricula, and standard measures of scholarly and learning production. The legal and marketable legitimacy of Empire State College depends on those things. Without them, ESC would not exist, nor would the promise of dialogical education it has harbored within.

The institutional, systemic view is necessary but overweening. It is remarkably seductive. Precisely contrary to the egalitarian, democratic nature of the dialogical inquiry it houses, the College, as part of the State University of New York, is entirely hierarchical in governance and formal organization (see State University of

New York, 2009). Alexis de Tocqueville (1988), who coined the word "bureaucracy," predicted that large democracies would founder on bureaucratic despotism (pp. 690–695). Max Weber (1958/2003) famously described bureaucratic rationalism as an "iron cage" without "spirit" or "heart" (p. 182). Nonetheless, this tremendous organizational instrument does offer power and control.

The human desire for power and control is strong and deep as curiosity and, as lust itself. Rather than control ourselves, as Socrates does in agreeing to follow Meno's lead (described above), we try to control whatever and whoever is around us. Finding nothing new to learn that matters to him, Goethe's (1951) Faust, a revered professor, retranslates the opening of the Gospel of John as, "In the beginning was the Deed" (*Faust*, I.5. 1224–1237). With not so very much help from Mephistopheles, he manages to kill or destroy nearly everything and everyone he loves; for in his absorption in power, he exorcises love itself. A century later, Freud speculated that behind the "compulsion to repeat," there lies the drive for control, the drive for the organism to so completely protect itself that by controlling stimuli impinging upon it, finally it blocks every stimulus, and therefore, dies (Freud as cited in Strachey, 1955, pp. 7–64). Knowledge-as-control, untempered with strong, dialogical doubt, becomes deadly. Seeing in the first test of the atomic bomb the inarguably awesome results of the massive applied science project he managed, Robert Oppenheimer recalled the words of the Bhagavad Gita, "I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds" (see Hijiya, 2000, p. 123). We should be skeptical of any scientific proclamation that we are on the verge of achieving a true and final "theory of everything" (e.g., Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010). Our skepticism might save the world we actually live in.

Some democratic institutions have a structural skepticism: voting and separation of powers. These constitutionally mandated and protected systems are costly and slow. Although they fail the economist's test of "utility," they do restrain the exercise of unchecked power. By making way for "other" voices, they interfere with office holders believing they know what is best, what is just, when in fact they do not. They preserve the possibility of Socratic wisdom. Classical Athens was a direct democracy and lacked the formal separation of powers with which we are familiar. However, most state offices were filled by lot rather than appointment or party-based electioneering. Moreover, all citizens had the constitutionally and divinely protected right of *parrhesia*, the capability of honestly speaking one's mind in public deliberations. The voice of the "other" was a necessary condition of justice. Sometimes, Socrates' interlocutors, frustrated by his logically confounding questioning, seek to humor and control him by simply telling him what they suppose he wants to hear (e.g., Thrasymachus). Socrates begs them not to, but rather to say what they really mean (*Republic* Book I, 350e). Discovering the truth, the care of the soul through the examined life, depends upon it.[4]

It is all the more remarkable then that the governance of Empire State College, home to academic dialogical inquiry, is constitutionally undemocratic, as required by the policies of the state university of which it is a part. Though customarily

obliged to "consult" with others, the president exercises within the College nearly absolute power, checked only by the contracts of faculty and clerical unions and the wishes of the university's chancellor. This constitutional isolation from other voices, from *parrhesia*, is also, as of this writing (2015), geographically enhanced: The headquarter buildings of ESC are located on the east side of Saratoga Springs, New York. No faculty or students are to be found there in the daily course of business. A few poignantly distant miles away to the west, on the other side of town, ESC students and faculty engage in learning. It is perhaps not coincidental that no current senior administrators have any experience of educational mentoring.

One should not see this dangerous concentration of power as a labor versus management problem. It is reproduced by the geographical dispersion of the faculty and the circumstance in which we normally do our educational work. We are scattered in small clusters, about 35 of them, across the state, by and large physically invisible to supervision. And, we do our educational work with students, in person and online, in the isolation of our offices. There are no witnesses and no obligatory assembly in which other voices are welcomed. Moreover, despite the call for us to engage in dialogue with students, to genuinely collaborate and thus share authority with them, we are by formal education and appointment, "professors." Our Ph.D.s assure the students and us that we are experts. Our tenure, once achieved, protects us from all but the most egregious violations of our responsibilities. Those egregious violations do not include eschewing dialogue for pontification. In these circumstances, it is easy for us to anatomize and dispense knowledge in controllable, readily assessable bits.

However, it would be silly, impossible, and unjust to dispense with the particulate aspect of knowledge. It would be silly because then we'd all be wandering about – starving, diseased, unclothed and unhoused – during our brief miserable lives, just wondering. It would be impossible because most fundamentally, the particulate aspect of cognition enables us to recognize, apprehend anything at all: things, people, phenomena, language, and ideas. Without it, I'd not recognize my coffee mug, or myself, from one infinitesimal moment to the next – let alone understand a question or statement a student makes during our conversation. And it would be unjust to discard standardized knowledge. As Weber (1946) understands perfectly well, it is exactly the intelligible, depersonalized and routinized rules of bureaucracy that enable a peasant, a foreigner, or anyone "different" to cash a check at a bank without having to worry if the clerk happens to be benevolent. Bureaucratic rules enable innumerably diverse minorities to enter universities, and enact the principle of due process of law for all (pp. 224ff). We depend upon knowledge-as-power, those solid, bounded, persistent and measurable facts and crystalline ideas about things. Had Socrates not pursued his inquiries in an orderly if misguided *polis*, he'd likely have been simply murdered for being such a gadfly, for asking impertinent questions, as I'll describe below. That is why, when offered a safe chance to escape prison and the death penalty, he refuses to dishonor "the laws" (*Crito* 50a-53a).

To persist and thrive for 45 years, Empire State College needed to house these two reciprocating but contesting understandings of education: the dialogical inquiry and the acquisition of knowledge. With a growing enrollment, faculty, and administration – all powerfully drawn by the desire for certainty, operating in an ever more elaborate, hierarchical system, and, beset by demands for accountability, cultural literacy, productivity – it is not so hard to understand that it would be difficult to institutionally sustain and promote dialogical learning. The financial, political and academic "opportunity costs" are very high.

But so are the risks of failing, as ESC increasingly has, to pay them. Consider a consequence of Socrates refusing to try to control others, just so the dialogue might continue:

Following the winding and unmapped route of the dialogue, he and Meno arrive at the provisional and unsettling conclusion that virtue comes not from teaching but by divine gift. Along the way, they are temporarily joined by Anytus, a politically ambitious citizen of Athens. He joins when they are entertaining the strong possibility that virtue is not teachable because so many prominent men, reputed for wisdom, fail to raise virtuous sons. Anytus would like to be thought of as one of those prominent men. He's insulted by Socrates' impertinent, if provisional, conclusions. He leaves the conversation with this warning: "Socrates, you easily speak evilly of people. I would advise you, if you are willing to be persuaded by me, to beware" (94e). Socrates and Meno continue on.

But at the very end of dialogue, Socrates urges Meno:

> Go persuade Anytus, our companion, of the things you have been persuaded of so far, that he might become gentler. If you can do this, you will do something good for the Athenians. (*Meno*, 100b)

It's unknown if Meno ever tried. We do know that Anytus did not become gentler. Soon, in the trial of Socrates, he will be the lead plaintiff and prosecutor (the two being one and the same in the Athenian legal system). Giving authority to the dialogue means not trying to control others, fully engaging their questions and ideas. It risks losing one's grasp on ideas one cherishes, such as those enhancing one's self-importance. And, it risks offending others – citizens, politicians, professors and administrators, proudly dependent upon their certainty and power. Were it not for the laws of Athens, Anytus might have merely murdered Socrates in the streets. Such violence had occurred in Athens, just a few years prior to Socrates' trial in 399 B.C., during the Tyranny of the Thirty (Colaiaco, 2001, p. 163). But the laws, while necessary, are not sufficient for justice. One might regard Anytus' prosecution of Socrates as judicially initiated murder. For justice, in addition to laws, it is equally necessary to nurture the uncertainty and freedom of inquiring persons, engaged in dialogues of unpredictable outcomes. For justice, one must embrace the perpetually fluxing, flowing of ideas and words, within and between differing, restless minds. If this is "the Logos," the true life of the mind and world, it is as hard to seize, Heraclitus knew, as water, fire, or a lovely chord evoked from the vibrating strings of a lyre (Kirk & Raven, 1964).

In point of hard fact, the "deliverables," the easily grasped and tallied results of Socrates' work are not much to brag of. Anytus, as we've seen, does not become "gentler." And as we know from the exhaustive biographical catalog compiled by Debra Nails (2002), many of the historical figures populating conversations with Socrates did not seem to benefit much from the experience. To list a few: Meno himself is reputed to have become a cruel and traitorous military commander. Critias (in *Charmides* and in Plato's "Seventh Letter") is a leader of the junta that overthrew Athenian democracy in 404–3 B.C.E., the Thirty, infamous for their arbitrary violence. And most infamous of all, there is Alcibiades (*Symposium*). His rapturous love of Socrates seems not to affect his wild intemperance: drunkenness, promiscuity, vandalism, ostentation, and ambition so unrestrained that he'd offer his considerable rhetorical and military skills to whatever side seemed to be winning the catastrophic Peloponnesian War. The Persians, whom he both betrayed and served, finally had him assassinated (see Nails, 2002).

Of course, not all of Socrates' companions turn out badly, Plato himself being a pretty decent example. For that matter, Socrates himself comes across as so good-natured and contented, that he's not afraid or bitter about his death sentence. He is happy (Vlastos, 1991, pp. 233–235). But that's somewhat beside the point. Whatever good dialogical inquiry does, it's not to be found in the production of experts on virtue or anything else. It's not an educational technology. Be that as it may, the Athenians hold him responsible for what they took to be *his* results. He's put to death not only for impiety but also for corrupting the youth of Athens.

Even so, Socrates insists that engaging the dialogue makes us "better, more stalwart, and less useless" (*Meno* 86b-c). He hopes that re-engaging Anytus in the conversation will make him gentler (100b). But none of it can be coerced. We ought to control ourselves, not others.

When that is how the learning goes, then the virtues enabling us to value our lives are experienced in the dialogue itself. The four traditional Greek virtues are courage, temperance, justice and wisdom. All of them are necessarily immanent in the dialogue. And I'll venture to add another: magnanimity. To participate in the dialogue, you must say what you really mean, regardless of what you fear others might think of or do to you. This is courage. But you are required as well to follow ideas through to their logical consequences and abide by the conclusions, no matter how disagreeable and provisional. This is temperance. To learn beyond your own suppositions, you must take others' ideas as seriously as you do your own. This is doing justice, by respecting others as you do yourself. To come closer to what you most want to know – how to live well – you must repeatedly embrace the discovery of your own ignorance. This is wisdom. And to do all this living among others, thus to afford yourself the opportunity to learn from them what you do not know, you must help them care for themselves as you do yourself. This is magnanimity. To engage in the dialogue means to accept the authority of these virtues, and thus to live hopefully and well.

At ESC, we promised to engage students in this way. It is a delicate, difficult enterprise … all the more so because we and our students are unavoidably surrounded,

pressed, obliged and tempted by the acquisition of knowledge for the sake of power and prosperity. An institution that offers both acquisitive and dialogical learning must comprehend and sustain two contrary dispositions: to control and to free, to profess and to inquire. That contrariness must be embodied in policy, procedure, and common custom, with all the confusing, inefficient consequences so subversive of the very idea of a well-organized institution. And it is just as difficult for students and faculty to achieve and sustain the breadth and agility of mind necessary to engage in these contrary ways of learning. One is routinized but familiar and reliable; the other is refreshing but alien to our received ideas of school and education. The questioning, challenging voice of the other can be annoying and felt to interfere with achieving the practical purposes that brought us to university in the first place, to strive to prosper in the world, including as academic professionals.

It is therefore not surprising that dialogical inquiry, the distinguishing vital spirit of ESC, has declined. The students arrive not knowing what it is and hear little about it when they are oriented. The faculty has little time and reward for actually practicing the "student-centered" education they'd heard the institution was about. And the administration has even less occasion and reason than the students to know about "the authority of the dialogue." Some administrators, including the most senior ones, seem to regard the student-mentor relationship as a costly "boutique enterprise," primarily valuable as a brand for marketing ESC in an ever more competitive world of adult higher education.

It's amazing, indeed quite magnificent, that ESC made as much room, and for so long as it did, for dialogical learning. It was an improbable thing to have occurred in the first place, and easy to neglect thereafter. One hopes, though, that some ideas, true and good, will be relearned, recollected. The authority of the dialogue is something to be remembered, hence this written memorandum.

NOTES

[1] I've modified all English translations from the Greek in the Loeb Classical Library edition of each text. References are the traditional "Stephanus Numbers."

[2] I use the word "figure" to sidestep the abiding historical controversy about who that person really was and about what he, who wrote nothing, really believed. Taking this move further, in this chapter I refer only to the version of Socrates Plato gives us. Moreover, I refer almost exclusively to the character we encounter in *Apology* and *Meno,* which is to ignore yet another controversy about how very much the Socrates of the earlier dialogues differs, some say and others hotly deny, from the Socrates of the so called "Middle" and "Late" dialogues.

[3] For a different and very influential account of this much debated topic, see Vlastos, 1991.

[4] On *parrhesia* and the care of the soul, see Michel Foucault's (2011a; 2011b) final lectures, 1982–1984. On Socratic discourse and democracy, see Gerald Mara (1997), *Socrates' Discursive Democracy*.

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