

## The Cave of Education

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What is reality, and what is mere illusion? In “The Allegory of the Cave,” Plato argues that most of our life is built on the illusions we accept and take part in every day, such as money, possessions, and fame. Plato claims that the only way to differentiate between reality and illusion is to enlighten oneself through persistent education. Through this continual learning, we will become gifted with the knowledge of what he calls “the Good” (“The Allegory” 98). Today, education is a prominent part of our culture, and vast numbers of students are attending colleges, universities, and graduate programs. To outward appearances, these students are striving for enlightenment and are bettering themselves in an effort to grasp the Good. However, what is the actual ultimate goal of their education, and is it really that good? The average student attends college and gains a degree in order to get a job, to make money, to buy possessions, and to earn respect from friends and family; therefore, for those students, the ultimate goal of their education is simply to get to what Plato would call the next illusion. Instead of pulling students out of the cave into enlightenment, the educational process is attaching them more firmly to their false realities and leading them away from the greater Good. Therefore, education itself is becoming just another illusion. In order to sift through the illusions of today’s world, educators and students should develop the objective of teaching and learning in place, where learning encompasses everything at every moment; in this way, students will be acquiring knowledge of a wide range of subjects, not just treating it as a means to an end, but as a step toward true enlightenment; this enlightened state can be realized

through a change not only in the creation of a more diverse curriculum, but also in the perspective of learning as a whole.

In order to fully understand the intrinsic issues in the education system and the steps our society needs to take in order to rectify the inherent problems, one must first fully understand the definition of education in place. Education in place is the act of learning at every moment of one's existence; it is the process of educating oneself not only in the classroom, but also in everyday life. Using this definition of education, students continuously learn about a variety of topics and have an education that is built on formal classes as well as informal observations. Along with learning constantly, education in place also involves gaining and embracing education in one's specific environment since the atmosphere and personality of a place deeply affect students' learning processes, and, in return, the environment is affected by the people around it. Students have a responsibility to be fully aware of their locations and to learn from the environment around them. Education in place is a tool that helps students to enjoy learning and to understand that education can occur outside the classroom and consistently throughout one's lifetime.

One problem with education today is that it is often designed and carried out for the sole purpose of teaching students skills for earning a degree, job, money, fame, or title; this approach leads students to focus only on future illusions rather than on present learning. In the ideal world of Plato and Socrates, every person would be educating him- or herself in order to become enlightened with the Good. Even though the Good is difficult to define and comprehend, it can only be realized through education. When realized, the Good expresses and teaches the purest form of living, almost like divinity. The greater Good is something

known only to the most enlightened people on earth, but it is never fully explained. Today, students are going to school; however, not all of them are getting a true education because some lack a deep desire and passion for learning or a need for knowledge of the Good. Some students may feel passionate about learning, but the majority of them are simply using education as a stepping stone toward their next illusion. They are not examining all aspects of their lives but simply the one area that they wish to pursue for an occupation, as Plato says in *The Apology*, “The life which is unexamined is not worth living” (124). The biggest problem is that some young adults are limiting themselves to learning only the subject matter that will help them get a job, and the current education system enables them to do so. Matt Slouka discusses this issue in his article “Dehumanized,” when he says that educational institutions today are creating “a nation of employees, not citizens” (33). Slouka states that the current expectation is that students need to learn only “whatever will get them hired by Bill Gates” (35). Instead of the chemistry major also learning about literature, music, and history, he or she may choose not to venture beyond science classes because that is all that is “necessary” or “required” to earn a specific degree, as those terms are defined by the educational system. The desire and push for knowledge in other areas is lacking; therefore, students are neither becoming enlightened across a broad range of areas nor striving to reach the Good; instead, they are simply working to finish school and to go on to further illusions.

Many students today limit themselves not only to required classes, but to the classroom itself because of the limitations of their everyday goals and the negative effects of a major-focused education. These students cannot fully grasp the idea of education in place. For example, as a first-year Paideia student at Luther College, I was given the opportunity to

participate in class outside, and this change in atmosphere was strange to me. I had never been given the chance to experience class outside of my usual comfortable setting of a desk, chalkboard, notebook, and pencil. I loved it! The environment was completely different, and I felt more conscious of my surroundings than before; this experience brought my learning out of the classroom to a place that I frequented in my spare time and had not previously associated with education. Unlike many students, I was given the opportunity to experience education in place, and it gave me an awareness of my surroundings. This experience introduced me to informal learning, which can be just as valuable as classroom discussion; I realized that learning can be achieved outside the lecture hall, even on one's own time. This realization helped me better comprehend the connection between the Good, education, and the examined life. This idea that a person can become educated outside of a classroom is foreign to many students because they often separate what they consider their "real selves," or the personalities they assume outside the classroom, from their "school selves." In this way, these future adults are cutting themselves off from the knowledge of the world around them because they are unable to learn as their "real selves." They are not present in their own lives; they are only present and conscious in the areas where they feel comfortable with their various illusions. The narrow, subject-specific curriculum requirements at many schools are often combined with this goal-oriented perspective of education, resulting in the students of today being able to think and to work only toward the next illusion in their adult lives.

In order to correct this shortcoming in the educational system, one must first work toward enhancing the current curriculum requirements by specifically requiring a wide variety of classes, as is typically offered by liberal arts institutions, where students take courses in

many fields outside of their majors. In contrast, some institutions offer very limited general education programs, so the English major is required to take English classes and little else. The same goes for the math major and the art student. Taking only major-specific courses allows students to become complacent in their ignorance. Just like the prisoners in Plato's cave who see nothing "except the shadows thrown by the fire-light on the wall of the Cave facing them," these students are learning nothing beyond their degree-specific subject ("The Allegory" 94). The art history student may know a lot of information about oil painting, but nothing about Shakespeare or Freud. Implementing curricular change in all institutions of higher education, not just liberal arts colleges, is important so that students are required to take classes outside of their major. They should learn about anthropology, music, and dance. The future doctor should not have his or her knowledge limited to anatomy; this student should learn about European history, the environment, and Faulkner. Doctors work with patients who are facing life-and-death issues every day, so if the doctors are equipped with a wide range of knowledge, they will be able to understand and relate to their patients in a more meaningful way than if they had been trained only in chemistry and biology. In effect, this broad ranging education will produce far superior physicians. The benefits of a well rounded, enlightened education can be applied to all individuals in their present and future lives. These students will become well-rounded human beings, who will be able to begin their "...upward journey of the soul in to the region of the intelligible" (Plato "The Allegory" 97).

Many people would argue that education is ultimately about learning skills that will help students get a job and earn their living. Without these skills, it is impossible to survive in today's society. They may even suggest that these additional general education courses are a

waste of time in the big picture of survival and success in our money driven culture. To some extent, these claims are true; money is important. However, these extra classes are essential for students' success. They may not need to understand music to pass chemistry courses, but they do need to understand something about music to become well-rounded people. The view that courses outside of the major are a waste of time raises an important issue. Today, many people place value on obtaining jobs, earning wealth, and attaining success as the most important goal of education. However, this type of value does not push students toward enlightenment of the ultimate Good but simply allows them to be content with the stereotypes of what is good enough. With this enhanced curriculum, students will be pushed out of Plato's cave of ignorance and allowed to "...climb the ascent to the vision of Goodness, which we called the highest object of knowledge" ("The Allegory" 99).

As well as changing the curriculum, students and educators need to change their perspective on the ultimate goal of education. As previously stated, the usual motivation for obtaining a formal degree is to get a comfortable job, to earn a good income, or to establish a solid reputation. This perspective of learning is too narrow; instead, the idea of "education in place" should be universally applied in all schools through activities like outdoor classes and experiential learning. Students should be taught to love learning! They should not be learning just to get a grade or a degree. They should get an education because they have a thirst and desire for knowledge. Young adults should want to take classes outside their major simply because they want to learn; they should be driven by a desire for deeper and broader understanding. Instead of viewing education as something to be endured in order to reach other life experiences, it should be enjoyed in and of itself. This change in perspective will bring

students closer to the enlightened ideas of Plato and Socrates. With their views altered to a more Platonic mindset, students will develop a thirst for knowledge and will feel encouraged about “the contemplation of divine things” (Plato “The Allegory” 97). This enjoyment of learning will ultimately not only get students jobs, but also bring them closer to enlightenment. Leaving college with this mindset, students will not simply settle for comfortable jobs. This attitude will push them to continue in their pursuit of more knowledge in their everyday lives in both formal and informal settings. A perspective like this will mean that educational institutions are no longer merely propping up students’ illusions, but instead are promoting the form of education that Plato and Socrates admired so greatly.

Our educational system has taken thousands of years to evolve to its present state. It has changed and been adapted by different perspectives and cultures. Even today, the educational system needs to continue to evolve. Current widespread attitudes and narrow curriculum requirements have, from a Platonic point-of-view, made education into another illusion and pushed us further away from understanding the Good. With a more diverse curriculum and a genuine thirst for knowledge, students will become well-rounded people and change the way our entire society functions because they will continue searching for higher knowledge as lifelong learners. This combination of changes in education will provide young adults with the enlightenment that Plato advocated. With this enlightenment, people will not just get a glimpse of the Good; they will understand it and, maybe, start to live it.

Works Cited

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