

Using the Classics as a Foundation for Media Studies

Haeryun Choi, Ph.D. and Dennis W. Mazzocco, Ph.D.

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Abstract:

This article considers the import of media studies education within liberal education. It will explore Plato's writings from the allegory of the cave in 4th Century B.C. as a means to appreciate the value of critical reflection within a world increasingly framed by our mass media system. Unchecked media consumption without critical deconstruction and reflection might make us more like those chained in the cave than free in the light of knowledge and empowerment. The goal of education must focus on teaching young people critical thinking skills, cultural literacy, the habit of self-examination, and to appreciate and value culture.

Affiliations:

Dr. Haeryun Choi
Assistant Professor
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education and Information Sciences
Long Island University, CWPost Campus

Dr. Dennis W. Mazzocco
Associate Professor
Department of Radio, Television, Film
School of Communication
Hofstra University

Contact information: Haeryun.choi@liu.edu or Dennis.W.Mazzocco@hofstra.edu

Using the Classics as a Foundation for Media Studies

Those of us who teach media studies at the university level often struggle with the most effective pedagogies to encourage critical thinking about the mass media. We would argue that there is a need for a philosophical foundation for media studies education that may help us to capture and hold the attention of our students. Consider Plato's allegory of the cave, written 2,400 years ago. Plato's allegory of the cave offers educators a unique perspective to persuade students that unmitigated consumption of mediated imagery may impede one's journey to a soulful, creative, or meaningful life. Ancient texts might offer students a different path to enlightenment and personal fulfillment that many seek, but do not find in our advanced mass media system.

Plato within the Classroom Experience

We are not the first to think about Plato and media studies. Indeed, there are others who have addressed the topic with more depth and complexity (Nehamas 1988, Bounds and Jagmohan 2008, Berry 2010). And we are fairly confident that there will be more who write on this topic in future years because of the enduring quality of Plato's work and the significance of media in people's consciousness. Our unique perspective emerges from our experience teaching philosophy of education and media aesthetic classes at two nearby, urban liberal arts colleges in Long Island, N.Y. Both of us enjoy outstanding teaching records and favorable reviews by our students, and have observed encouraging results bringing Plato and media studies simultaneously into our curricula.

We believe Plato's essay on the cave communicates most powerfully about what it means to be human. It also eerily describes our eternal struggle to seek knowledge in

spite of our resistance to self-examination. We find the work remains profound and potent, particularly among those college students we have reached with this text.

In our classroom experience, many of our students bring with them the dominant, ahistorical, and technocratic cultural view that “Life should be Easy,” perhaps because that view is so appealing in its simplicity. Indeed, there has been much written of late about the current state of so-called generation-me students who remain skeptical that they might have anything to learn from non-digital sources, particularly from those who might be older than 30 years of age (Hoover 2009, Bauerlein 2008, Twenge 2006). There are also those who are more critical about the apparent decline of higher education and the low learning rates on college campuses today (Arum and Roksa 2011).

Indeed, there is much more pressure upon the instructor to be less strict and more friendly with students than even 5 or 10 years ago. Our students themselves will argue that our 21st century world is now more removed and irrelevant to our ancestors because of our seemingly infinite access to technology. Many, if not most, of our students assume that technology gives us a free pass to knowledge because we have 24/7 access to mass media, which, of course, mostly refers to the internet. They have also become more confident and complacent in the comfort and speed that the technology affords, but less so into discussions about personal enlightenment (or meaningful empowerment). Yet, that is precisely the inside job that Plato was talking about. Modern media lead us to be consumed with the external and not the internal.

In our experience working with our students, we have witnessed a general decline in imagination and lack of willingness to take intellectual risks, amid an eagerness to blame the institution or their instructor for the failure to “reach” them. An increasing

portion of our students regularly shows us that they bear little if any responsibility for their own education. No, this does not describe all of our students, but those mature (wise) few ones are indeed far and few in between. We think that Plato can offer those immature students much in the way of promoting self-examination as a means to a more hopeful and effective professional life. Indeed, Plato may still be our best teacher.

In our experience, there has been a gradual loss of interest in history and the humanities, which may be one of the highest costs of drifting toward an almost unconscious technocratic perspective. While our students may at times show skepticism toward the economic, political, or social aims of mass media messaging, they rarely question the basic assumptions about how to view the world, and/or who are the good and/or bad people as defined by the vast majority of media portrayals. Their willingness to develop critical thinking about the media skills comes in a distant second or third to landing a good job after graduation. And we have also found in our classes fewer and fewer students who have “to be persuaded that they can believe anything that appears in mass media.”

For those of us who critique the media, it is sometimes easy to feel as if we were telling a child that there is no Santa Claus. We want and need to believe that the media are all truthful and all-powerful, even though we know they cannot be so logically. But even if it were so, our students often say, the media would have more impact on others, not themselves (Salwen and Dupagne 2000, Davison 1983). If there is one by-product of “medium is the message” thinking that is toughest to counter, it is the student misconception that because they have consumed a great deal of media product from young age so they have little or nothing to learn about the impact of media upon culture.

Among our students, there exists an almost faith-like expectation that any new idea or concept we introduce should be presented with clear justification of its relevance to “reality,” the professional world, and/or the prospect of a successful job after graduation. Even the media theorist Marshall McLuhan, whose writings in the early 1960s, were far more encompassing and visionary, particularly when it comes to revealing the anti-intellectual and ahistorical potential of a mass mediated society, predicted this development. He forecast a modern society with advanced mass media where the superficial would literally drown out the symbolic:

In a culture like ours... It is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message (McLuhan 1964, 7).

Over the last three decades, as mass media have become pervasive (some might even say invasive), the value of using classic texts in the humanities to deepen student understanding or appreciation of the value of media studies education—perception and consequences of media imagery and messaging—may seem a paradox. For so-called millennial students, the world cannot exist without an all-powerful media that simultaneously has the cultural and educational power to entertain, inform, distract, comfort, and/or inspire.

Part of the reason for this might be the cumulative effect of more profit-driven media systems on our social culture. To chase advertising viewers, tabloid techniques have reigned supreme for the last two decades:

The tabloid world of network television news, 1997. It is often a world of UFOs, psychics, daydreams, miracle cures, cuddly animals, O.J. Simpson, JonBenet Ramsey and, from time to time--for at least a few minutes--real news. But real news in 1997 usually comes by the spoonful (McCartney 1997).

Tabloid values require emotional engagement with media, over rational engagement. In the age of appealing to the largest audience to sell products, appealing to emotion, fear, and comfort prove to be far more reliable in increasing viewership. But these tools have educational consequences for undermining our ability to perceive reality or to understand the value behind the imagery presented over time.

Making a transition from emotional to intellectual engagement is difficult, and the individual has to end their way of cognitive understanding as a satisfying experience. Students must acknowledge that they are ignorant and that they are wrong (Plato *Apology*). Plato, in the allegory of the cave, describes how human beings, including our students, can be reflective and rational in deconstructing the media instead of unreflective and emotional. This is a journey we as human beings need to take to become “a liberally educated person.” Following this train of thought, media studies education must become a critical part of this process of liberal education in college, one that dates back to the very beginning of western philosophical thought.

The Allegory of the Cave: human condition and the need of liberal education

Plato describes the human condition in his famous allegory of the cave in the *Republic* (514a - 516b). Human beings are portrayed as chained prisoners in the cave. Human beings live in an underground cave from their childhood with their neck and legs shackled. Since they are unable to move and turn around, all they can see is the wall in front of them. The cave is bright enough to see things due to a burning fire behind them and a light coming in from the above, a way to the outside of the cave. Between the prisoner and the fire, there is a path along with some people carrying around man-made objects and puppets. The human beings can perceive only images and shadows that are

reflected on the wall in front of them.

Plato makes the observation that because the prisoners would have no other experience besides that of the cave, they would see the images and shadows on the wall and believe them to be "real" and "true." Their captivity would distort their view of reality. Plato further asks what would happen if some of these prisoners were released and led from the cave. They would be in pain and angry as they were dragged along. For the road to the outside of the cave is rather rough. When they came into the light, with the sunlight filling their eyes, they would not be able to see any of the things that are now said to be true.

Because of the confinement in the cave, they would need time to get adjusted before they could see things in the world above. Eventually, they would become wise to the ways of the world and with time would be able to "see the sun itself in its own place and be able to contemplate it" (Plato *Republic*, 516b). They would realize that everything they had formerly loved was either a lie or insignificant, and would realize just how little they knew during their imprisonment.

In the allegory, the sun represents truth, the prisoners are the uninformed and uneducated, and the cave is all that we can perceive. Plato says that so long as we are confined by what we can see, taste, and touch, we will never be able to even consider abstract ideas like justice and love. If, however, we shake the bonds, which our senses have placed upon us, we can arrive at a higher stage of enlightenment or understanding than we could have imagined possible during our imprisonment.

Education, and college education as so-called liberal education, is the process by which an individual arrives into a state of enlightenment. For Plato, this process is rather

long and truly that does not begin to become realized until we reach 50 years of age. Using the allegory of the cave as an illustration, education represents the prisoner's journey out of the cave.

As college professors, we would like to educate our students to come as close as possible to being ruled by the rational part of the soul or by our rational desires, for that way, they would have the best chance of achieving genuine understanding, happiness, and freedom. This is the goal of liberal education. We value knowledge and freedoms because our enslavement to bodily/worldly desires distort our perception of the good and cause us to chase after things that will never make us really happy and free.

Many college professors profess to do this, that is to bring out students outside of the cave. However, we find out it is not an easy task; more often, we find that it is rather a very daunting one. If they can bring just one more person into the light, they will feel that they have accomplished something which will, of course, give them a great deal of satisfaction.

College professor as Socratic Teacher

Socratic teachers know that the road to the truth is through questioning of the obvious, and that self-discovery is very tough for those who are not ready or inclined to embrace the examined life. Socratic teachers also believe that this is the way to self-knowledge and spiritual growth, and understanding (Neiman 2000, Gotz 1999, Nassbaum 1997, 2009). To distinguish what we know and what we do not know is the necessary condition to the way of knowledge. In other words, Socratic teaching is a powerful tool that promotes critical thinking and self-awareness, which is the goal of liberal education.

Many of our students lack critical thinking and self-awareness in a world that is increasingly defined by wealth, power, and great fear of the unknown—all of which are increasingly features of modern mass media messaging. Socratic instruction, rather, focuses on empowering students to question, not give ready answers that others may have chosen. This method continuously probes the subject area with questions. Students gain the ability to focus on the elements of reasoning; they can discipline and assess themselves in this process. An attitude of disciplined thought and self-examination as a way of life prepares students ready for their education in life when formal schooling is over.

The greatest outcome of enlightenment and liberal education is to achieve freedom. It is this idea that makes enlightenment and liberal education worth any cost. Individuals who are enlightened have the freedom to choose between various options because they have the knowledge that those options exist. Those who are limited by shadows on the wall have no other choice but to remain there by what they see because they simply do not know any better. Until they manage to receive enough education that they, like Socrates, become aware of their own ignorance, they cannot hope to escape the cave. Once they begin to question whether or not there is more to life than the cave, however, they may turn their head just enough to catch a glimpse of the light shining at the entrance of the cave. When they have once seen the light, they will be motivated to start a lifelong journey to achieve it. We, Socratic teachers, are there to guide our students to see the light.

How the allegory of the cave encourages media studies

Plato was way ahead of his time in that he knew about human needs and our human

desire to evade from truth. Without liberal education, Plato said we lack critical thinking, rationality, and the power to challenge what we see in front of us. So there are a few things to keep in mind if you choose to introduce the allegory of the cave into media studies education. There will always be the common misperception among students that Plato was talking about electronic media—2400 years ago! Plato did not know or envision television, or even electricity, per se. But why do our students think this?

Media consumption comes much earlier than formal education itself. The paradox inherent here is that it is harder to counteract the media because it becomes a central focus of a child's life much earlier than any other social or cultural influence, such as the parents, church, or school. The media because they are consumed in the home where the child becomes acculturated and socialized culturally, becomes even more difficult to neutralize. Indeed, media consumption without reflection can interfere with educational practice in substantive ways that are hard to measure, and even harder to challenge critically. Uncritical media consumption is more comparable to Plato's cave dwellers than at any time before in human history.

Without education, then, we accept media as reflection of truth, not a refraction of it. In order to understand, though, we need context. To have context, we must have education. Education must rise above that which is merely stimulant of our emotions and senses. There must be some dedication to developing logic and rationality with regard to understanding imagery. When we see the cave, it is detached from reality, it is symbolic and to some degree abstract, on purpose. The meaning for many is that we do not have access to the reality itself; we have only access to what others are saying, as if we should only watch and remain passive.

The shadows on the wall are mediated forms—created by others to entertain and amuse us to depict another reality, but they are also meant to disempower us in order to make us more receptive to the message of the advertiser. When we see things without education, we must use our senses and feelings to understand. Without education, we are forced to rely upon our senses and emotions to make sense of the world. We, as in McLuhan’s conceptual frame, become the message.

The goal of education must focus on teaching young people critical thinking skills, cultural literacy, the habit of self-examination, and to appreciate and value culture. This is the goal and the promise of the liberal education, which no one should afford to lose. This would seem to even more true when one considers the import of media studies education within a world now more than ever contextualized with, and through, public media and imagery. The allegory of the cave seems a compelling choice through which to convey our hope.

Among our students, we believe the internet holds great promise but all too often the technology succumbs to the challenge of veracity and fuels misinformation; instead of clarity, we see more and more evidence of narrow thinking and reduced expectations. The technology affects our perception of what could be, but we are the agents of change (or not). In this view, there is more pressure upon us to conform rather than deviate from the “road less travelled.” Here is where the cave makes sense to us. Our point to our students is that Plato’s work is timeless, and, like great art, has the power to transcend hundreds of years of human existence and touch the reader now as well as into the future. It shows that we must struggle with our own original sin of intellectual laziness.

We would argue that Plato will still be relevant for students two or three

generations from now when the internet as we know it may be considered irrelevant.

Three decades ago, a 500-channel television universe seemed out of this world. Yet, how many times have we enjoyed discussions among our students that, even with 1000 channels, we would still be searching for that which is new, meaningful, and/or educational. To think and to think well are not mutually exclusive.

In our professional experience in the classroom, we believe that taking students through the allegory has paid off in different ways that perhaps more contemporary philosophers cannot. Foucault, Orwell, and again McLuhan, come to mind here. All are excellent theoretical choices with whom to challenge students to think about enlightenment. But it must be said that all three of those brilliant 20th century authors were writing largely in the post World War II period when the power of the individual began to decline amid the nuclear threat and the Cold War, and the unchecked power of a privatized (corporate) mass media. This is a period marked largely by mass media dominance and almost total infiltration of its messaging (and priorities) in nearly every facet of human life. These three authors mentioned are contemporary authors who argue from a non-classic perspective and none address the path to enlightenment in the same way as Plato.

Foucault was concerned with psychology, literary affairs, sexuality, and its history. Orwell wrote largely fiction and some great essays, and was a keen observer and critic of the British colonial system and 20th century totalitarian political movements. McLuhan was a political theorist, literary expert and rhetorician as well as a media critic. All three were writing in opposition to the illusion of modern technological prowess, but not necessarily enlightenment. There is a difference in our view.

Our point is that 2400 years ago someone was urging us to lead an examined life and to search the soul for answers as well as the path of enlightenment through self-examination and education. It is a traditional but still powerful message in our opinion, and one of that is worth with time and energy to show students the value of historical texts. Surely, there is room for a philosophy text in media studies from outside of 20th century thinking that will challenge our students.

At this point, most of our students are the product of more than two generations of family influence who have increasingly depended upon the US mass media for guidance and instruction on morality, whom to vote for, and what products to buy. This also applies to foreign students in countries that are within the reach of US media. There never has been a time when the power of the family has been more challenged by media portrayals and influence. Parents, religious institutions, and other heretofore dominant cultural forces now compete with a sophisticated and powerful corporate media system that seeks to engage its target audiences through multiple levels of public consciousness. With two-parent families as the norm, many families are forced to rely upon the media (including the internet) as both pacifier and entertainer, and, in some extreme cases, as surrogate parent. When parents themselves are raised on mass media from the youngest of ages, the family becomes an agent in reinforcing powerful and lasting for-profit media imagery that is designed precisely for its escapist appeal. Think Disney. More parents than children seek the multinational escapism of the Magic Kingdom—in Orlando, Anaheim, Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and soon, Shanghai.

We posit that Plato's work is especially apt for making the point that it remains a difficult task to explain enlightenment to those who remain imprisoned by the shackles of

conformity and comfort. It is especially hard to be skeptical when even education seeks to remake itself into doing it the Disney way (Gerver, 2010)

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