

# LEARNING ABOUT SOMETHING MEANS BECOMING WISER: THE PLATONIC DIALOGUE AS A PARADIGMATIC MODEL FOR WRITING CENTER PRACTICE

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## Abstract

As our discipline's scholars, we must recognize that ours is a history "that is best recognized as an always incomplete narrative" and continue to delve into the past as we seek to inform our future (Lerner 25). In this article, I delve into Plato's use of "elenchus" or cross-questioning for the purpose of achieving "aporia"—the sense of perplexity or confusion that usually accompanies the discovery that language does not have the ability to mean in any stable sense" within *Theaetetus* (Raign 90). In addition to extending our narrative history, studying the process of elenchus will allow us to share this methodology with our tutors, so that they can develop the ability not to merely engage in conversation with their students, or lead them to a truth not their own, but engage in the type of inquiry about language and its ability to mean that leads students toward the sort of self-discovery present in the Platonic dialogues.

Many students are not taught to think critically, and consequently, they build fragile structures composed of unsubstantiated opinions designed to beguile the reader into accepting as fact what is nothing more than emotion—what for Plato was sophistry. Socrates's answer to this teaching dilemma, according to Plato, was the use of dialectic. But should today's writing tutors attempt to teach today's students, students characterized by weak critical thinking skills, such a complicated and arcane method of critical analysis? I would answer yes.

I would like to focus on Plato's use of the heuristic, rather than eristic dialogue—a form of dialogue that employs "elenchus" or cross-questioning for the purpose of achieving "aporia"—the sense of perplexity or confusion that usually accompanies the discovery that language does not have the ability to mean in any stable sense . . . intended not as an end but rather as a beginning" (Raign 90). In the ten years that I directed my university's writing center, I listened to many tutors and students discussing writing and writing issues. Some of the tutors were able to engage students in in-depth conversations about their topics, while others had difficulty moving beyond questions such as "What is your problem today?" or "Let's review the rules for writing a thesis statement." The first empty question is likely to result in an equally empty answer, and the second very specific response will end in a thirty-minute review of a handout on

thesis statements, which the student could easily read him or herself.

Muriel Harris accurately describes the writing center's primary responsibility: "to work one-to-one with students" (27). Frances Martin argues that this one-to-one, "is at its best . . . clearer, fuller, more frequent, more timely, more appropriate, and more reassuring than written comment" (7). However, as teachers of writing, we all understand how difficult it can be to engage an unengaged student. The average student comes to a writing center with one expectation—someone fix my paper. Even those students who might want to engage with the tutor on a deeper level often find themselves uncertain how to do so. Students' attempts to articulate their needs vary, but the content is basically consistent:

- I need help with grammar.
- I need you to read this and find the mistakes.
- I'm not sure my paper makes sense.
- I don't know if my paper has a structure.
- My teacher said I don't have an argument.

In summary—fix it. Our students honestly need, and in most cases want more than a quick fix that excludes them from the writing process. They simply do not have the vocabulary or writing experience to articulate their individual needs in a manner that will help a writing center tutor begin a targeted, critical conversation about the student's writing. To complicate this issue, tutors often share this problem with their students. We hire tutors who have strong writing abilities, but the ability to write does not ensure the ability to critically discuss someone else's writing. Consequently, many tutorials sound like this:

**Tutor:** How can I help you today?

**Student:** I need help on my paper.

**Tutor:** What kind of help?

**Student:** You know, just help with the whole thing.

**Tutor:** OK. Let me read the paper, and then we can discuss it.

At this point, the tutor will read the paper aloud (sometimes silently) while the student looks at his or her phone. After several minutes have passed, the tutor will begin again.

**Tutor:** What are you trying to say in this paper?

**Student:** My teacher told me to write about a world without something important in it. I wrote about a world without cell phones (while looking at text).

**Tutor:** OK. That's an interesting idea. What would a world without cell phones look like?

**Student:** Well, you know. Not so good. Bad. Like I said in my paper.

**Tutor:** OK. Let's look at your paper. Where do you say that not having phones wouldn't be good? Can you show me?

**Student:** (Poking paper with pen). Here, here, and here. I said three things because I needed five paragraphs. But my teacher said I didn't say enough, and I should look at how I support my thesis.

At this point, the tutor is beginning to get frustrated and starts looking for a way to give the tutorial some kind of structure.

**Tutor:** What is the topic sentence of your first body paragraph?

**Student:** A world without cell phones would be boring.

**Tutor:** Excellent. So you do have a topic sentence. Do your other body paragraphs have topic sentences?

**Student:** Let's see. A world without cell phones would be unsafe, and a world without cell phones would be lonely.

**Tutor:** Great. So now we have something to work with. Let's look at how you support each of those ideas.

The tutorial ends shortly after this, with the student and the tutor agreeing that the student needs to add examples after each topic sentence—making sure each paragraph has at least two examples. Sadly, the tutor and the student never moved beyond their discussion of how the student could produce a five-paragraph theme to discuss the relevance of the student's thesis, or the quality of the arguments being made. Because the tutor could not discover how to initiate a dialectic

with the student, the tutorial devolved into chat about how to structure a paper devoid of originality or credibility. The student and the tutor didn't engage in an analysis of the paper's content; they engaged in a conversation about the structure of the paper *sans* content—in essence verifying many students' misconceptions that writing doesn't need to mean—it simply needs to follow a set of abstract rules. Unfortunately, the behavior described in this example, while not typical, does occur with disturbing regularity.

The question of how to train tutors to engage in meaningful conversation has haunted me for quite some time, and recently, as I was reading Plato for a graduate course I was teaching, I found my answer. Plato's *Theaetetus* provides a specific model of effective tutor and student behavior, and by using this dialogue as a training tool for our tutors, we can provide them with an example of a structured dialogue that they can use as a road map for their own tutorials. Introducing tutors to this process and the structure in which it occurs will teach tutors to do more than reduce a tutorial to a discussion of a randomly identified grammar issue—though this method can be used to discuss grammar issues, or the application of a set of arbitrary rules (e.g. every essay must have five paragraphs). Tutors will have the skills to engage their students in dialogues that will help them identify the flaws in their arguments or reasoning, that rather than causing the dialogue to disintegrate, lead the conversation to a deeper level. In this paper, I attempt to do several things:

- Briefly discuss the relationship between dialect, dialogue, and tutorial.
- Analyze the usefulness of Rosemary Desjardins' discussion of elenchus as a paradigm for teaching students to recognize aporias in the Platonic dialogues, and consequently, in their students' papers.
- Offer an analysis of the Platonic dialogue *Theaetetus*, which can be used to train tutors.
- Suggest how tutors can use this knowledge to engage their students in the valuable heuristic of dialectic by acting as both guide and mentor.

## The Socratic Method, Dialectic, Dialogue, Tutorial

Amid heavy course loads, tentative job security, and numbing committee work, we eke out our fifteen minutes of conferencing a semester, apologizing to students that is all we can do. We hope that some students visit the writing center, getting more informed feedback than they'd get from a quick opinion offered by a roommate or younger sister. And we hope that our inability to offer more extensive contact doesn't push students into seeing writing assignments as little more than rote exercises in giving the teacher what she or she wants, a function easily fulfilled by the wide range of online papers for sale (Lerner 205).

In this quote, Lerner acknowledges the gulf that separates the classroom from the writing center. Despite their best intentions, composition teachers have limited time in which to provide students with informed, personalized feedback, instead hoping students will fill this need in the writing center. Clearly, the writing center, where students can engage in inquiry based conferences, offers something the classroom cannot—the opportunity to engage one-on-one with a mentor who is not restricted by his or her need to give a grade, what Thomas Hemmeter calls Socratic tutoring, and claims is “the traditional site of language instruction” (43-44). This activity, the social process of constructing knowledge, has been identified by multiple scholars, though each gives it a different name. Nancy J. Allen analyzes Plato's *Phaedrus* and identifies three tutoring models. The authoritarian tutor believes that he or she holds the truth, and should share it. In other words, the tutor might determine that the student needs to add topic sentences and would then suggest that action as a cure to the paper's ills (Allen 5). Conversely, the tutor as inquirer uses probing questions to lead the student to a truth about his or her paper—a truth the tutor believes the student already owns. Socrates uses this method when he gives his second speech with his head uncovered. In this speech, and the discussion that follows, Socrates uses questions to lead Phaedrus to a truth that Phaedrus consequently believes is his own. However, Allen points out that while Phaedrus did discover a truth he felt to be his own, in fact, “it was [Socrates] who determined that truth and then led [Phaedrus] to recognize and articulate it” (6). Consequently, she cautions that tutors as inquirers

might to some degree appropriate students' work. Allen concludes by advising tutors to emulate Socrates the explorer, who investigated the nature of rhetoric with Phaedrus so that they could both understand it more fully (8). She acknowledges that the role of explorer is a difficult one for tutors because it leads them into uncharted waters, void of a firm structure or clear goal (9)—a structure that I argue can be found in *Theaetetus*.

Gregory Clark, in a similar rhetorical move, also identifies three types of Socratic exchange: “Dialogue ... is characterized by its participant's consciousness of each other, by the conscious efforts to interact cooperatively ... Dialectic ... enables people to construct together assumptions and agreements they can share ... Conversation describes that process through which people enact the essence of compromise” (xvi). So, dialogue describes the shape of the activity; dialectic describes the function, and conversation describes the process (xvi). Clark relies heavily on the work of Chaim Perlman, who subsumes the three—shape, function, and process—into one term: the dialectical method (Clark 164-165).

Within the dialectical method, Clark identifies two types of dialogue: eristic and dialectical. Eristic discourse attempts to force one person's interpretation (or truth) on another. When a tutor tells a student to “write the sentence this way,” while writing the sentence on the student's paper, he or she is engaging in eristic dialogue. The purpose of a dialectical exchange, however, is to “present an interpretation to others for them to judge, opening it to their modifying response” (Clark 19). When a tutor uses questions such as “To me your thesis sounds vague, but what do you think?” he or she is engaging in dialectical dialogue and emulating Socrates the explorer (Allen 8-9). Discourse that Plato condemns, such as Lysias' speech in the *Phaedrus*, is an example of eristic dialogue, while the later discussion of the meaning of love is dialectical in nature. So we end with multiple metaphors to describe the types of rhetorical inquiry occurring within the Platonic dialogues:

Authoritarian/inquirer/explorer  
Eristic/dialectic

Regardless of the terminology each uses, they are all saying the same thing: within the Platonic dialogues, we have models of tutoring behavior—both positive and negative. I would like to continue the conversation by focusing on Socrates the explorer, who engaged in dialectic dialogue—the methodology most effective in a writing center—to provide an antidote to the ills of foolish and empty thinking and writing (Allen 9). I also

suggest that an exploration of the process of elenchus in Plato's dialogues, and the aporia that may result, provide us with both a vocabulary and a process for understanding this methodology more clearly.

## The Process of Elenchus That Results in Aporia

We must deconstruct the methodology of dialectic in order to validate that the Platonic dialogues do, in fact, describe and codify a tutoring methodology that clearly serves as a useful model for 21<sup>st</sup> century writing centers. Rosemary Desjardins, in "Why Dialogues: Plato's Serious Play," provides useful terminology for understanding the use of the dialectic to tutor students by identifying, in terms of actions, the process that takes place within the dialogues. First, elenchus, the process of inquiry or "cross-questioning" occurs and serves the primary purpose of making someone "realize that to come up with even the right words is not enough, that one's unquestioned assumptions are often really obstacles to true understanding" (Desjardins 115). In Desjardins' view "...the ambiguous nature of language complicates the ability to communicate in more than a superficial manner by undermining an unshakeable belief in language's ability to mean ... which attempts to open the participant to the process of elenchus" in which one is made to realize that to come up with even the right words is not enough, that one's unquestioned assumptions are obstacles to understanding (Raign 90; Desjardins 116). Elenchus, if rigorously used, results in aporia. Aporia, "meaning literally 'no way out,' 'no exit'—is intended, of course, not as an end but rather as a beginning" (Desjardins 116-117).

*Theaetetus* provides an example of both the process of elenchus and the discovery of aporia, supplemented with Socrates's commentary on the usefulness of both as a learning strategy. In the analysis that follows, we will look at best practices for tutoring as they occur during the process of a tutorial.

## In the Beginning—The Role of the Tutor and the Student

Early in the dialogue, Socrates attempts to ensure the success of the tutorial by explaining to Theaetetus both his own role as tutor and Theaetetus's as student, as well the rewards and risks that are the results of engaging in the process of elenchus. First, Socrates establishes the purpose of their discussion:

**Socrates:** . . . So tell me, in a generous spirit, what you think knowledge is.

**Theaetetus:** Well, Socrates, I cannot refuse, since you and Theodorus ask me. Anyhow, if I do make a mistake, you will set me right.

**Socrates:** By all means, if we can (146c, 851).

Here, Plato provides us with a definition of the roles of the tutor and the student. The student is to respond to the tutor's questions in "a generous spirit," with the reassurance that the tutor will "set [him or her] right" if necessary. Socrates is quick to do so, suggesting that Theaetetus's answers are too circular in nature:

**Socrates:** . . . we are going an interminable way round, when our answer might be quite short and simple (147c, 148).

After Socrates tutors him in the art of the short and specific response, Theaetetus questions his ability to meet Socrates's expectations:

**Theaetetus:** But I assure you Socrates, I have often set myself to study that problem [what is knowledge], when I heard reports of the questions you ask. But I cannot persuade myself that I can give any satisfactory solution or that anyone has ever stated in my hearing the sort of answer you require (148e, 853).

Socrates refers to his own skill as a tutor in order to establish his own ethos and to reassure his student:

**Socrates:** . . . the highest point of my art is the power to prove by every test whether the offspring of a young man's thought is a false phantom or instinct with life and truth. . . I can bring nothing to light because there is no wisdom in me. (150c, 855)

Here, Socrates establishes that his ethos lies not in his possession of wisdom, but in his ability to guide others in their search for wisdom—his expertise lies in the process of elenchus. Socrates very effectively empowers his student to explore his ideas while providing a safety net of sorts—his ability to serve as a guide, or mentor if you will. He carefully avoids setting himself up as a rival to Theaetetus by denying his own possession "of any sort of wisdom, nor . . . any discovery of [his] soul," which prevents him, whether actually or metaphorically, from appropriating Theaetetus's ideas. He has, in essence, created the persona of the perfect tutor whose job is to help his or her student separate weak ideas (false phantoms and

wind eggs) from those with potential (instinct with life and truth).

Next, Socrates proves to Theaetetus, the benefits and drawbacks of engaging in the process of elenchus with a skilled tutor:

**Socrates:** Those who frequent my company at first appear, some of them, quite unintelligent, but, as we go further with our discussions, all who are favored by heaven make progress at a rate that seems surprising to others as well as to themselves, although it is clear that they have never learned anything from me. The many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within. But the delivery is . . . mine (150d, 855).

In this passage, Socrates might be a tutor sitting in any writing center at any college or university, silently mourning a student's lack of intelligence, only to find his or her opinion altering as the tutorial unwinds; the student's confidence grows, and the tutor's questions are met with thoughtful answers. It is this very experience that keeps those of us who inhabit writing centers returning each day. As Socrates and other wise tutors know, the tutor is only the facilitator in the process. However, Socrates also wants his student to be clear that his intellectual growth is contingent upon the mentorship being provided by the tutor, and the process of elenchus itself:

**Socrates:** The proof of this is that many who have not been conscious of my assistance but have made light of me, thinking it [their intellectual growth] was all their own doing, have left me sooner than they should, whether under others' influence or of their own motion, and thenceforward suffered miscarriage of their thoughts through falling in bad company, and they have lost the children [ideas] of whom I had delivered them by bringing them up badly, caring more for false phantoms than for the true (150d-e, 855).

So, those students who openly and regularly engage in the process of elenchus with a trained tutor will "make progress at a rate that seems surprising to others as well as to themselves," while those students who believe they do not need a tutor's aid will fail to deliver true ideas.

Socrates is not unaware of the fact that many students whose ideas he has cast away do not see that

[he] is doing them a kindness," but have "been positively ready to bite [him] for taking away some foolish notion they have conceived" (151c-d, 856). Again, this description is a startlingly accurate summation of what many tutors experience today. Many (if not most) students are like Plato's students—they desperately want instruction, but become defensive when their ideas are questioned. This attitude must be tempered by the reminder that "the many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within" (150d, 855).

As the tutorial continues, Socrates continues to reiterate for his student that the work being done belongs to him and is the result of his labor, not the tutor's:

**Socrates:** The arguments never come out of me; they always come from the person I am talking with. I am only at a slight advantage in having the skill to get some account of the matter from another person's wisdom and entertain it with fair treatment (161b, 866).

Socrates is again pausing the tutorial to remind the student that he has the answers in order to alleviate his natural frustration—another important behavior that tutors must emulate. Students need positive reinforcement. Having established how elenchus works, Plato, in the remainder of the dialogue, shares further best practices to be used by those who lead others in the process of elenchus.

Four clear practices are outlined for the tutor:

**Explain the role of both the tutor and the student.**

The tutor will use his or her skills to ask students pertinent questions about their writing, and the students are to participate fully by answering honestly and clearly.

**Correct and reassure as needed.** The tutor should correct students when they fail to fully engage in the process and should reassure students when they doubt their ability to do so effectively.

**Establish a role as mentor, not editor.** Tutors should remind students that while they are expert writers, their job is to lead students to a fuller understanding of their own writing, not to fix, correct, or appropriate students' work.

**Provide positive reinforcement about the process.** Tutors must take the time to convince students of the positive effects of the tutoring process, rather than assuming students are already convinced of this fact, or

losing their patience when students express doubt about the tutor's knowledge or abilities. In most cases, students, like Theaetetus, speak out of fear and a lack of confidence—not experience.

### Stuck in the Middle with You—Empathize, Don't Criticize

The metaphor of illness is commonly used in writing center lore, and in this context, Socrates is suggesting that students are not to be blamed or judged if they do not recognize “good” writing versus bad.<sup>1</sup>

**Socrates:** To the sick man his food appears sour and is so; to the healthy man it is and appears the opposite. Now there is no call to represent either of the two as wiser—that cannot be—nor is the sick man to be pronounced unwise because he thinks as he does, or the healthy man wise because he thinks differently. What is wanted is a change to the opposite condition, because the other state is better (166e-167a, 872).

Students do not need to be “fixed,” “healed” or “diagnosed.” Instead, the tutor is to help students reach a better state in which they are able to judge the quality of their writing more wisely. In fact, he sees this as the tutor's obligation:

**Socrates:** . . . when someone by reason of a depraved condition of mind has thoughts of a like character, one makes him, by reason of a sound condition, think other and sound thoughts (167b, 873).

One method of helping students whose thoughts on writing and the writing process are not sound is to help them make appropriate choices based on audience analysis:

**Socrates:** For I hold that whatever practices seem right and laudable to any particular state are so, for that state, so long as it holds by them. Only, when the practices are, in any particular case, unsound for them, the wise man substitutes others that are and appear sound (167c, 873).

So, the tutor must, through careful inquiry, help the student to determine what the particular state, or writing situation, deems to be the best practice. Clearly, if an instructor requires a student to write in third person, the wise tutor will help a student to understand

the necessity of making that choice if he or she wants to satisfy his or her audiences' expectations. Again, we are left with clear practices to follow:

**Physician, heal thyself.** Tutors must remember that their students are not broken and waiting to be fixed. If they have “wrong” ideas about the writing process, it is the job of the tutor to discover the source of the belief and then guide them to a healthier belief. Students don't insert errors into their papers in order to confound the tutor. They do it out of a lack of understanding.

**Empathize, empathize, empathize.** A tutor must first understand the source of a student's belief before he or she can help the student replace that belief with a more useful one. A tutor must help the student to understand the rhetorical situation of his or her current writing project so that the student can make sound choices.

None of these best practices are new or surprising. What is surprising is that the best practices did not develop out of the work of 20<sup>th</sup> or even 21<sup>st</sup> century writing centers. In fact, these best practices were bequeathed to us in the works of Plato. Next, we will look at specific examples of the occurrence of *aporia*, and their effect on the outcome of the tutorial.

### Useful Frustration—Elenchus and *Aporia*

Although the entire dialogue *Theaetetus* is an example of *elenchus*, it is in the latter half of the dialogue that Socrates overtly states the difference between a debate and a conversation, the latter being his word for the process of *elenchus*:

**Socrates:** Do not conduct your questioning unfairly. It is very unreasonable that one who professes a concern for virtue should be constantly guilty of unfairness in argument. Unfairness here consists in not observing the distinction between a debate and conversation. A debate need not be taken seriously, and one may trip up an opponent to the best of one's power, but a conversation should be taken in earnest; one should help out the other party and bring home to him only those slips and fallacies that are due to himself or to his earlier instructors (167e-168a, 873).

Clearly, this is directed at those who would be tutors, reminding them that their role is to engage students in

rational inquiry—elenchus—not strive to prove their own superiority through debate, which is self-serving.<sup>2</sup>

The most overt examples of elenchus and aporia occur in the final passages of the dialogue. As Socrates and Theaetetus struggle to understand the meaning of knowledge, their questions lead to multiple aporias, the first being the result of their agreement that, rather than finding out what knowledge is, they have discovered what it is not:

**Theaetetus:** It is now perfectly plain that knowledge is something different from perception.

**Socrates:** You are right, my friend. Now we begin all over again. Blot out all we have been saying, and see if you can get a clearer view from the position you have now reached (186e-187a, 892).

Next, Socrates and Theaetetus must acknowledge that they have been defeated in their search to understand the meaning of knowledge. They have been trapped by their own reasoning, and must seek a new way out; if no way can be found, they must humbly begin again:

**Socrates:** I should feel some shame at our being forced into such admissions. But if we find the way out, then, as soon as we are clear, it will be time to speak to others as caught the ludicrous position we shall have ourselves escaped; though, if we are completely baffled, then I suppose we must be humble and let the argument do with us what it will, like a sailor trampling over seasick passengers. So let me tell you where I still see an avenue open for us to follow. . . We must, in fact, put the case in a different way. Perhaps the barrier will yield somewhere, though it may defy our efforts (191a-b, 897).

Although they do, in fact, begin again, Socrates and Theaetetus are once again stymied. They have “gone a long way round” only find themselves facing another impasse.

**Socrates:** Maybe, my young friend, we have deserved this rebuke, and the argument shows us that we were wrong . . .

**Theaetetus:** As things now stand, Socrates, one cannot avoid that conclusion.

**Socrates:** To start all over again, then, what is one to say that knowledge is? For surely we are not going to give up yet.

**Theaetetus:** Not unless you do (200c-d, 907).

Despite their many attempts, Socrates and Theaetetus never answer their initial question. Yet, as I stated earlier, the purpose of aporia is not to find answers, an end, but to create a conversation, a beginning—a fact that Socrates both acknowledges and praises at the close of *Theaetetus*:

**Socrates:** Are we in labor with any further child my friend, or have we brought to birth all we have to say about knowledge?

**Theaetetus:** Indeed we have, and for my part I have already, thanks to you, given utterance to more than I thought I had in me (210b, 918).

Although Socrates and his student agree that all of their ideas have been “wind eggs” not worth raising, they are likely to give birth to future thoughts worthy of development. Theaetetus acknowledges that the process helped him to discover more ideas than he thought he had in him, and such is the true purpose of elenchus:

**Socrates:** Your embryo thoughts will be better as a consequence of today’s scrutiny, and if you remain barren, you will be gentler and more agreeable to your companions, having the good sense not to fancy you know what you do not know (210b-c, 919).

So we again see the dichotomy of debate versus conversation, or answer versus inquiry. If we honestly believe that writing and learning to write are processes, then we must naturally engage not in debate but in conversation, and where is that activity most likely to occur? The writing center.

## Applications for the Writing Center

Writing center staff has intuitively been modeling the Platonic paradigm for centuries; however, we have never formally acknowledged our debt to Plato, or fully utilized the tools with which he provided us. Yes, writing tutors typically engage in dialectic when working with students, and much has been published on the tutorial, but we should make our instruction in the Platonic method more intrinsic. While it is not necessary to require your tutors to read Plato, though it might make for an interesting conversation, you can provide them with an overview of the Platonic method, and explain the relevant terminology. You might also do some modeling with your tutors, and have them do the same. Consciously using the terminology provided here can help writing center

directors to more effectively train their tutors in several ways:

**The Platonic dialogues provide evidence of the richness of our history, and offer tangible examples that writing center directors and staff can analyze and emulate.**

New writing center tutors are often stymied by their lack of an understandable, replicable method for conducting effective conversations—dialectic—with their clients. Writing center directors, myself included, often attempt to remedy this problem by having tutors engage in mock tutorials, or observe experienced tutors as they work with students. While these methods have their benefits, why not reinforce them by first introducing our tutors to the Platonic dialogues? Providing an overview of dialogues such as *Theaetetus* for our tutors will provide them with a model to follow, while also introducing them to our discipline's rich history.

**The terms “elenchus” and “aporia” offer tutors a specific vocabulary to use when working with students—one that will help tutors to demystify the process for students so they can effectively identify their own discoveries.**

It is often their faith in the ability of language, particularly their own unique use of language to mean, that prevents students from being able to distance themselves sufficiently from their own writing to engage in the process of elenchus for the purpose of seeking aporia. Simply put, their unwillingness to question language renders them unable to engage in dialectic. For example, a student who chooses to write on the topic of abortion must question that word's ability to signify a unified meaning by confronting the term's multiplicity of meanings. However, such a process requires that students risk shaking the very roots of their own beliefs in language's power—a process that not only frightens students, but one in which they are totally unprepared to engage. By taking students through a process of inquiry inspired by that in *Theaetetus*, and explaining to students what happens when aporia occurs, tutors can help students take their first tentative steps into a deeper level of meaning beyond their own preconceived beliefs.

As we train each new generation of writing center directors and their staff, we need to ensure that we have given them access to their rich heritage, so that they can learn from the works of Plato, and strive to implement the process of dialectic as they seek to empower students. Perhaps we will not work with our students to define knowledge, or truth, but that does not mean the conversations in which we help students

to understand truths about writing and the writing process (e.g. what is a good thesis? Do I have one? Have I fairly defined my terms in my argument?) are less important or less useful to our students. Let's reimagine that tutorial we began with:

**Tutor:** How can I help you today?

**Student:** I need help on my paper.

**Tutor:** Great. So the topic of your paper is imagine life without cell phones, right?

**Student:** Yeah.

**Tutor:** OK. Let me read the paper, and then we can discuss it.

At this point, the tutor asks the student to read his paper out loud.

**Tutor:** (Pointing at thesis). So, you are arguing that life without cell phones would be bad, right?

**Student:** Yeah.

**Tutor:** How would you define bad?

**Student:** You know, not good.

**Tutor:** I agree that good is the opposite of bad, but you still haven't told me what “bad” means. Do you define bad in your paper?

**Student:** (Poking paper with pen). Here, here, and here. I said three things because I needed five paragraphs. But my teachers said I didn't say enough.

**Tutor:** You do have three paragraphs, but you still haven't told me how you define bad in your paper. Show me one place in your paper where you define bad.

**Student:** (Pointing at a paragraph) A world without cell phones would be boring.

**Tutor:** Excellent. So you define bad as boring?

**Student:** Well, I would say it is bad to be bored.

**Tutor:** Let's think about this. First, boring is how we describe something, right? Give me an example of something that is boring.

**Student:** (Laughing) This tutoring thing is boring.

**Tutor:** (Laughing) Fair enough. But is it bad?

**Student:** No, it's good because I'm learning how to make my paper better.

**Tutor:** So?

**Student:** So I guess bad and boring aren't always the same thing.

**Tutor:** I agree. So what does that do to your argument that life without cell phones is bad?



**Student:** Messes it up. I guess I need another word besides bad.

**Tutor:** I agree. How would you describe life without cell phones?

This time, the tutor was able to help the student realize that many of his ideas were “wind eggs,” not worthy of development. This was discovered through the process of elenchus, which led the student to realize he could not adequately to define the terms of his own argument. This type of transformation is possible if we give tutors and students the tools they need. As Plato so eloquently states, the intellectual site of the writing center, the psychological space where inquiry occurs, is the home of the “free man [or woman] who has time . . . to converse in peace . . . He [or she] will pass, as we are doing now, from one argument to another . . . Like us, he will leave the old for a fresh one . . . and he [or she] does not care how long or short the discussion may be, if only it attains the truth” (172d-e, 878). As writing center directors and consultants, we are free: free to embrace our history, free to use that history to validate our practices, free to use that history to build the future.

#### Notes

1. See Boquet, Elizabeth, “Our Little Secret: A History of Writing Centers, Pre- to Post-open Admissions. *College, Composition, and Communication*, 50 (3): 463-482; Carino, Peter, “What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Our Metaphors: A Cultural Critique of Clinic, Lab, and Center.” *Writing Center Journal* 13:1 (1992): 31-43; Hairston, Maxine, “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing.” *College, Composition, and Communication* 33.1 (1982): 76-88; Lerner, Neal, “Searching for Robert Moore.” *The Writing Center Journal* 22(1): 9-32; North, Stephen, “The Idea of a Writing Center.” *College English* 46(5): 170-189; Moore, Robert H. “The Writing Clinic and Writing Laboratory.” *College English*, 11.7 (1959): 388-393. Print.
2. Socrates alludes to the often contentious relationship between writing center tutors and writing instructors, a topic he returns to later in the dialogue when he compares the freeman who “always has time at his disposal to converse in peace” to a slave who is “always talking against time, hurried on by the clock; there is not space to enlarge upon any topic” (172d-e, 878). We can easily substitute “teacher” for “slave” but that is a topic for another paper.

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