



HARVARD

Office of the Vice Provost for Advances in Learning

Reflections from the Community

The idea of *immediate learning* in an age of necessitated distant education

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Prof. Nagy sent the following to his students in Comparative Literature 156, "Performance and Lyric," on March 22, 2020, one day before the first day of the new online format for his course. Used by permission.

§1. The immediacy of learning, indicated by the title *immediate learning*, should be a personal experience that can happen to each and every one of us when we gather as a group to engage in dialogue.

§2. Being a member of such a group should not take away from the personal experience achieved by way of the dialogue that takes place in the group. Rather, membership in such a group should enhance the personal experience of learning.

§3. A fair example, rooted in a distant past, is Socratic dialogue, which can happen even today, so many years after the death of Socrates, whose voice was silenced when he was executed by the Athenian State in 399 BCE. Socratic dialogue is still alive and well—long after the original group of Socrates and his followers has ceased to exist.

§4. Socratic dialogue does not depend on the historical contingencies of any institution. It has survived even though the Academy, originally founded by Plato, the most prominent follower of Socrates, had been shut down and disbanded many centuries after the death of Plato.

§5. Plato's Academy could trace its membership all the way back in time to some of the original followers of Socrates in the fourth century BCE and all the way forward, at least indirectly, to the neo-Platonists of the sixth century CE. But how did Socratic dialogue survive without the survival of an original group? The answer is simple. It was the technology of writing, as we see it at work in the writings of Plato himself, that kept the dialogue alive, so that the immediacy of personal learning through dialogue could be continued by way of reading the supposedly original exchanges that had once upon a time taken place between Socrates and his followers.

§6. For writers like Plato, the technology of writing was a medium that made up for losing the immediacy of personal learning experienced by a supposedly original group engaged in Socratic dialogue. I see a point of comparison here. The new technology of the Internet, unlike the old

technology of writing, has the power of retaining, not losing, the immediacy of personal learning experienced by a group engaged in ongoing dialogue. Thus you could say that the Internet is a medium of intermediacy for immediate learning.

§7. Unlike the old technology of writing, then, the new technology of the Internet has the power of creating a synchronous environment for immediate learning in dialogue. Meanwhile, well beyond the old technology of writing as used by Plato for the purpose of showing asynchronously how Socratic dialogue is possible, the Internet also has the power of sharing asynchronous learning in a vast new variety of situations, personal as well as interpersonal.