

Aporia and Imagination

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Among the things I find interesting about the new technologies of communication are the metaphors that are used to talk about them. These metaphors point to things that are at once familiar but different. The "Web" is a good example. It describes some of the familiar ways in which ideas are linked with each other but it also suggests something new about the ways information can now be organized, distributed and utilized. For a number of years now Nick Burbules has been describing some of these new possibilities. But beyond description, Burbules has explored the structure of hypertext environments in order to re-examine some of our most cherished philosophical theories and concepts. I know of no other educational scholar who has so systematically considered the implications of the new technologies for our theories of learning and teaching.

In his previous papers, Burbules has explored the metaphors of hypertext to challenge some of our most basic epistemic prejudices. In this paper, he turns his attention to the concept of aporia, most familiar to us from Plato's dialogue, the *Meno*. In *Meno*, Plato presents an image of what it is like to learn a new concept.¹ The teacher takes the learner through various stages from ignorance to confusion and then finally to knowledge. Plato refers to the learner's psychological state of confusion, perhaps exasperation in not being able to understand the essence of the concept, as *aporia*. Much of Burbules's paper is concerned with the question of the extent to which Plato's idea of aporia is useful in describing the experience of getting lost on the World Wide Web.

His argument is that the confusion, the doubt, the uncertainty, the puzzlement one feels in using and learning from the Web, by linking the network of criss-cross references, is totally dissimilar to the state of aporia described by Plato. With the Web, the feeling is not one of misconception that needs to be cleared for the reconstruction of true knowledge but a lack of clarity about how to proceed, requiring a judgment or a choice to be made.

Now while I agree with Burbules that Plato's idea of aporia does not adequately describe the feeling of being lost on the Web, I am less clear about the scope of Burbules's claim. There appears to be an equivocation in his position between the claim that Plato's concept of aporia is limited in its application and the claim that it is fundamentally misguided. His argument is that there are many different kinds of aporia, and that aporia need not be viewed as a kind of doubt that causes embarrassment but an opportunity to engage with difficulty, involving a sense of challenge and excitement. Thus in the Web the confusion is over which choice to make. But does Burbules's position suggest that Plato's description of aporia (and the theory of learning it presupposes) is correct for at least some limited set of circumstances? Or is Burbules's claim a stronger one? I believe that a consistent reading of Wittgenstein, whom Burbules uses to support his own argument, favors the latter claim.

Plato's view of learning involves two main suppositions: that all knowledge is governed by rules that are fixed, immutable, and objective and that successful learning requires a complete understanding of the rules by the learner. The learner has to go through the various stages of comprehension. One of these stages, when the learner finds it difficult to discover or follow the rules, is referred to as the state of *aporia*.

No one has done more to dislodge this image of learning than Wittgenstein, as Burbules indicates. In *Zettel* #297-306 and elsewhere, Wittgenstein has argued that the actual existence of rules is neither necessary nor sufficient in being guided by the rules. He has shown, first, that the grasping of the rules cannot explain what needs to be explained, and, second, that even the mastery of the rules depends ultimately on our human capacities and inclinations, which do not themselves have any further explanations. A learner can, for example, "go on" and continue a mathematical series without being able to give the correct algebraic formula for it. On the other hand, even when the learner is told explicitly of the formula for the series, he or she might not be able to "go on." For the formula is helpful only to someone who understands the further rules for its correct application. No rule, Wittgenstein says, is self-sufficient.

Now this argument, it seems to me, undercuts Plato's conception of the way in which logical or grammatical rules compel us to "go on." According to Plato, once the rules have been determined and understood they owe nothing to the future behavior or decisions of human beings. Failure to conform to the rules consists essentially in deviation from a path prescribed for us by an authority independent of ourselves — the authority of logic. In contrast, Wittgenstein suggests a different understanding of logical compulsion which is much closer to the ways in which we experience the Web. Wittgenstein's notion of error is not as austere as that of Plato. He allows for greater opportunities for experimentation with rules, for trial and error and for other forms of contingencies associated with learning. As Burbules observes, 'the idea of following a rule entails both an element of obligatoriness and an element of judgment and choice.'

According to Wittgenstein, an error is a deviation from the rules. But rules are made by us and are not objectively given, as Plato would have us believe. Furthermore rules are often broadly defined, and can only be breached when the learner goes beyond the latitude provided by our collective understanding. Sometimes the latitude is limited but on other occasions learners have a great deal of room to move, even to modify the rules, as, for example, in the case of the Web. But the rules are rules only in virtue of human society. They are our rules, grounded in our social practices, and can therefore be amended or even abandoned.

This is not to say however that the rules are entirely arbitrary; and that since our concepts and linguistic practices are human constructs we can have any rules we like. As Wittgenstein argues, while facts do not serve as the foundation of language any more than language serves as the foundation of our knowledge of reality, this does not mean that rules are based simply on conventions. They are based also, as he points out, on "certain general facts of nature" — the capacities human beings

characteristically have and the ways they characteristically behave, *as a species*. But Wittgenstein insists that we cannot demonstrate the non-arbitrariness of our rules simply by pointing to some facts in reality or arguing that without these rules we would not be able to express this point. In the *Investigations* he says, “what has to be accepted, the given, is — so one could say, — form of life.”² The human form of life includes the ability to be both creative and imaginative and to interpret the world in infinitely diverse ways — and also to experience doubt and uncertainty that is culturally and historically specific.

Wittgenstein’s later work thus shows that the antidote to unlimited conventionalism is to consider human being as actors, and not as spectators capable only of following the rules in the same way. Both at the level of the individuals and the community, we do have a great deal of freedom to create our own paths, lines, links, passages, circles and networks both on the Web and elsewhere, even though we recognize that the language-games within which these are located, are not arbitrary but linked to a wider set of cultural and historical considerations.

I agree with Burbules, therefore, that a Wittgensteinian understanding of learning (and teaching) leads us to view the idea of aporia differently. But in my view, the idea of aporia is not simply broader than but also radically different from that suggested by Plato. In so far as we might wish to keep the notion, it should not be seen as a state to be overcome in search of epistemic certainty but as an opportunity to ask new questions, to view things differently and to create new maps in order to improve the quality of our intellectual work. To regard aporia as a kind of intellectual feebleness, or indeed a human folly, is to fail to recognize its importance in teaching for imagination and creativity, and for enhancing a fuller range of human capacities and inclinations.

Indeed, if I were permitted just one more “click,” to ask Burbules to extend his essay by just one more Web entry, I would ask him to say a little more about the role imagination plays in using and learning from the Web. For it seems to me that the use of the Web requires imagination at every “click,” an informed guess at what the text that follows might reveal. The response to aporia here must be to imagine the productive paths to take, either in response to our curiosity or interest or in relation to some other more determinate objective. Our purpose in using the Web must surely dictate the way we formulate the questions we take to the Web and the ways in which we imagine and search for possible answers. Without this focus on imagination, I believe we cannot fully realize the educational potential that the World Wide Web clearly has.

1. Plato, *Meno*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 353-84.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3d ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), ii, 226.