

I will be saying a few words about Late Ancient education. More precisely: about how teaching and learning were idealized in a quite specific context, namely : the Athenian Neoplatonic Academy during the time of its main 5th century scholar, Proclus. Now, most of what I am going to say is based on Proclus' own philosophical texts. However it could be applied, to a reasonable extent, to other Late Platonists of the 5th and 6th centuries CE.

What does Proclus say about education? That is a broad topic, I am writing a whole dissertation about it, but very briefly: it is a relation of causation, by which one soul leads another soul to know itself, through the recollection of contents (of *logoi*) it already has. In your handout, you can find an extract from Proclus' commentary on Plato's *First Alcibiades*, about the very first sentences uttered by Socrates to Alcibiades. According to Proclus, it is here that a relation is being build, between a teacher (Socrates) and his recently-acquired pupil (Alcibiades). In order for this relation, this causal action, to work, it needs to be possible. But potency is twofold, says Proclus (as we are short on time, I have put the most relevant info in bold characters). There is one potency of the teacher, another of the pupils. Each potency is a certain set of qualities, both innate and acquired. Both potencies must be sufficiently developed in order for a educational relation to be possible. There's a lot of information about that in the rest of the commentary on the *First Alcibiades*, but the most explicit passages can be found in another commentary, this time on Plato's *Parmenides*. According to Proclus, it also depicts a teacher-and-learner relation, between Parmenides (as teacher) and the young Socrates (as learner).

These are your texts 2a, 3a and 3b. What is especially explicit here is that Proclus is making general statements about what a good student and what a good teacher should be. If we dig a little bit into text 2a, we can find three main headings of qualities necessary in order to learn. First, the natural, or innate, qualities. This denotes a certain familiarity with incorporeal ideas, a certain innate curiosity, that cannot be satisfied with ordinary answers. It may be discernible through physical features or through behavior. Second, the experience or preparation. This is the most detailed item of the three. It involves various steps of ethical exercises aimed at taming the passions, then some time with classical poets and moralists, followed by a great deal of logical, mathematical and scientific studies, in order to train the mind to think correctly. Third item, the enthusiasm. It is a propensity to keep learning in the long run, sometimes with only very slight a stimulation. It is partly innate and partly earned in the course of the teaching relation, and is often considered a kind of love: love of knowledge, but also love of the teacher.

I have said these are the qualities that a pupil must have in general in order to access higher kinds of learning, regardless of who is that pupil. Accordingly, this is what Proclus says he expects from his students. In the beginning of the *Platonic Theology*, he describes his methodology, then the qualities necessary to “hear” this treatise, as it is explicitly presented as a lecture. That's text 2b. He is actually silent here concerning innate qualities. This could be what is referred to as “moral virtues”, but we have independent evidence that these virtues are rather a part of the “experience” category. Otherwise, the requirements are quite similar: one need to have some experience with logic, mathematics, sciences, and even the supreme science, which is dialectics. This allows to fill one's soul with the profound love also necessary for proper learning. This is another way to designate the enthusiasm, we have already encountered it in the previous text. So far, this is quite consistent: every pupil should have a certain list of qualities in order to learn philosophy, and Proclus expects no less from its own students.

Can we draw the same kind of picture for an ideal teacher? A few lines below text 2a, we find text 3a. The first thing we learn is that the teacher should have walked the same path as the student, namely, he should have had natural qualities, proper experience and burning enthusiasm. But in order to teach, one should have a few additional qualities. These are briefly described here: the teacher should be able to avoid verbosity (that is, be concise, or even laconic). He must start his

explanations with something remote from everyday experience, more unitary and simpler. Lastly, he should prefer hints and allusions to detailed explanations, probably in order to test and to stimulate the curiosity and enthusiasm of the pupil. Then again, we can see that Proclus consider these two sets of qualities as normative expectations for all teachers and learners, at least concerning the learning of philosophy or, to use Proclus' words "intelligible truth".

There is however a couple more qualities he ascribed to the ideal teacher, some fifty pages later, that's text 3b. These might be a qualification of the laconism he had endorsed. The teacher, he adds, should be productive and inventive, in order to find ways to sufficiently stimulate others, and in any case the students. This does not mean the teacher should talk a lot, but rather that he must be able to conceive of several ways of explaining things and of hooking the interest of the pupils.

Now, even with this qualification, there's something odd with these didactic ideal qualities. As Proclus expects that his own pupils have the same qualities he ascribes to the ideal pupil, it is reasonable to suppose that the ideal teacher is also an ideal for Proclus himself as a teacher. For systematicity, taking more general principles as starting point and so on, there is little doubt that Proclus is up to the task. His treatises, especially the *Platonic Theology*, is very systematic, whatever we take this word to mean precisely. It is quite less obvious concerning allusiveness and laconism. You have had a taste of Proclus' writing, it is not as cryptic or even as concise he praises a good teaching to be, sometimes it is frankly prolix. Proclus explains a lot and, compared to many Platonists (for example Iamblichus or even Plotinus), he is quite clear, especially in the first two books of the *Platonic Theology*.

There is one last element that may put Proclus' words in a larger perspective. I can't give you a general presentation of late ancient Education in a few minutes, but perhaps other will. However it may be, we have no evidence of an very long mandatory curriculum, even remotely comparable to what Proclus describes, for the actual students of the late Athenian Academy. Most students, with a few notable exceptions, were there for a relatively short time. There were a fierce competition between Proclus' school and other schools, for example of rhetorics. Proclus could not reasonably afford to demand or even assess the natural qualities, the scientific and logical experience and the deep enthusiasm he praises.

In all likelihood, these profiles of the ideal teacher and learner and only ideals. They are not actual criteria for selection practices in the 5th century Athenes. There is even a important discrepancy between these ideals and what is described by recent historians of the topic (for example Edward J. Watts). It does not mean that these sets of qualities, and all the arguments that support them (as there are a lot of them) are only words. They are not just conventional utterances aimed at flattering the wealthy students. They are a lively and consistent ideal of how teaching and learning should happen, even if the context of the 5th century Christian and busy empire did not allow for such a demanding ideal. After all, according to Platonists, the quirks of the sensible copies are no objection against the purity and the normative worth of the model.