Chapter V

Pedagogical Implications of Mimesis

What we call learning is remembering.

- Plato

This chapter is divided into three interlinked sections. In the first section, we explore the pedagogical implications of historical mimesis by first looking at the two great Greek philosophers as pedagogues and briefly understanding their educational philosophies. Some mimetic ideas are of use in the classroom such as *mythos* and *praxis*, Aristotle’s ideas of errors, iterations and patterns in evaluations, and using mimesis-as-*copia* to teach writing skills. There is an important contribution on framing new conventions to use film as a teaching aid as well as implications of mimesis on plagiarism. In the second section, we venture into the discourse on philosophy of education by first looking at two concepts related to mimesis in the work of the influential and modern philosopher of education, John Dewey, namely imitation and habit. Based upon these new ideas, in the third and fourth sections, we re-examine the modernist denigration of rote-learning, especially in the light of ancient Indian oral traditions.

Pedagogical Implications of Historical Mimesis

We first look at Plato and Aristotle as teachers and see the differences in their teaching styles.

Plato and Aristotle’s Educational Philosophy and its Extrapolations

In their individual quest, both Plato and Aristotle were guided by the belief that truth is hidden, but while for Plato, the unveiling of truth was a notoriously difficult affair, and could be ascertained only individually and privately, the unveiling of truth was a relatively simpler matter for Aristotle, and involved a movement to study general structures and principles rather than individual things. Thus, ascertaining whether one has arrived at truth was a more public affair for Aristotle as it meant checking one’s knowledge against that of others (Lesser 1982: 393).

Plato had dwelled upon mimesis in education at great length, and his awareness of its dangers resulted in his anti mimetic position, as has been discussed in Chapter II. Rooting mimetic ways of thinking in the idea of mimesis-as-imitation, Plato pointed out that this leads to
an unthinking population, incapable of making choices based on rational thought. This was one reason why he was against mimesis; the other reason was that people identified themselves so much with the dramatic performances that they would become emotional and unstable, and such an emotionally unstable population could be taken over easily by a despot. Thus, for Plato, there was a political repercussion of mimesis which challenged the foundations of democracy itself. It is easy to extrapolate this to communication education in general, and to journalism in particular. Journalism in a democracy is considered to be its watchdog – protector of the freedoms of citizens through a constant expose and critique of its activities and institutions. If students are exposed to a pedagogy which doesn’t help them to question situations, frame problems, make rational choices and develop critiques, then they will be unable to serve this role well. Creative thinking in turn depends upon these very important educational objectives. The education of the young thus clearly needs a Platonic component, including questioning and Socratic dialogue.¹

Plato’s concept of mimesis-as-imitation was critically linked with his idea of ‘the cave’ as being equivalent to the life of illusions. This latter idea finds an echo in our times, ironically enough in the idea of the classroom, and educational arena in general become considered by some as a kind of unreal, illusionary or protected space. For them, education is artificial and unnecessary, taking youth away from the ‘real’ world and encouraging a kind of thinking which is of no ‘real’ use. This attitude is reiterated when young people are told that they are being prepared for the ‘real world’; as if the world of education they live in currently is false or unreal. Thus, for this group, it is educational institutions and education are unreal, while the world is real.

We can look at the metaphor of the cave in another way: For Plato, it was mimesis which brought people into the cave and kept them there in the world of illusions. It was only the philosopher-teacher who, being the most rational of all creatures, could bring them out of this cave. In our times too, this can be seen as the role of the enlightened teacher who removes the false binary between the unreality of the classroom and the reality of the world and creates a link between them. Such a teacher would reveal the illusions which perfuse even the real world.

¹ Since this dissertation is on mimesis and therefore is located in western conceptual thought and traditions, except for the brief but significant foray into oral traditions, we look at what the people and the their ideas can contribute to Indian learning and education. However, there is a vast body of distinct and complex Indian knowledge traditions, encompassed by the six darsanas or philosophical schools, which would perhaps be even more germane to the goals of innovative pedagogies, albeit not in the traditions of mimesis.
through the media, particularly visual media and keep young people happy in its illusionistic portrayals without questioning or critiquing them. Thus, it is important that young people are made to examine the assumptions underpinning visual media from pictures and photographs, to advertisements, commercial and movies. These images must be de-constructed and revealed for what they are.

Plato had considered mimesis-as-imitation in children to be dangerous and an indicator of the greater evils. This was quite contrary to Aristotle for whom such behavior only confirmed its naturalness. For Aristotle, poetry arose from two sources deep in human nature (Potolsky 2006: 36): one, the mimetic capacity of children which transcends mere imitation and goes into imaginative recreation (as they do when pretending to be doctors, mothers and cooks); and two, mimesis as a source of both knowledge and pleasure (as when mimetic reproductions of death and dead bodies which we would ordinarily find painful and repulsive to learn from). Thus, he distinguishes between mimesis as cognition (or educational mimesis) and mimesis as recognition (or aesthetic mimesis): ‘the former derives from learning about the model; the latter from previous knowledge about it’ (Spariosu 1984: ix).

These Aristotlean views have significant implications for teachers. Firstly, understanding the mimetic basis of imaginative play makes way for a deeper understanding of learning itself being rooted, in its early stages at least, in imitation. Here, it is important for a teacher not to judge this pejoratively as ‘copying’ but as the first and necessary step towards critical and/or creative thinking. We discuss Aristotle’s ideas of mimesis as a source of knowledge in the section on film in the classroom a bit later.

When speaking about Aristotle, one also needs to refer to his distinction between educational mimesis and aesthetic mimesis. The former is mimesis which is ‘cognitive’ in the sense that the mimetic process is directed towards cognizing or understanding of models/frameworks. Aesthetic mimesis on the other hand is based on ‘re-cognition’ and as such is mimetic in the sense that it depends upon the existence of previous knowledge of one kind or another but at the structural level. Teachers must realize that both are important to the development of the intellect.

**Pedagogical Styles of Plato and Aristotle**
A brief look at the teaching styles of the two major Greek philosophers is warranted. Among other things, Plato and Aristotle have been studied in terms of their pedagogy. Interestingly,
although we meet them first as philosophers, they were essentially teachers, ‘men who learned and researched largely in order to teach’ (Lesser 1982: 389). They both had different teaching styles: Plato invented the dialogic method which was a series of dialogues between a fictitious teacher called Socrates and students; Aristotle used the lecturing style. The differences in their pedagogy has been traced back by one scholar to the different conceptions of teaching they held and/or the different solutions they came up with while teaching (Lesser 1982: 389)). Both confronted a situation which is similar to that faced by teachers today, namely a variety of backgrounds, temperament and capability of students. These features also meant that the chances of misunderstanding arising among individual students was possible, if not high, requiring the selection of a pedagogical style which would overcome this situation.

Another parameter for selection of teaching styles was each teacher’s larger goals, or their educational philosophies as outlined above, ‘their doctrines rather than their pedagogical aims’ (Lesser 1982: 392). Plato, as we have seen, desired to set his students on the road to truth, to help them distinguish between true and false knowledge, to bring them out of the ‘cave’ of irrationality, illusions, falsehood and deception. Aristotle desired to create a body of knowledge that would form the basis of learning for generations to come.

Plato used the dialogic style as it could be adapted to the student as well as the subject matter while Aristotle used the lecture style whereby he felt ‘one could teach anything to anybody’ (Lesser 1982: 389). In addition to this, Plato does not directly teach subject matter in his Dialogues but is focused on teaching students ‘how to think for himself, or more fundamentally, that he must think for himself and that there is a world of knowledge for him to discover’ (Lesser 1982: 390). The danger of this kind of teaching is that it may encourage the student to enjoy the process of thinking or properly framing questions, for instance, without requiring them to search for answers. It is considered that such constant questioning reveals the foundations of knowledge and allows the formation of clarity as doubts are continuously removed.

It is apparent that unlike Plato, Aristotle is focused on ‘providing the world in general with a body of knowledge than in teaching individual pupils’ (Lesser 1982: 391) which means that he lays out what is the status of knowledge at a given point, detailing clearly what is the case by pointing out ‘these are the current views of the subject under inquiry, these are the problems, these are the relevant observed facts, these are the arguments on each side, this is the
likely or inevitable conclusion’ (Lesser 1982: 391). Personal emotions of the teacher do not get involved at all in such a style. In the large classroom teaching that we are familiar with in India, lecture style tends to dominate as the practical situation shapes the pedagogical style. Since the undergraduate degree is a basic degree for young people, and the increase in Gross Enrolment Ratio is pitched at this level, we can only anticipate that the numbers of registered students will increase. It may be quite appropriate to adopt Aristotlean methods to the classroom at this level in such a context.

Yet, the dangers of the lecturing style of Aristotle are many and one should be aware of them: it encourages students to memorize and repeat, and this is possible to do without any real understanding of the subject at hand and may result in ‘rote-learning’ in the sense of low or no comprehension. Socrates’ observation on poets could be relevant here: ‘On this, then we are fairly agreed,’ Socrates assures us, ‘that the imitator knows nothing worth mentioning of the things he imitates…’ Even worse, it easily satisfies the weak and/or lazy student as it ‘gives the appearance of knowledge’ (Lesser 1982: 391). This is equally true of teachers who are satisfied with this kind of knowledge. We have seen this too in the Indian context and as education is becoming more inclusive all over the world, other countries are also experiencing this as a weakness of both the lecture style and the large classroom, but there appears to be no way out of it at the current time in the Indian situation.

In relating it to our current context, another clear distinction can be made in addition to subject-matter and background of students giving rise to different teaching style: namely the size of the class. The dialogic style would be more suited to smaller classes of a maximum of thirty students while lecture style would be eminently suitable for larger ones with the problems mentioned thereof which need to be addressed. Platonic style of teaching is well suited to postgraduate study where one needs to transit from covering subject matter alone to start cultivating a research interest by delving deeper into the subject matter.

**Resemblance and Similarity: Errors**

If we follow in Aristotle’s footsteps we see that mimesis is not the simple, indeed simplistic idea as made out by Plato. It is actually complex, cognitive, creative and productive. Looking at the two kinds of errors that Aristotle mentions, ‘essential’ and ‘technical’ errors, the former being one of lack of skills the latter being of lack of information or faulty information, Aristotle says that an essential error is a bigger one. In terms of evaluator practices, this is important to keep in
mind where like Aristotle tells us, the facts and details are of less importance than the larger style and goals.

This has serious implications for educational evaluations: when we evaluate youngsters, what is worse? How does one evaluate a poorly-written paper which is correct factually or a well-written paper which states wrong facts? When a student hands in a paper, should it be evaluated for its content (details, facts) or for its style (ability to argue, even though argument is ‘wrong’)? If we follow Aristotle who seems to suggest that the skill of writing and argumentation is more important than the emphasis on exactness and excessive focus on details, in pedagogy, we may want to focus on strengthening skills of argumentation and expression of ideas to be more important than precision, exactness, grammar or even relevance.

Mythos and Praxis in Pedagogy: Models and Structures
We recall here that mimesis for Aristotle occurs at the level of plot or mythos. We can also extrapolate Aristotle’s idea of the characteristics of good tragedy as possessing plot (mythos) and action (praxis) having magnitude. Thus, according to Aristotle, not only should good tragedy organize or structure events in a rational manner, they should also have a certain magnitude to them. For Aristotle, plot is so important a concept that he considers poets to be makers of plots. As a teacher, he first gave a summary of the state of knowledge, as mentioned above. Keeping in the spirit of Aristotle, a teacher would have to develop an exposition of the status of knowledge in a subject to begin with. As the student progresses, it would be more educative to direct her attention to the structural level of the knowledge. For instance, in tracing the history of India, one can teach it as a series of events first and this would comprise Aristotellean exposition. But at some point, one would have to go to a structural level where students are alerted to the themes such as gender, colonization and poverty which may, or may not be, recurrent in different periods of history.

Understanding at the structural level also enables prediction or estimation, now considered an important part of education. This is also an extension of Aristotle’s ideas that good tragedies are predictable and reasonable because they are rational. Rational knowledge therefore, for Aristotle, enables further skills such as predictability.

Similarly, a teacher must keep this in mind when teaching – to encourage students not only to understand at the structural level as mentioned in the previous paragraph, but their own output in the form of assignments and projects need to be structured in a similar, ‘rational’
manner. For instance, at the first level, it needs to be reiterated to students to structure their responses in the form of an introduction, body and conclusion, particularly if the response is ‘of a certain magnitude’ as in an essay response. This helps students organize their thoughts and reiterate to themselves the important points of their argument. At the second level, in Aristotelian terms, there must be a kind of ‘internal logic’ to responses that must be expected which is as important as the content. This internal logic should make it possible to follow the logic of the argument and predict the result. If this cannot be done, there is a randomness of response.

Aristotle’s concept of mimesis as ‘internal logic’ rather than ‘mirroring external reality’ can also be interpreted in terms of the kinds of genres in communication. Thus, in addition to history which is inherently mimetic, even documentary cinema can be seen to be essentially mimetic in the Platonic sense due to the use of simple narrative. The Platonic concept of three types of narrative also implies that students may be guided to consider which of the three narrative styles they are using when they write an assignment. Since plagiarism is an issue in higher education, if students are guided to move from the simple narrative of Plato to the mixed narrative, then it would be a step in the direction of learning citation.

Aristotelian magnitude can also be interpreted as the appropriate size of a response that is expected. Frequently, students are not given the length of response that is expected for a question or an assignment; this is an important requirement because the ‘magnitude’, in Aristotelian terms, determines the reader’s perception of the response. If too short, the reader may not perceive what is being said; if too long, there may be too much dissipation. An even more complex understanding of magnitude can be made in terms of the use of rhetoric, for instance, whereby certain rhetorical devices can be used to great effect. This may inversely tie well into magnitude.

In an exercise on installations given by me to post-graduate students in creative communication, it was realized that they did not pay attention to magnitude in the sense of size, and therefore the impact of installations was negligible even though in terms of ideas they were able to deliver in other ways. Thus, we came up with the concept of ‘table-top installations’ (a take-off from table-top experiments in science). These were good at the level of models and to test out ideas and structures but could not be seen as the final installation.

**Repetition, Iterations, Patterns in Teaching and Written Assignments**

In some ways, the history of mimesis shows that, from the time of Plato, we privilege the written word over the oral one, and the world of philosophy (or rationality in general) over poetry.
Auerbach (1945) following Plato, had thought the oral tradition to be mimetic in the sense of simple, repetitive, and dependent upon formulae and direct syntax for conveying meaning. But if we follow Melberg’s critique, itself influenced by Hillis Miller’s (1985) idea of ‘two forms of repetition’, it appears that even mimesis can be renewing, not just repetitive, through the use of substitutions and oppositional strategies. In terms of pedagogy, it is important to see that when something is taught, experienced teachers repeat. But the repetition, if it is a word for word repetition, as is common in undergraduate teaching across India, tends to encourage students towards rote-learning of notes; rather, it is important for teachers to say the same thing in several different ways, following the oral mimetic tradition, using different rhetoric, alerting students to different ways of saying the same thing. In other words, using mimesis effectively.

It is also useful to think of repetition in the oral tradition as forming different patterns rather than merely repeating the same thing in some prescribed format. This for example is what we learn from repetition in block printing (and even rangolis/kolams, the designs drawn on the floor with colored powders or rice flour) where the same block (or two blocks) is used to generate a number of different patterns by different placement as well as different use of colors. We can see the same use of repetition in Indian classical music where in percussion, the cycle of 16 beats or matras known as teen taal is the most commonly used in the northern style of Hindustani music. This rhythm cycle repeats over and over again as an accompanying percussive beat. Yet, within the 16 beat cycle, there is a lot of scope for variations such as parans and gamakas which add decorative flourishes and embellishments by the percussionist and the main performer respectively, as well as a bit of competitive challenge when both try to reach the ‘sam’ (point of coming together, as in sangam) at the same time in the rhythmic cycle. If we extrapolate from this to pedagogy, it appears that we need not focus obsessively on large or gross repetition but look at smaller variations within assignments to change the pattern and make it distinctive. The ways in which mimesis is sustained through embellishment.

When thinking about repetition, it is useful and germane to refer to Derrida who developed a body of work based upon deconstructing texts. He looked very closely at repetitions or iterations occurring in a text and showed the displacement, slippages and decentring that occurred in them, often without the author’s conscious knowledge. But rather than ending with empty signifiers in the way, for instance, Deleuze or Baudrillard do with simulacra and empty signifiers, Derrida used iterations to show the essential nature of texts as one characterized by
‘slippages of meaning’ and ‘floating indetermination’. He pointed this out as an essential feature of writing where meaning gets continually deferred. This was his concept of ‘differance’. When we see students work as being unnecessarily repetitive, the notion of iteration may help teachers look a little closer at the work before judging students too harshly and perhaps even erroneously.

As a way in which to teach critical thinking, Derridean concept of mimesis can be used to make students understand the structural features of texts. But what is more important is to notice the small differences that crop up even in repetitions, as described above.

Using Film in the Classroom: Creating Conventions of Pedagogical Film-Viewing
In his defense of mimesis as rational, Aristotle talks about mimesis being important as it gives us the space and distance for rational reflection. For instance, if we see a dead body in real life, we may be overcome by emotions such as fear or grief. But on seeing a dead body on stage, we have the critical distance which allows us to feel the emotion as a cognitive response and not be overcome by it. It also allows the distance to compare the character with oneself and imaginatively replace them by our self. At the very least, there may be a catharsis or release of all emotions. It is in this senses that catharsis is rational, for Aristotle, as is mimesis.

We can appropriate this argument of distanciation for the use of film in classrooms. In a course I taught on Development Communication, for instance, when Words on Water, a film by Sanjay Kak (2002) on the issue of the Narmada dam was used, students get to see and hear poor, dispossessed people speaking in their own voices - Plato’s ‘simple narrative’. Documentary films in general tend to use Platonc ‘mixed narrative’ style with a voice over as well as the voices of some of the people participating in the film. While the main validation of using films in classes has been creating empathy by bringing an unknown (and perhaps unknowable) world to the attention of young students, there has been little understanding of why and how this works. Aristotelian framework gives us an insight into this as it tells us that it creates the critical distance which enables rational reflection. Through film, students are able to see and ‘experience’ poverty, for instance, at third or fourth remove (Platonic mimesis) and therefore can be enabled to understand it rationally through creating an emotional distance. Many times poverty, for young people of affluent backgrounds, is so unfamiliar that it overwhelms; this is their first close exposure to ‘people not like us’. Using film in this way provides a rational explanation for what happens when one sees a film on poverty as opposed to the live, real experience of poverty.
There is nothing ‘natural’, automatic or inevitable about this enabling process, however, and merely screening a film in a classroom will not necessarily have such positive, educative results through distanciation for every student. In fact, such a screening may even be detrimental to learning for some students as it enables only passive mimetic watching from beginning to end, as Brecht points out for epic theatre. What one needs to do is break the stranglehold of narrative voices (Plato) as well as the stranglehold of (mimetic) narrative (Barthes) and remove students from the passive mode that they slip into, as ‘consumers’ of the film. As Aristotle pointed out in the example of benefits of theatre, distanciation happens for many of the students. But for many of them, this distanciation simply may not occur and as teachers, it is this latter group that we need to support academically. Similar to Brecht’s alienation techniques, we must then impose some distanciation ‘techniques’ on the students to bring them out of the ‘aesthetic trance’. Of course, the premise is that when a film is screened in class, there must be a clear curricular reason for its selection which is different from the general interest in watching a film outside of curriculum transaction process.

Once the principle of distanciation has been accepted, and the choice of films is appropriate for the curriculum, then all manner of techniques may be devised while using film in the classroom. Together these constitute creating the conventions of classroom viewing. Distanciation techniques may be as follows: the film may be screened in parts, rather than screening the whole film at one time. We have found that showing a film in 15-20 minute sections is far more effective than watching the entire film, and is particularly successful in breaking the aesthetic (and mimetic) trance of film. Students protest that they prefer to see the entire film at one go, but the use of film in the classroom has a pedagogical purpose that is unmet if one sees the film at one go. Questions must be raised of students in these intervals or pauses, and responses sought from a diverse section of the class. Some relevant concepts which are not named as such in the film but arise from theory should be used. For instance, the concepts of ‘dominant paradigm’ and ‘colonization’ are essential to understanding development. But they remain at a theoretical plane of understanding unless students are made to recognize them at work and for this purpose, a film is very useful. These two concepts were easy to understand for

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2 Distanciation is an iteration of Brecht’s alienation. I prefer distanciation as it helps convey the idea of spatial distanciation so much a part and parcel of mimetic nature of film. It is also closer in spirit to Aristotle’s initial ideas of emotional distance (or the step back one is required to take) important for intellectual reflection.
young people in the film *The Seed Keepers* by Farida Pacha (2005). This is a film about a group of women who decide to stop using GM seeds and revive traditional methods of seedkeeping and other organic methods of farming in order to regain nutritional self-sufficiency for their families as well as additional income. Other concepts like etic views of the woman’s body versus the emic one, and the concept of objectification of women’s bodies is similarly easy to recognize and understand through a film such as *Something Like a War* by Deepa Dhanraj (1991). This film talks about the sterilization programme during the Emergency period.

Having said this, it is also important that the distanciation is not so much that it becomes a spectacle of some kind where the form obfuscates the content. This may lead to the realization of one of Augustine’s greatest fears that the spectacle becomes a source of pleasure to the extent that even poverty, for instance, becomes a source of pleasure. The second possible problem is that with this ‘aestheticisation of poverty’, there is also a chance that students get caught in the circle of becoming ‘consumers of development’ without seeing themselves as ‘agents of change’. Thus it is important to ensure that film does not become a tool to maintain the status quo, much like Brecht thought theatre did. In fact, this is a far bigger danger in the case of film than it is with theatre. In the classroom, while beautifully composed shots and background score are appropriate to draw young people’s attention to, as indeed Sanjay Kak’s *Words on Water* illustrates, it is equally important that students be brought back repeatedly to the issue under discussion which prompts their desire to ‘go to the field’.

It is important that one breaks the ‘fourth wall’ of viewing which creates the false space between viewers and the viewed too. In theatre, the fourth wall had made ‘the stage into a mimetic copy of the world’ (Potolsky 2006: 75). Films are a pedagogical tool in a classroom and every attempt must be made to not make it into a ‘movie’. The conventions of film viewing such as darkening the classroom and watching the film at a stretch should be discouraged, as they convert film into a spectacle rather than a pedagogical device. They also render students as passive consumers of the narrative of the film, so uncritical of it that they do not seek to question what they are seeing. At the end of this ‘movie’ watching there is a kind of catharsis that may be experienced by them in the sense of having watched a satisfying movie but how it has connected

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3 On a trip to Rio de Janeiro, our tourist bus stopped at an appropriate spot and the guide urged us to get off the bus and take pictures of the favelas or slums. This activity aestheticizes poverty.
with the curriculum and enabled thinking and critique is a question mark. Breaking the fourth wall means constantly bringing in the distanciation techniques in order to enable the latter.

It is also important to constantly reiterate that the people in the film are not characters or actors, or even in fact, character-actors playing a role in a film, but real, living people. Thus, selecting films which show a larger context of life and multiple roles played by people in real life is important in classroom contexts. However, here too there is something we can learn from the Romans who believed that nature is too wild for aspiring artists, to make sense of, or to learn anything from. Similarly, it is hard for young people to ‘learn’ everything from life itself. While relevance is an extremely important criterion of good education, films bring aspects of life which are relevant to education into the classroom so that one can learn from their finished form with scenes which can be replayed at will or played at slow pace at the press of a button – something which one cannot do in real life or even in theatre. Hence films have a great educational value for re-viewing scenes and details.

Filmic narratives which mimic fiction films and some docu-dramas may be used minimally as their mimetic effects may be more difficult to deal with and break. Mimetic responses may also be sought in the sense of soliciting responses as to which character students would identify with and why. Or more powerfully, students should be made to take on specific roles of activist, media, politician etc from the film for role-play, which will create greater empathy among them and also give them exposure to agency. Further, creative forms may also be used by some of the students by engaging with the class through the deliberate use of the Brechtian ‘interruptions’ in the use of statements, gestures, displays and the like by the students themselves as instantaneous responses to the film section screened. Lastly, it is far more important to use one or two films, judiciously and in depth rather than show several complete films.

Thus from the above, it is quite clear that to use film in class effectively, we need to create distance, as Aristotle said about theatre, so that students can understand the rationality underlying the film. But we also need to create distanciation as Brecht did with alienation techniques in theatre, in order to break the aesthetic trance that some students may experience due to established and widespread conventions of classroom film viewing. All this would make film a powerful pedagogical tool with distinct pedagogical conventions of viewing and specific interventions.
In terms of pedagogy and learning, the swinging between the two meanings of mimesis as imitation and representation is interesting precisely because it reveals an important barrier in the development of knowledge in young people: in educational institutions we tend to chastise ‘copy and paste’ both in terms of its moral significance as well as in terms of its implication in terms of originality. However, if one posits that the imitative thinking-learning always precedes the original thinking-learning, as in fact the historical development of knowledge systems has been from antiquity until now, with ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny in addition, then one is merely an early stage in the development of learning and needs to be seen as such by teachers – one step towards re-presenting the material or presenting it anew.

But there is a third aspect to mimesis as mentioned before: its connections with politics. And if this is brought into teaching-learning, then the question may also be raised in Platonic terms as to what the purpose of such mimetic teaching-learning is, if not to politicize young people, one way or another. Here, mimesis would translate as ‘intergenerational oppression’ and its transformation would benefit from the work of Paulo Freire whereby there is a partial ‘conscientization’ of students through a deliberate process by using film as described above.

**Mimesis-as-Emulation**

It is the Latin traditions that pedagogy can benefit most from, unlike with the Platonic notion which made mimesis so mechanical and reproductive. As we saw above, films are a great tool for students to emulate as nature is too wild for aspirants to learn from directly, in consonance with the medieval Roman view. Documentary films allow young people a structured entry, ironically enough, into the ‘real’ world. Further, just as the Romans used the idea of mimesis as emulation, students can imitate existing cultural products such as essays, stories, films, advertisements as worthy of emulation and be inspired by them to make new ones with fresh insights.

For instance, in Chapter II we discussed Seneca’s idea of imitation which was about drawing inspiration from many sources, to which it may be similar yet must be different from (Potolosky 2006: 57). His key metaphor about being like the bee – getting its honey from a variety of flowers, yet sorting and arranging it anew, by its own logic – could well be a metaphor for education in general and pedagogy in particular. Exposing students to a variety of ideas is important; yet leaving it to them as to what they do with them. As conscious as imitation may be, it is very difficult for one to copy identically. To make replicas is difficult for human beings, and
is a job best left to stamps, moulds and machines. Ironically, it is only with the rise of technology, particularly internet and new media, that plagiarism has become so widespread.

What is interesting is that a particular form of plagiarism is common: the plagiarism is of machine-enabled copying and pasting in toto. Surprisingly, visual material is seldom copied and pasted, indicating that young people appear to be more comfortable with this medium and we can enhance this literacy. The lack of citation is what is usually seen as the basic problem in academics; unfortunately the genesis of this plagiarism is in the ease of copying which, if done by writing by hand, would have been hard to sustain as word to word copying itself becomes tedious. One needs to focus on Seneca’s idea of the bee and ensure that although different sources may be used in toto, there is some structure underlying the larger project as we see in the next section.

**Copia in Teaching Students to Write**

One of the most important, although simple, ideas of mimesis that can have great value in pedagogy is in its reincarnation as *copia*. As discussed before, Boon (2010) discusses rhetorical manuals which detailed *inventio* (selection), *dispositio* (sequencing) and *elocutio* (execution). If this is taught to students as a way in which to move from (mimesis as) copying to (mimesis as) transformation, it would of a great advantage. We demonstrate this idea with a description of what we have tried in class: Students should be given a topic to and then told to get the material from the internet and present it as a first draft. This is *inventio*. Two things may be used in evaluation: Whether the selection is appropriate; and how many other students have presented the same material. At this stage, no attention need be given to the sections which are copied and pasted; in fact, students should be instructed that if they do copy and paste, they need to note the sources. If students have presented ‘the same’ material as would be the case if they went to the internet as the common source, then one needs to look at smaller changes made within the material so that one can be seen as an iteration of the other. Next they should be asked to organize their material under headings and subheadings so that without reworking the material they have found, they learn to sequence it in some logical fashion. This is *dispositio*. From here is born the development of argument because the very idea of organizing something indicates that there is a logic to it. Students may be questioned on what their logic of organization is. Last, they must be instructed to rewrite the content as summaries, in their own words to best effect, also giving appropriate citations. They must focus on improving their language at this stage, not
just by improved vocabulary but also the use of embellishments of any kind when writing, such as rhetorical devices. In younger age-groups, this embellishment may even include artistic work, or embellishments which personalize the assignments such as choice of fonts, borders, layout and the like. This cultivates a sense of authorship and ownership among young people. All this is *elocutio*. If students are able to follow this format for several assignments, not only is there a systematic way in which we anticipate plagiarism in its inception but we also use *copia* in the development of a general pedagogical tool rather than it remaining as a rhetorical one.

Evaluating assignments in the above manner gives priority to the role played by selection and organization in the thought processes of the student; whether the student has appropriately selected material from the vast range of material available to her on the internet, and the extent to which she has been able to use some principles in organizing it. This is especially so for students in communication courses, where this approach would help a teacher focus on whether, and at what level, the student is thinking rather than getting caught in the more gross aspects of plagiarism. As students progress in their degree courses, one needs to be clear that a transformation happens wherein Du Bellay’s notion of mimesis comes into play whereby they have digested what is read so well that its individual components disappear. The teacher would do well to keep in mind Goethe’s position that imitation is a necessary but insufficient condition for creativity.

**Plagiarism in Teaching-Learning**

One of the most significant implications of mimesis is in terms of our understanding of plagiarism in classrooms. It may be recalled that confronting plagiarism in assignments had been the impetus for selecting mimesis as the topic of this dissertation. An understanding of mimesis will probably not help frame policies and it will not conflict with research plagiarism. What we hope it will do is afford a more nuanced and pedagogically sympathetic way of viewing plagiarism. With our understanding of the historical underpinnings of plagiarism in mimesis, it can now be seen as reflective of a mimetic impulse of copying in human beings, which is innate and beyond human volition. It must be understood to be a product of a particular paradigm of knowledge – western science - and can thus be traced historically to only to western Enlightenment. It was in this time period in the history of ideas, that knowledge was seen as belonging to the individual. Copyright laws came about in 1709 in England, and as a result this pejoration and denigration of copying began.
Plagiarism is not only based upon ‘copying’ in its pejorative sense, but also upon the idea of the existence of ‘original’ knowledge which has not been accepted historically, even in the western Europe, as our historical exegesis has shown. In fact, copying, emulation and repetition have been historically important components not only of teaching-learning but also of creativity in the arts in the western world as well as in Asian cultures. Thus, even assuming that one takes a position on the certain existence of ‘original’ knowledge, at a most benign interpretation of mimesis, there is at least no reason to believe that imitation will go against its pursuit.

More important, once its pervasiveness in contemporary, creative fields has been understood to exist as a mimetic impulse, teachers may take a more nuanced position on plagiarism after understanding its important contributions in contemporary cultures. This will enhance learning in the classroom when used consciously in teaching. Plagiarism must be seen by teachers as evidence of insecure students as well as superficial knowledge rather than a violation of cherished norms. After all, part of the business of teaching is to enculture students into the norms of academia. However, this does not mean that it is always held as an established norm. Through the use of mimetic processes, ironically enough, it is possible for transformatory knowledge to evolve. When plagiarism is seen in assignments, efforts must be made to identify the types of mimesis they are rooted in and provide the pedagogical support to help transform it into other kinds of knowledge.

There are two more implications of historical mimesis: one is on rote learning and is addressed in the two following sections, as the issue deserves some detailed attention. We enter into it through an understanding of the work of the well-known philosopher of education, John Dewey. The second important implication we have framed as a pedagogical possibility by developing an indicatory mimetic pedagogy. Since this needs additional background work, we have dealt with it separately in Chapter VII as one needs a bit of exposure to the discourse on education before entering the framework of mimetic pedagogy.

**Mimesis in Modern Philosophy of Education**

**Dewey and Mimesis: Imitation and Habit**

It is useful to understand Dewey’s larger educational philosophy in the context of this dissertation. Two aspects of it concern us directly as they resonate with other mimetic constructions: his ideas on why children imitate and his understanding of habit. Although his
philosophy is primarily directed to children, yet the way in which he discusses these concepts illuminate learning even in other age groups.

Dewey’s thoughts are extremely germane to mimesis in education as he talks about the nature and role of imitation in the formation of dispositions. In a neat flip of the theory of imitation, he comments upon people’s belief that the urge or instinct to imitate is so strong in young people that they imitate the actions of others or model themselves on them. As he says, ‘They conform to the patterns set by others and reproduce them in their own scheme of behaviour’ (Dewey 1916: 41). This is not just the popular view of imitation but also the theorization of imitation in the production of conformity. Norms of behavior also are maintained like this. But, Dewey points out, this kind of thinking is an error. According to him, individuals imitate because they want to participate with others ‘in the use of things which will lead to consequences of common interest’. Dewey points out that in the sense that they are doing similar things and have the same mind-set, children may well be imitating each other but, he points out that imitation per se does not tell us anything about the motivations of the imitators. In other words, we need to understand why they are imitating each other rather than, as he says, ‘repeat[ing] the fact as an explanation of itself’.

Giving the example of a child tossing a ball to another child, Dewey points out that to say that this is imitation is superficial; rather one should look at the entire situation to which the child is responding. One must understand that there are at least two motivations for the child to engage in the game as she does; one being that she wants the game to go on and therefore imitates the actions of the other and adjusts her own actions; two, her own survival has to a large extent been dependent on her ability to fit her actions into the framework of others. To my mind, this psychosocial theory of learning in children also has implications for young adults as they desire to be a part of their peer group and frequently will ‘follow the crowd’ in order to enhance their group membership and sense of identity.

Thus, Dewey makes a distinction between ‘imitation of means’ and that of ‘ends’ and says that imitation of ends must be seen as a superficial act and has no effect on disposition; imitation of means, on the other hand, is intelligent for Dewey and entails judicious selection of that which will improve his performance (Dewey 1916: 43). This is similar to Moritz’s distinction between imitation of objects or actions and imitation of the process of creation by
which he says that the beautiful cannot enter passively into us by imitation; it must rise anew from within ourselves even as we imitate (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 162).

This distinction between imitation of product and process is a significant one for pedagogy. In the Indian educational context, it illuminates our understanding of mimesis as copying, either off the internet or some other source. Outside of the fact that technology-enabled copying-and-pasting gives rise to identicality which was not possible so easily when students handwrote things (they tended to summarize and abbreviate since copying entire pages was too tiresome!), Dewey’s distinction is significant when we see that teachers may evaluate whether copying has been ‘judicious’, in other words whether the selection has been appropriate and/or correct. This is also in line with Latin rhetorical traditions of copia mentioned above where the element of inventio also captures Dewey’s idea of judicious selection. Secondly, other than judicious or appropriate selection of material, students copy because ‘they want the game to go on’, according to Dewey. If for some reason they do not copy, the game of learning stops or in case they give a wrong assignment, it may turn out to be a zero-sum game and therefore again the game stops. Hence, interpreting ‘copying’ from within Dewey’s framework makes perfect sense as young people want ‘the game to go on’.

The second motivator for imitation, according to Dewey, is to survive: ‘to fit [her] actions to the framework of others’ as Dewey said. If we interpret copying in these terms, it is even more profound in terms of our educational context where we see that students have already learned the strategies for survival and adapted to the situation in order to survive. Copying becomes one of those strategies to just survive. In institutions where there is a great deal of plagiarism, we tend to think it is because of poor quality students, laziness or poorly devised assignments. But Dewey reminds us to look at the motivations of the copier and this gives us a profound insight into copying by young people which can be appropriated for copying among young adults in educational institutions practiced in order to survive.

Dewey thus points out that imitation is strategic when he says, ‘Used for a purpose, the imitative instinct, may, like any other instinct, become a factor in the development of effective action’ (Dewey 1916: 43). Thus Dewey makes a critical distinction in observing that failure to see the kinds of situations in which people are ‘mutually concerned’ ends up seeing imitation as the driver of learning, rather than it being a motivator for participation and survival.

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4 http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Democracy_and_Education/Chapter_III
In an early chapter, Dewey stresses the importance of communication in building a society; merely living in proximity to each other does not make a community, he points out. This is reminiscent of Mahatma Gandhi who had believed that a community cannot just be born; it must be bound together and in his view, a newspaper was important to the building and educating a community. Through his life, Gandhi maintained this belief, writing and sharing his thoughts through various newsletters and publications. Thus, for both Gandhi and Dewey, there was a close connection between society, communication and learning. ‘Social life is identical with communication and all communication is educative,’ Dewey noted, ‘[o]nly when it is cast in a mould and runs a routine way does it lose its educative power’ (Dewey 1916: 5). Dewey thus understood early on that if thoughts were identical to each other, as those formed by a mould, then they would have lost their educational value. Clearly then, for Dewey, one had to break the moulds wherever we found them in education. By these words he is also alerting us to the dangers of communicating in a ‘routine’ way. The dangers of shaping different students according to the same mould implied one would be ignoring individual differences in capability and strength. As the section on mimesis as reproduction implies, there is a mechanistic idea behind the use of the word ‘mould’ for Dewey which is anathema for him.

Dewey has another section where he deals with a concept related to mimesis (as well as moulds as routine), namely habit. This is defined by Dewey as ‘a form of executive skill, of efficiency in doing … it is an active control of the environment through control of the organs of action’ (Dewey 1916: 55). While recognizing that an action such as walking is looked upon as a habit because of the facility and ease of the motor skill itself, Dewey points out that walking as a habit is important not because it controls our actions (which it does in improving deftness, ease and accuracy) but because it enables us to better control the environment. He says, ‘The value of these qualities lies in the economical and effective control of the environment they secure’ (Dewey 1916: 55).

When we read Dewey, it is almost like looking through the binocular through the ‘wrong end’ – everything appears different. While his analysis of imitation upturned the commonplace understanding of it, in his analysis of habit, he acknowledges it to be true but also adds another layer to it. While it is generally understood that habits help us gain control over ourselves, who would ever have thought they were equally a way to better control the environment? For
instance, if we walk as a matter of habit, we certainly will be in better control of our bodies which will be limber and light; but equally, at first glance, Dewey seems to suggest that walking as a habit will allow us to control the environment as it will help us negotiate it. If we could not walk, we would have to sit at home!

Dewey points out that a lot of time education is portrayed as being involved in teaching or enabling such habits as would enable the individual to adjust to his environment (Dewey 1916: 56). He thus makes an important link between habit and another concept important to him, namely ‘plasticity’ which he describes as the ability to retain and carry over from the past those things as will effect subsequent activities, the ability in general terms to learn from experience. Without plasticity, habits cannot be acquired.

But this adjustment is not a passive one; it does not involve conforming to the environment; what Dewey means by adjustment is an active action to control means for achieving ends. There are two aspects of the ways we think of habits that Dewey goes to great lengths to disabuse: One, although one tends to think of habits as motor or physical skills, habits are as much emotional and intellectual. Two, when we say habit, we usually mean it in a pejorative sense implying either something so fixed as to have lost its freshness and openness to newness. In addition to plasticity, which factors in learning from the past, Dewey points out that there is a great deal of thought, observation, reflection and desire which enters into the one who wants to be a surgeon, all of which guide his habit. He points out that in unskilled forms of labour, the intellectual components are low precisely because the habits are low grade. He calls as shortsighted those methods which ‘are directed towards mechanical routine and repetition to secure external efficiency of habit, motor skill without accompanying thought, marks a deliberate closing in or surroundings upon growth’ (Dewey 1916:59). It is unfortunate that Dewey did not make specific reference to the role played by memory in plasticity.

In his clarification that habit should not be seen in its pejorative sense, Dewey alerts us to the intellectual component of habit and points out that ‘thought, observation, reflection and desire’ all guide habit. As teachers, these are important qualities to cultivate in students before or concomitant with their cultivating habits. If young people routinely do something, it loses its educative value precisely because it does not have an intellectual and emotional component. Thus it is important to focus on cultivating comprehensive habits which take the intellect and emotion into account.
When we explore the ideas of thinking and learning, there is also the associated idea about development (Dewey 1916: 49). Dewey expounds upon his idea of growth and points out that it should not be seen as an end point but as a means. It is because we make a distinction between adults and children and project the latter as being immature in the form of lacking something and always needing to be brought into maturity, that we conceive of growth in this way. Dewey says that if instead of thinking of growth as a capacity to be filled, we think of the potentiality of growth as the ability, always present, to develop, we focus on the positive and eternally present qualities of growth (Dewey 1916: 50). For Dewey, developing, growing, is life and life is development. This implies that one, education is its own end (non instrumental) and two, that education is continually reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming. Although he does not say it, we can clearly see from our understanding of Latin mimesis-as-copia that there is a great deal of mimetic activity even for Dewey’s idea of growth.

Seeing development in comparative terms as above, comparing adults and children, leads us to always assess by the standards of the adult. But we must recognize, according to Dewey, that each has their own specific powers. Both use their powers to transform their environment. If they merely adjust mechanically to it, he calls it accommodation. The difference between them is the modes of growth appropriate to different conditions. Thus, if the mode is economics or finance, then the development of powers must be such the child needs to grow into adulthood; if the modes are about sympathetic curiosity, unbiased responsiveness, openness of mind, then perhaps it is the other way around, says Dewey, and it is the adult who has to become childlike or ‘growing in childlikeness’. When we look at these ideas together, we see education is a process of continually reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming, and when we understand the psychosocial motivators that drive imitation and habits, it can be anticipated that at some stage in the learning process, young people move through the process of judicious selection of the action to be imitated, through imitating it as habit in Deweyan sense, and finally to achieve transformation of the action. Deweyan habit can be reinterpreted as strategic mimesis. This can be seen clearly in the case of sport where a cricketer may learn how to bat as does everyone else in his group, but through habit ends up having a distinct style of his own. He has then achieved transformation.

For Dewey, when growth is regarded as having an end (instead of being one) then there are three educational implications to this false idea: instinctive powers of the young are not taken
into account; initiatives to deal and cope with new situations are not developed; disproportionate amount of effort is spent on drill and other automatic skill serving devices rather than allowing the focus to be on personal perceptions. He alerts us to the close connection between the ideas underlying education and our pedagogical practices.

**Dewey’s Critique of Locke on Education**

John Locke had a different point of view on education although on the surface of it, his views were innocuous and similar to Dewey. For instance, he too talks about moulding: ‘I considered [the son] only as white paper or wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases’ (Goodyear 1999: 5). But whereas Dewey abhorred moulding children by routine, Locke considers it very important. He also thinks it important to build self-discipline through esteem and disgrace; develop good character; cultivate reason by treating the child as a rational entity. Education, in his view, was to build physical and mental toughness (Goodyear 1999: 1). Writing in 1693 CE, he asserts that self-discipline is all important. Discipline is different from Dewey’s habit and rather than leading to control over oneself, it leads to control of oneself. Discipline is about being obedient. For Locke, weeding out bad habits is to do with repetition of good ones ‘until it no longer depends upon memory or reflection’ (Goodyear 1999: 4).

Dewey critiques John Locke’s pedagogical theory, based as it is on dualism (ie a separation of mental powers or mind from subject matter or the world outside) and a simplistic view of what education entails (Dewey 1916: 72-73). Dewey’s critique of Locke is that there is no separation between mental faculties and matter – one is not just observing, for instance, but that one is always observing *something*. Thus, Locke’s dualism is false, according to Dewey (Dewey 1916: 74). Locke’s education theory was that humans are born with some mental powers which are limited in number and must be trained by specific exercises. Here is where Locke is much more mimetic than Dewey could be: how was the practice to be done? It was through the ‘repeated acts of attending, observation, memorization…’ (Dewey 1916: 73). The scheme of teaching then becomes merely devising a set of exercises of increasing difficulty. This is radically different from the formation of habits and Dewey’s complex understanding of it as explained above.

Dewey doesn’t agree with Locke’s views. Most of our powers are instinctive, native tendencies that are present owing to the nature of our nervous system, according to Dewey. They tend to respond in particular ways because of something in the environment so as to bring
about other changes. Dewey demolishes the idea of repetitive practice to perfect such capabilities. He says that in a stimulating situation, selection of certain habits or powers occur such as those which discern that holding something hot hurts. The other powers wither away or are selected out.

The second thing that happens according to Dewey is that coordination of stimuli also takes place and may involve other powers, such as the visual and the auditory. According to Dewey, observation, recollection, memorization are results or outcomes of mind engaging with subject matter in Lockean terms, rather than something to be pursued as ends in themselves. So, rather than saying that the goal of education is to makes students more observant, it would be more appropriate, according to Dewey’s framework, to ask what kind of subject matter we wish the student to become adept in observing and for what purpose. For Dewey, the criteria are clear: ‘We want the person to note and recall and judge those things which make him an effective, competent member of the group in which he is associated with others’ (Dewey 1916: 79). Without this connection, what today’s pedagogues would call relevance, we may as well set students the task of memorizing lists of words in foreign tongues, according to Dewey.

When looked upon superficially, Locke’s theory appeared to be rational, credible and suited to individual propensities (Dewey 1916:78-80). Even though Dewey demolished this reading of Locke, his views were valid for many educators of subsequent generations as it gave some direction to education and teaching, by giving the teacher a concrete task to do. Her task was now to ensure that there was sufficient practice of the mental/intellectual powers.

It is clear that Dewey was completely against teaching routinely in order to mould children. He was also against imitation, repetition, memorizing in learning, as we have seen, and in his position against Locke, he is even against the idea of practice making some powers perfect. Dewey thinks that unlike the practice of muscles in a gym where practice makes perfect, in education it is extremely important to ensure that there is a connection made to the real world, rather than focusing on some false notions of outcomes. Some skills certainly will develop as outcomes, but this will happen because they have engaged with subject matter rather than as a skill that can be separately honed. Thus, starwatching may give rise to superior observational skills but since they are linked to gazing at the subject matter of the stars, the skill that is honed is also of a particular kind, linked to the opportunities provided by gazing at stars. These skills are an outcome, for sure, but they are different from the observational skills that someone gets
from watching a tribal ritual which involves twenty people or observational skills which are honed in the forests hunting tigers. Thus, just as he makes it a point to say that one is always seeing something, not just seeing, he also makes it a point to describe how this is brought about due to a constant engagement with the subject matter and that this is what should be given importance.

In the next section, we look at education in ancient India in order to get a sense of how pedagogy worked then, especially in the context of our earlier survey of orality and oral traditions in Chapter II with reference to Homeric epics. We find here the mimetic ‘impulses’ of repetition in the context of a larger oral tradition of memorization. We are already familiar with how this discussion shaped in the context of Homer, as well its critiques. In this way, this section tries to build a bridge of common discourse so a connection is possible between the two cultures and one can also develop a critique of the modernist denigration of rote-learning.

**Ancient Indian Education: Memorizing and Repetition in the Oral Tradition**

We next move to the sphere of Indian education to see if there is material which will be of use to us. From our understanding of western mimesis, it would seem self-evident that some Indian formulations of mimetic impulse must similarly occur within the oral tradition, which was a much longer one as compared to the west, as it is still alive in various forms today, unlike in much of the west. For instance, the chanting of hymns at Hindu temples as well as the chanting of mantras at Buddhist ones; the religious discourses based upon oral epics as well as ancient and medieval religious and philosophical texts that occur in many places, including secular public ones and private homes; the long tradition of classical music which was historically without a notation system and even with modernity, for all practical purposes, continues to lack it and is thus effectively oral. Historically, all teaching was conducted in *gurukul-s* or *pathashala-s* and was oral. Thus, script and writing were invented in ancient India as early as 300 BC yet the oral tradition dominated (Scharfe 2002: 19) and did not spread and get internalized for several centuries, well into the medieval period.

Ancient Indian education was characterized by the division of literature into two classes: *sruti* and *smriti*, roughly ‘knowledge by hearing’ and ‘knowledge by remembering’ respectively. This is an important distinction made in the Indian tradition, as both were conceptually different and also subject to different rules, requirements and constraints as we shall see. Both kinds of knowledge traditions are very alive in various contemporary domains even today.
Sruti and Smriti: Critiquing Standard Ideas about Indian Oral Traditions

In ancient India, knowledge was categorized as either sruti or smriti. Sruti was the knowledge which was ‘based on hearing’ and was therefore subject to precision that is characteristic of stereotypical ideas of oral knowledge i.e. it is based on repetition for serving the purposes of memorization. Two terms we have already seen in the section on western mimesis arise here, namely repetition and memory. This kind of knowledge closely maps onto what Donald (1991) calls the mimetic mode of cognition in his theory of cognitive evolution, wherein the mind is still used as a ‘memory storage system’. It would also appear to support prima facie Havelock’s propositions that the primary function of orality is to preserve cultural knowledge and pass it on. Additionally, it would support his proposition that in order to remember this knowledge more easily and efficiently, it had to be poeticized. However, as we saw in the contemporary critics of this view, such as Melberg and Halverson in the earlier section on Homeric tradition, this view of oral Indian tradition too as static is doubtful at best.

Orality was privileged for a variety of reasons. Sayana, in the introduction to his commentary on the Rgveda, wrote that ‘the text of the Veda is to be learned by the method of learning it from the lips of the teacher and not from a manuscript’ (quoted in Scharfe 2002: 8). Among the many reasons for this privileging of the oral, besides the fact that it was a time-honored tradition, are the following: the pupil may not be suited for learning the sacred knowledge; the knowledge may fall into the hands of a low caste; there was a necessity to recite mantras with perfect intonation and accurate stressing of syllables so that disaster does not strike (Scharfe 2002: 8). Moreover, education in ancient India was a strictly limited or exclusive affair, in principle restricted to the three dvija castes but in practice to the Brahmins and males. The demands of orality gave rise to certain fundamental qualities of historical Indian education, such as repetition (found in Buddhist canonical texts, according to Scharfe) and memorization.

The other type of knowledge was categorized as smriti or ‘remembered knowledge’ and in this, there was no obsession with precision in any of the aspects mentioned above. Memorization played an important role here too but it was a means to an end, not the end itself. In terms of modern educational concepts, both would meet the definitions of rote-learning in the sense of learning with understanding and committing to memory. Both could be used for achieving the next level of learning objective such as critical or analytical thought. Smriti would include all such responses and innovations and thoughts which could be passed on to and
appropriated for one’s own intellectual purposes. Interestingly, although oral literature and cultures in general have no concept of copyright in the modern sense, and free borrowing of another’s words was practiced and even allowed, yet there were some restrictions here for smriti. For example, there was a prohibition of ‘wholesale usage of striking expressions’ which therefore had to be avoided’ (Scharfe 2002: 32). Allasani Peddanna in Manucarita (about sixteenth century) mentions a kukavi (a ‘pseudopoet’) who went through other people’s work and tried to pass it off as his own. This was not looked upon with favour (Scharfe 2002: 32).

However, any one could elaborate or even improve upon someone else’s work and in fact, this was encouraged (Scharfe 2002:15, 32). This perhaps is the basis of commentaries on original texts. These changes, corrections and elaborations could even be done by the original author or by another but in most cases the original utterance and formulation was retained. This gave the form of a patchwork, or what Levi-Strauss has so memorably called a ‘bricolage’ (Levi-Strauss 1966), to the entire oral ‘text’ (Scharfe 2002: 30), what another commentator has called ‘disorganized’ nature of such texts (Deussen 2007). Thus, there were norms and rules even in oral cultures about the kind and extent of copying that was allowed. Many times the reading of these patchwork texts gives the impression that there is lack of organizational skills among Indians. But this is a simplistic representation in the views of this author; rather it could equally be proof of continuous engagement and rectifications of received knowledge, written evidence that received knowledge was questioned and challenged.

We have already discussed Parry’s and Havelock’s analysis of orality, and debunked the notion that it was simplistic and formulaic because repetitive. We have also seen how this view was debunked further as a superficial reading of another apparently repetitive knowledge system, Indian classical music, in Chapter IV. Although it is possible to restate the above observations in terms of mimesis, it is unclear what purpose this would serve, in view of our initial remarks on comparative paradigms. In terms of theorizing, however, these areas of orality are interesting to look into as they hide the dominant paradigm of thinking which still continues in educational discourse: one, we have already mentioned above is Donald’s (1992) theory on cognitive evolution of cultures - the episodic, the mimetic and the mythic - where he says that without an external system of storage/memory, human cultures were doomed to mimesis. Two, is that the

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5 According to Scharfe (1992: 32), the first accusation of plagiarism in fact came from a Roman poet, Martial, in the first century AD
advance of high literacy, according to Scharfe (2002), has resulted in a decline of emphasis on memorization as everything can now be written down and can be easily accessed simply by reading and skimming. If the need for storage was indeed a reason for memorization, then with the spread of new media technology and advanced digital storage systems, it is clear that memorization should be on the decline. In India, this is not so in the larger culture, either as sruti or smriti. Three, commentators, such as Walter Ong have further pointed out that an aspect of oral cultures is that self-analysis is not possible without writing (Ong 1982: 54). We address this in the next paragraph. Four, it is important to note that the most emphatic stroke on this killing of memorization however has come from the west who lost their oral traditions in large part in antiquity itself, unlike in India and the rest of Asia, particularly China, where oral traditions continued into modernity. More important, in India at least, these oral traditions continue to exist alongside of both illiteracy as well as literacy.

Historical evidence from India counters the above points of view on orality. Sanskritic cultures are an example of an influential and impactful culture and, in fact, civilization, which developed within an oral tradition. Vedic schools had developed ways in which to enhance the memory of their students through ‘the creation of skeletal text forms that permitted them to survey large masses of data by scanning their memory’ (Scharfe 2002: 27). Although it is easy to dismiss this as uncritical ‘rote learning’, it is not so. The skill required in mentally locating these frameworks is a feat in itself and not doable without a critical perspective. Further, as Scharfe correctly states, ‘the Indian traditions of yoga, samadhi and atman-doctrines have ancient roots and experience a special development in Buddhism with no visible relation to writing and are, as has been pointed out, almost certainly anterior to the emergence of writing’ (Scharfe 2002: 28). More significantly, the development of the six Indian philosophical schools through orality all bear witness to the formidable intellectual prowess, analysis and self-reflection that was possible in Indian oral traditions over and beyond repetition and memorization. In addition, there is evidence that despite the emphasis given to memorization, the injunctions to respect ‘smaram upassva’ (memory), ‘asa’ (hope) and ‘prana’ (vital breath) were rated still higher (Scharfe 2002: 27). Thus, memorization was not an end in itself but a means to other goals.
Considerable developments had been made in grammar and medicine and continued in the oral tradition, even after script and writing were introduced.\(^6\) Traditions of teaching were well established within the oral tradition. In medicine, for instance, Caraka’s ‘pedagogy’ included teaching by a competent authority, then perception followed by, first, inference. This is the necessary order of learning to be followed ‘for what would one know by examining through perception and inference what has not been taught before?’ (Caraka Samhita quoted in Scharfe 2002: 44). Another expert Susruta specifically prohibits changing the formula to be given for a particular illness if it raises doubts about its original validity. ‘The knowledgeable [physician] shall not in any way investigate with reasons the herbs that have obvious characteristics and results and are by their own nature established…. The wise stand on tradition and not on reasons’ (Quoted in Scharfe 2002: 62).

Interestingly, and contradictorily in terms of attitudes towards received knowledge, much later within the medieval Indian tradition of astronomy which made such huge strides in terms of knowledge, the conservative attitude towards knowledge is countered by a more progressive, indeed scientific one, based on investigation and curiosity, as evidenced in one Keralan text, Jyotirmimamsa of Nilakantha Sastry (1444-1545 CE). Here the checking of old astronomical doctrines must be done against contemporary observations and, in the words of Nilakantha Sastry ‘in case of discrepancies, investigations must be conducted with instruments and revolution - numbers of the planets calculated thereon. A new system has thus to be expounded. Nobody will be ridiculed for this in this world nor punished in the next’ (Scharfe 2002: 45).

Yet western criticisms have played a dominating role in influencing the formation of our own understanding of our intellectual history. For instance, mention was made a bit earlier in this chapter that one of the problems of oral Indian work is that it appears to have no organization in the western aesthetic sense (Deussen 2007). We submit that this may be true due to several other reasons as well, for instance, when compared with the aesthetics of writing itself, oral Indian work may appear to be disorganized. This apparent lack of organization may appear to be so due to the numerous repetitions necessary for rooting content in the listener’s mind. Or it may simply appear so when looked at from the literary perspective. Or, it may be a matter of transliterating the oral into the written and the attending problems thereof of documentation. However, Scharfe

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\(^6\) See Sen, SN 1988 for an issue dedicated to education in ancient and medieval India covering medical, scientific and technical education.
points out that this did not indicate a complete lack of organized texts. Tamil Nannul (about the thirteenth century) was one such example of an organized one as were the Vaisesika sutras ‘which followed a didactic design, going from the obvious to the less obvious’ (Scharfe 1992: 34). Nannul, in fact, while it ‘stresses the importance of listening to the teachers’ oral instruction, …[expected students to]… deepen their insight by talking to fellow students, by teaching and by public lecturing’ (Scharfe 2002: 35).

There is another aspect which needs to be highlighted about this system which is the typology of learning within the Vedic and Upanishadic schools which also suggest, like the above reference to Nannul, that traditional education was not as mindless as it is made out to be by modern educationists merely because it was based upon a core of memorizing. In the engagement between teacher and student, there are three types of questions (and knowledge) sought, according to one view: prashna (question), samasya (problem) and jijnasa (inquiry). In prashna, which can arise from either student or teacher, there is a definite answer possible. Knowledge gained from this will be of a definite nature, either empirical or mathematical. In samasya, question can be asked only by the student, the knowledge is not of a definite nature and may have two or more sides through which the student has to work through and find the answer. The teacher may, however, guide her in this pursuit or in seeking a resolution. In jijnasa, the student finds the answer themself through a process of constant search.

It would appear that in the larger oral culture, new knowledge was considered unattainable, possibly because of the strength of the belief in the Veda as the source of everything. But other than this being only partially true, we have also seen that these concepts of ‘originality’, ‘creativity’, ‘ownership’, ‘genius’ are all products of western Enlightenment. Whether and how such concepts translate across space and time is difficult to gauge. As Parry’s collaborator puts it, ‘The truth of the matter is that our concept of ‘the original’ and ‘the song’ simply makes no sense in the oral tradition’ (Lord 2000: 101). This idea is extremely important for us to examine in the context of education.

Interestingly, Jayanta, a logician in the ninth century may well have been echoing his counterparts in the Latin tradition when he asks, ‘How can we discover any new fact or truth?

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7 Personal communication with Dr KP Rao whom I thank for alerting me to this aspect.
8 Sankara was the most rigid in this belief, according to Scharfe (Scharfe 1992: 39). However, as he points out, not everyone was as rigid; others such as Yamuna, Madhusudhana and Saravasti accepted the Purana-s too.
One should consider novelty only in re-phrasing the older truths of the ancients in modern terminology’ (Scharfe 2002: 46). Surprisingly, Scharfe notes this de-emphasis on individual innovation to be in contrast to the west, where, he says, individual achievement has been seen as the driver of progress, ‘the powerful engine of Western culture and civilization’ (Scharfe 2002: 46). This has shades of Havelock’s own understanding that alphabetic literacy being the sole cause of Greek Enlightenment and even western civilization as mentioned earlier. Even if true, Scharfe’s focus on the individual achievement appears to have roots in Romanticism and can thus be true only of western modernity rather than the whole of western civilization; in fact, we have seen in the section on Roman mimesis that in ancient and medieval Europe, Jayanta’s belief underlined much of what we now understand to be their intellectual history.

Lastly, in early Mahayana Buddhism, ‘[t]raditional Buddhist texts ‘were handed down orally and their validity and correctness were reaffirmed by group recitation of the monks’. Interestingly, this led to the situation where one could not make changes to the oral Buddhist canon but could write an independent manuscript and circulate it, thereby undermining monastic authority’ (Scharfe 1992: 36). The latter would correspond to smriti knowledge comprising texts based on remembered knowledge. The strict Buddhist sruti canon comprised for instance, a dogmatic style, the formulaic style of prose, the aphoristic style of the six classical philosophical schools are all evidence of this. There is another practical aspect to learning via repetition in the Buddhist tradition as it took into consideration that the words may not have been heard correctly the first time around or the listener’s attention may have diverged (Scharfe 2002: 30). This is seen in another ancient Asian culture, the Chinese: Writing in 7 CE, I–Tsing documents that there are two traditional ways in which an individual can achieve great intellectual power: the first is ‘[b]y repeatedly committing to memory, the intellect is developed; secondly, the alphabet fixes one’s ideas. By this way, after a practice of one day or a month, a student feels his thoughts rise like a fountain, and can commit to memory what he has once heard’ (I-Tsing 1982). It is interesting to note that unlike in the western tradition where repetition is for ‘fixing’ or locating in the mind, the Asian tradition, as evidenced in the quote, appears to suggest that repetition is critical for the development of intellect itself.

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9 It was only later, such as the commentaries written perhaps around the 5th century CE, which demonstrated the heavy prose style of writing (Scharfe 1992: 20).
**Dewey’s Argument on Observation Extended to Repetition**

We are already familiar with Dewey’s ideas on imitation, habit and observation. From our point of view, despite his understanding the complex nature of imitation and the interchange between intellect and emotion (desire) in the formation of habit, Dewey was unable to see that repetition may also have some advantages. Similarly, he did not dwell on how ‘plasticity’ could be formed through memory. Just like we never simply observe, but always observe something, isn’t it possible that we never only repeat but repeat in different modes and degrees and thereby also understand at a different level through repetition? For instance, repetition is usually considered a technique or strategy to memorize and rote learn, sometimes achieving identical output, but this is difficult and what is achieved is similar output through such memorization. Identical repetition is possible easily with tools and technology (eg blocks, printing press, Xerox). It is also achieved in extant Indian oral traditions such as Vedic schools where pitch, prosody and the like are still important to replicate. However, even in the Vedic tradition, repetition is not an end in itself; knowledge had to be ‘seen, heard, considered and meditated upon’ (Scharfe 1992: 6). In the Buddhist tradition, the *Samgiti sutta* – a text which laid down the canons of learning – differentiated between three types of wisdom: ‘wisdom based on thinking, on hearing, and on meditation’ (Scharfe 1992: 6). In the Hindu tradition, Sankara’s *Upadesa-Sahasri* has three sections ‘on instruction (*sisyanusasana*), understanding (including discussions; *avagati*) and meditation (*parisamkhyana*)’ (Scharfe 1992: 7).

Thus, it is unclear why repetition and memorization in pan Indic traditions is treated by modern educationists as if it were a mindless process, when it is clear that it was only one part of a larger educational culture, no doubt with a larger emphasis on strict enunciation, prosody, and rhythm, as is the case in the larger culture of Vedic chanting as well as epic story telling. Further, repetition in its precision was critical only for *sruti* knowledge as pointed out earlier, in the section on mimesis in Indian traditions. *Sruti* knowledge was that which was revealed to someone, a *rsi* or a seer, then passed on down the generations orally; it was heard by students and learned through repetition (Scharfe 1992: 14-15). *Smriti* was knowledge based on *sruti* but had human authors. However, ‘it lacked the rigidity and textual faithfulness of that tradition’ (Scharfe 1992: 15). Reciters of *sruti* knowledge could not make the minutest of changes; those of *smriti* could make changes as they were based on ‘men’s remembrance or inferences of doctrines “heard”, but not preserved in their exact wording’ (Scharfe 1992: 15). Thus, here again we see
that there was already a culture which was not as fixated on mindless repetition as it is made out to be. Both *smriti* and *sruti* were oral traditions and even when written, were products of the oral tradition (Scharfe 1992: 15). Later, written commentaries on key texts in all the six schools of Indian philosophy were also included in the *smriti* tradition.

Dewey and others who follow in the modern education system make the same mistake of their counterparts: they believe that all learning is a matter of comprehension, relevance and construction and therefore trash repetition completely just like their colleagues who believe that all learning is a matter of repetition and memorizing. Perhaps we need to separate which kinds of subject matter is amenable to what learning style and at what stage of learning. From the above brief summary and discussion of Dewey’s ideas on the social and psychological motivations of some aspects of imitative learning, we see that even though his observations and analysis have much to illuminate the behavior of even those in higher education, his understanding may have been constrained by his psychological approach. Although his analysis of imitation, his insistence that we look at motivations, his understanding of habits and finally his incisiveness regarding learning itself, as we see from his comments on observation as a skill, stand out as key to understanding the role of mimesis from the point of view of learning, we find that he was unable to similarly understand the nature of repetition in learning due the lack of familiarity with oral knowledge traditions. In this sense, he remained rooted in his western culture and remained a modern philosopher of education.

**Repetition, Rote-Learning, Memorizing: Some Lessons from Ancient India**

We now come directly to the question of mimetic impulse of repetition, an important component of an education system based on memorization and ‘rote-learning’, as is common in oral cultures. We now have a more comprehensive understanding of oral cultures as well as mimesis and education and find it worthwhile to look again at pejorative ideas of rote-learning. In fact, such is the pervasiveness of this view that in the introductory section to a major volume on education in ancient India, Scharfe (2002) observes the contrast between the Indian education system and the modern western one and says, ‘Indian education of memorizing-by-rote … aims at identical replication whereas our modern Western education includes an element of innovation, an appeal and incentive to change traditional knowledge and improve upon it’ (Scharfe 2002: 1).
Even ignoring the blatant methodological errors in comparing the ancient Indian education system with the modern western one, the observation appears to be a simplistic binary, steeped in colonialism and even worse, ignorance of the ethos and spirit of oral traditions as well as his own scholarship, as evidenced by the book itself! It is Scharfe who had pointed out that smriti is open to change and has been quoted in the previous section.

We have attempted to show in the section on contemporary culture, especially in music and yoga that there is no simplicity or static quality inherent in these systems both of which are based on ‘rote-learning’. There can be two other responses to Scharfe’s observation: one, we now know that the influence of mimesis has been profound, even in the west. As Muckelbauer (2003) points out, ‘in terms of pedagogy alone, imitation was the single most common instructional method in the West for well over two millennia …. [A]ny student who received formal education at any level was almost certainly subjected to explicit exercises in imitation’ (Muckelbauer 2003: 62). Two, it is problematic to reduce the differences in European and American countries to the ‘modern west’, as Scharfe does. Not all countries, modern though they may be, have such an element of innovation in them, as their internal critics have pointed out. For instance, Derrida speaks about the nature of teaching in state-run institutions, which has ‘a special responsibility to understand the educational system in which they work, whose ideas are mechanismically passed on from teacher to student and back again’ (Huttunen 2011: 11).

That memorization and rote-learning are without redeeming qualities is a common misconception shared even by western-trained and influenced Indian educators and educationists, who continue to denigrate rote-learning and memorization of all kinds and at all levels.\(^\text{10}\) The illogic of this claim seems to be as follows: all memorization is repetition; all repetition is copying; all copying is plagiarism; all plagiarism is evil. Therefore, all memorization is evil.

Others have joined the chorus of denigrating voices against memorization and rote-learning which apparently the Indian education system encourages and is characterized by. Here it should be made clear that memorization as only ‘locating in memory’, is an extremely important quality for survival but also for the evolution of our species, as some cognitivists believe and we have discussed before (Donald 1992). Carruthers’ work on medieval Italy

\(^\text{10}\) An important example of this is the National Curricular Framework 2005. A significant document for many and very commendable reasons, it appears to be uncritical about the mimetic basis of learning and has an excessive focus on constructivist pedagogies, positioning them almost as binaries.
mentioned in Chapter II also highlighted the role of memoria in rhetoric. Even at the individual level in daily life, if one keeps forgetting the litany and sequence of routine activities, one is doomed to spend a substantial amount of time and energy every day, figuring out what to do and in what sequence to do them.

It is true that memorization is achieved by repetition, but there are a host of other mnemonic devices which also achieve the same thing. Rote-learning is probably the bigger issue in education. From the emic perspective in India, ‘mugging up’ or ‘knowing by heart’ implies committing to memory through repetition and mnemonics without comprehension or only partial comprehension of subject matter. Thus, repetition is the sine qua non of both memorization as well as rote-learning, but we tend to think that repetition is the same as both memorization and rote-learning, rather than being only one of the techniques or strategies for enabling it.

From the etic perspective of international educationists, there is a distinction made between ‘no learning’, ‘rote learning’ and ‘meaningful learning’. This distinction itself draws upon the conceptual distinction between retention and transfer (Mayer and Wittrock 1996), where retention is ‘the ability to remember material at some later time much as it was presented during instruction’ and transfer is ‘the ability to use what was learned to solve new problems, answer new questions or facilitate learning new subject matter’ (Mayer 2002: 226). In this framework, rote learning is learning which focuses on retention rather than transfer, and therefore may involve comprehension of the material as well as its retention (through one or other memorization strategy, only one of which is repetition). It is considered a lesser stage than meaningful learning which involves the ability to understand knowledge, retain and recall it as well as apply it to different problems and/or situations. Rote-learning is based on theories of knowledge acquisition while meaningful learning is based on theories of knowledge construction (Mayer 2002: 227).

This distinction between rote-learning and meaningful learning may be itself culturally constituted, leaving behind an important category between them, namely making interpretations or finding different (levels of) meanings. In an interesting exploratory study done of Hong Kong Chinese high school students and German ones on the role of repetition in the processes of memorizing and understanding, Dahlins and Watkins (2000) found that both groups recollected recitation being encouraged by parents as a significant part of their childhood, but Chinese students also were encouraged to do so by primary school teachers. What is significant is that
while German students downplayed the importance of repetition in understanding, Chinese students emphasized repetition with ‘attentive effort’ as being key to discovering new meanings thereby deepening their understanding. The authors relate this to more traditional, Confucian attitudes to learning where repetition makes a deep impression on the mind as well as gives rise to new meanings. Further, they inferred that effort was thus an important feature of learning for the Chinese students while ability was important for the Germans.

The kind of rote-learning which is based upon repetition (committing to memory through repetition), since it assumes only knowledge acquisition, is thus considered an earlier stage in the hierarchy of educational objectives in the western world. However, when we look at the ancient Indian teaching-learning models based upon memorization, we may be able to use its form of mimesis-as-repetition and perhaps use its positives in order to make some pedagogical innovations as we show in Chapter VII.

In brief, it appears that well-intentioned westerners, and western-educated educationists, believe that the emphasis on memorization in education has led to the lack of critical skills in children and young adults in India. With our simple clarification of the Indian distinction between sruti and smriti, it should be clear that if at all there could be some stereotypical understanding of ancient Indian systems being static and focused on ‘rote-learning’, it is only with sruti knowledge. Even then, it is the case that it would rate lower in terms of educational goals and it is not all that clear that it should be held as responsible for the decline in critical and creative skills. Moreover, smriti itself is higher up in terms of educational goals and its importance to critical thinking and other contemporary positive learning aspects needs to be acknowledged.

The previous section thus critiqued the denigration of rote-learning by modern educators, based as it was on an outdated, incomplete and many times erroneous understanding of oral traditions. We now move into examining some of the key ideas that drive contemporary education so as to give a background for the pedagogy we develop in Chapter VII.