Chapter VIII

Summary and Conclusions: Towards a Mimetic Pedagogy

_Frail humanity! Be it embodied in a grave philosopher or a frivolous housemaid, it succumbs. It cannot be otherwise. Imitation is easy and invention is difficult._

- BR Ambedkar

We have come a fairly long way on the road towards understanding the topic of this dissertation _Mimesis in Contemporary Culture: Implications for Pedagogy_. As we have seen, there were essentially two parts to the dissertation. The first part was on conceptual formulations of mimesis and drew from philosophy, art and aesthetics. The second part was on the pedagogical implications. In Chapter II, there was an exploration of historical mimesis in the Western tradition from antiquity to modernity. There was also an important section on Indian traditions which followed the implicit framework of the Western exegesis and showed how the formulations of key ideas in Indian traditions were quite different from those in the West. The subdivisions for investigation in the Indian traditions were thus dramatic traditions, visual arts, and an example of metaphysics of reference in one school of Buddhism.

The complex thematic family of mimesis was teased out in a variety of ways in three chapters: In Chapter II, the historical exegesis of the Greek and Roman ideas surrounding mimesis since antiquity – a diachronic conceptual analysis - revealed six different reconfigurations of historical mimesis: mimesis-as-imitation, mimesis-as-creation, mimesis-as-emulation, mimesis-as-imitatio, mimesis-as-copia as well as mimesis-as-representation.

In Chapter III, the conceptual analysis moved into other formulations of mimesis in postmodernism, such as mimesis-as-iteration, which arose in the discussion of two themes, namely the place of conventions in art and the idea of the real through realism. Through the discussion on the arts, we saw how reality was not something ‘out there’ awaiting imitation (in whatever way), but was constructed in particular ways at different times in the historical development of the arts in the west. The notion of the real, and realism as an artistic and literary style, developed through a series of conventions which arose around the making of art as well as
viewing it. We thus got an idea of the role of conventions in shaping how people perceived and understood the arts – those of viewing, for instance, which went into the formation of theatre as a genre and conventions of writing which shaped the notion of the real. This chapter also went below the surface to problematize the real, by discussing the false binary between the real and the artificial as well as the part played by mimesis in subversion and, interestingly enough, subjugation. Subversion, undermining and subjugation are important powers (and responses) of mimesis, all of which are deeply political in nature. This discussion was important to understand as the arts too are an integral component of culture, as is education, and both get shaped by existing cultural conventions. The iterations of mimesis arising in modernity as well as postmodernity were also mentioned in this chapter, in the context of these ideas.

Together, Chapters II and III thus formed the conceptual part of the dissertation and gave us a deep understanding of the thematic concept of mimesis, as well as its repercussions and replications in the arts.

Chapter IV concerned vernacular notions of mimesis. In order to discover these, we selected some particular configurations of mimesis in order to examine how they arise in popular and contemporary culture. This gave evidence that mimesis is not an antiquated concept but is also a living, transmuting one, from the emic perspective. We saw that mimesis manifested itself in more accessible, vernacular forms such as copying, mirroring, imitating, mimicry, replicating, repeating, substituting, juxtaposing, emulating, re-producing, and re-presenting. Based in mimetic impulses too, these were referred to as vernacular notions of contemporary mimesis. But they have been around since antiquity too, in one form or the other. We examined the range of domains in which these mimetic impulses arose - from explaining evolutionary cognition and genes to the social and the cultural domains. We paid particular attention to classical music, contemporary music, dance and yoga all of which use the mimetic impulse of repetition at their core, not just in learning but also in producing, creating and practice. It is this logic that allowed us to use repetition within our pedagogical framework, developed in Chapter VII, and gave birth to yet another avatar of mimesis-as-repetition.

We next moved to the second part of our dissertation which is the one concerning education and pedagogy. Chapter V was divided into four parts: In part 1, we first looked at, and discussed, the implications of some of the concepts of historical mimesis, and saw that an understanding of this historical concept actually has implications for how we teach. For instance,
we saw how the conventions of viewing a film pedagogically in the classroom had to be distinctly different from those of watching a film in a theatre. Thus, the ‘mimetic trance’ had to be broken quite actively and this was an important learning gleaned from mimesis. This is an important new contribution to teaching. We also saw how other smaller interventions based on our understanding of mimesis can be made, so that pedagogy can be more oriented towards the learning needs of students. We also looked at the implications of mimesis on our understanding of academic plagiarism, particularly in learning contexts. If mimesis in one or other of its formulations is *sine qua non* of learning, and in fact, has been an important influence of shaping historically acknowledged creative work, then isn’t it time we factored this mimetic impulse into our pedagogical practices? This was an entry point into the philosophy of education through the ideas on imitation and habit, both mimetic, in the work of the philosopher of education, John Dewey. It illuminated our understanding of educational mimesis as he spoke about the psychological motivations which drove both habit and imitation. The question arose as to why memorization through repetition – an important mimetic impulse - did not receive such a sensitive, albeit psychological, treatment within its educational context. We therefore extended Dewey’s ideas to repetition ourselves. In part 3, we summarized an important aspect of ancient Indian education, namely memorizing and repetition in the oral traditions and this led to a critique of the modernist denigration of rote-learning in part 4. Thus, new conventions of using film in the classroom, as well as re-looking at plagiarism and repetition in learning are important contributions of this chapter.

Chapter VI contains some key ideas on contemporary education discourse which led us to ask the question, what is thinking? We found Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives (original and revised) to be a viable framework for thinking through this issue. In Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives, a range of skills from rote-learning to critical and creative thinking are considered important. We decided to focus upon creative and critical thinking as serious lacunae in young people. We also found Howard Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences to be a useful framework to justify the shift away from reading and writing in education to visual work that we make in Chapter VII. An important shift that young people need to make is from making ‘meaning’ to making ‘interpretations’ and the systematic use of visuals in teaching is one interesting way to do this.
Chapter VII made the mimetic circle of research complete. After all the knowledge gained about mimesis, it was time to build it anew and the possibility of a mimetic pedagogy was born. One would usually translate a mimetic pedagogy as an imitative one. But by then, we knew better as we had a thorough conceptual understanding of both historical and contemporary mimesis. We had an array of seven historical configurations to choose from, not just imitation, and a range of contemporary impulses too. The pedagogy thus had a conceptual framework based largely in semiotics (denotation, connotation, paradigm, syntagm and intertextuality); the analytical framework is pictorial mimesis which gave rise to and justified three types of pedagogical interventions, each based on a different mimesis, towards enhancing critical and creative thinking as follows:

1. The first was based on vernacular notion of repetition, in its avatar as mimesis-as-repetition and used substitution to make it more dynamic. It drew its logic from oral traditions of learning but rather than advocating memorizing, it used the very structure and process of oral teaching to the domain of visuals.

2. The second pedagogical intervention was based upon mimesis-as-imitatio and used the ideas of juxtaposition and intertextuality as a conscious mechanism to encourage critical thinking. This intervention drew its logic from the Roman rhetorical tradition.

3. The third pedagogical intervention was based upon mimesis-as-copia and used the idea of ornamenting/embellishing to encourage creative thinking. This too used the logic of Roman rhetorical tradition, but combined it with the idea of ornamentation present in both visual and oral traditions.

All three above are ways in which theoretical and conceptual knowledge can become the foundations of a new pedagogy, in other words, a pedagogical praxis. The pedagogy is an indicatory one, parts of which have been used in courses we have taught or in work done by thesis students. The development of ‘pictorial mimesis’ as an analytical framework and the theorizing of the pedagogy using mimesis is new.

Thus, if we re-look at the objectives of this dissertation, we have achieved all four of them as described above. The objectives were as follows:

1. To get a conceptual understanding of the current Western ideas of mimesis
2. To understand Indian formulations of mimesis
3. To explore the interrelationships between mimesis and contemporary Indian culture
4. To examine the implications of the above on teaching practices in the Indian context

In sum, this dissertation has specifically achieved the following:

1. By exploring the historical concept of mimesis, we have opened up the idea of mimesis for more fruitful engagement with mimesis in education;
2. By including certain aspects of knowledge from the contemporary creative domains such as contemporary dance and music, as well as other Indian traditions such as classical Indian music and yoga, we isolated the category of repetition and show how it was central to learning and therefore could be used as a mechanism within contemporary pedagogy;
3. By describing some key ideas in ancient Indian education as well as oral traditions, we have used this to develop a critique of the modernist position against rote-learning;
4. By using a framework of emic analysis, we have isolated ‘mimetic impulses’ in the vernacular idiom in several contemporary cultural domains, and showed the pervasiveness of mimesis today;
5. By understanding the thematic underpinnings of mimesis, we were able to develop a new set of conventions for using film in the classroom and justify them using mimesis;
6. By using mimesis as a theoretical framework, we have developed an indicatory and mimetic pedagogical method, with illustrations, to show how an innovative ‘pictorial mimesis’ can be used for encouraging critical and creative thinking in classroom pedagogy. This comprises a definite possibility for future work based on this dissertation and would need to be developed comprehensively and systematically.

This dissertation was born in the experience of plagiarism in the classroom as we described in Chapter I. Perhaps it is time to go back to it and see whether and how the understanding of mimesis can contribute to both our understanding of plagiarism as well as to handling it in the classroom. As we now know, plagiarism is a norm of academic culture, not of learning or knowledge or cognition. It is thus deeply embedded in the culture and conventions of academia. It is a convention that is associated with educational institutions, particularly with the written and printed word, and is ‘committed’ by students in the classroom, and even teachers, while
developing powerpoints or writing a research paper and other instances of this kind. Some of these instances of plagiarism we may turn a blind eye to, as for instance, power points which are glorified notes in a newly furbished avatar of yellowed ‘notes’ dictated by teachers. Others we take cognizance of, and address as a serious issue, such as plagiarism in term papers or papers for publication. But there are instances, quite rampant it must be confessed, when we see it occurring in classroom assignments when we believe a more nuanced position may be taken as it reveals, on the one hand, insecurities about thinking-writing skills; on the other, a mimetic impulse to creative learning which needs to be handled with care by teachers using the mimetic framework of understanding. Copying as a pejorative idea needs to be done away with. Instead, we need to learn to harness the potential of mimesis in its various avatars in order to better reach out to young people’s critical and creative faculties.

The idea of using Turnitin, a plagiarism detection software, is fast gaining currency for student assignments as well as research papers for publication in journals. This is a misguided notion, from our point of view, as the software merely indicates word-matching in texts. This cannot necessarily be construed as plagiarism and a judgment call needs to be made on such matches by the teacher.

Plagiarism also reveals the pressure on academics everywhere to be ‘original’ when, in principle, to be original is not a demand made by other fields where one assumes it would appear. Even the arts would rate ‘expressivism’ or ‘creativity’ as being more important than being ‘original’. Other factors appear to be equally or more important to establish than originality in the performing arts: lineage, for instance, in classical Indian and folk singing. Singers and musicians clearly have more nuanced understanding of what ‘originality’ means in their contexts, even within the boundaries of copyright laws. The paranoia about plagiarism simply does not appear to exist in other domains as we showed in Chapter IV, where we discussed mimetic impulses of vernacular mimesis. It appears convincing that copyright laws and Derridean ‘economimesis’ have a lot to contribute to this paranoia. While all these domains contain and even may nurture mimesis of one kind or the other such as copying, repetition, reproducing etc, it is only in academics that there is such a thorough bulwark to protect the ‘original’ works of those gone by but ironically enough, it may prevent any type of creative thinking from taking place in the future if we come down too harshly upon these mimetic impulses, especially in the early stages of learning, even in universities. Ironically, we have seen
that historically the creative arts have used mimesis in one form or the other to create some of the most lasting artistic products and this needs to be factored into our expectations of students.

The dissertation has revealed at least five notions of mimesis which hide under the dominant understanding of it as imitation – as creation, emulation, *imitatio*, *copia*, and representation. In addition we have the new avatar of mimesis-as-repetition, which is really a mimetic impulse in the vernacular, not a concept as such. Of these, pejorative interpretations of mimesis are rooted in the Platonic idea of mimesis-as-imitation. But there is enormous space and potential for using the mimetic foundations of plagiarism as a teaching methodology as we have shown. Not only can the understanding of mimesis enhance our pedagogical practices in the classroom, as, for instance, re-looking and re-formulating the conventions of using film as a pedagogical tool through breaking of its mimetic trance as we discussed in Chapter V, it can also enhance our understanding of how we handle plagiarism at different learning stages. This is possible with a thorough understanding of the other different kinds of mimesis and adapting them to classroom situations to retain the integrity of the learning space.

This distinction where there is a demand made to be ‘original’ must be reinterpreted in the classroom at least as being ‘innovative’. The word innovation more clearly conveys the idea of working with what already exists – and therefore renewal or making something anew. In other words, ‘innovation’ is deeply mimetic whereas the idea of ‘originality’ is more deeply rooted in assumptions that are hard to sustain in teaching-learning. As we have demonstrated in Chapter VII, the process of teaching critical and creative thinking working with what exists is a somewhat easier goal to accomplish, IFF we base our understanding of being creative and critical thinkers as doing something different with an existing body of material. In our pedagogy, we have chosen to work with pictures or other visual elements, but the attitude of innovating is what we need to cultivate in young people.

The pejorative connotations of plagiarism as copying have meant that academic culture has created an array of minute and detailed rules, requirements and norms which need to be followed in order for a work to be considered ‘original’. We need to re-look at this heavy-handedness with regard to plagiarism at the learning stages as it may imply that it stifles all kinds of thinking except that legitimized by research academia. This does not imply that teachers must allow plagiarism to be unattended as is currently the case in colleges and universities but we must be able to re-direct it in clear and learning-sensitive ways. The patronizing and indulgent
attitude by teachers towards plagiarism among the young deserves censure as much as the heavy-handedness and denigration that accompanies the pejorative meaning of copying among students. For the more mundane levels of teaching-learning in classrooms, which reach out to a larger section of the population than does research, and has tremendous consequences on the life opportunities of young people, we need to be refocused upon how to pre-empt stifled thinking which is equally possible by this enormous referencing and citation. It is a given that ‘scientific’ knowledge builds upon what has gone before. This is not an insight of western Enlightenment or science but the nature of knowledge itself, as this dissertation has shown.

This dissertation has also questioned the basis on which memorization has been so thoroughly denigrated in modern education. Like the literate tradition had tried so hard to decimate the oral one by branding themselves as rational and innovative and the oral as illogical, confused, repetitive and static, similarly, the power of reading and writing has thoroughly pre-empted other kinds of thinking from emerging. In this dissertation, we chose to work with pictures and other visuals to put forward the proposition that we need to develop newer pedagogies based on other kinds of intelligence as our education becomes more inclusive. Do assignments always need to be individual and expressed as written academic work in such a strict sense? If we open up the domain of education to other ways of knowing, new creativity and criticality may emerge from unexpected quarters, untrained in the particular logic of writing and reading, and that too in English. Rather than suppressing them under the heavy teacher’s scale of the literate, perhaps the time has come to unleash other languages, other knowledges, and other traditions.