‘Mimesis in Contemporary Culture: Implications for Pedagogy’
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Extended Abstract

The dissertation is set within the discipline of philosophy of education. It examines the philosophical foundations of plagiarism in mimesis and its occurrence and pervasiveness in contemporary culture, from the perspective of its implications for pedagogy. It draws from the disciplines and discourses of philosophy, semiotics and education.

The dissertation examines the conceptual foundations of plagiarism by locating it in an ancient Greek concept called ‘mimesis’, usually understood as the notion that ‘art is an imitation of reality’. It unpacks this singular understanding of mimesis to reveal at least half a dozen significant variations based on it, which in turn problematize the very concepts of art and reality. Five domains of contemporary culture, namely mimicry, classical Indian music, contemporary Indian music, contemporary dance, and yoga, are examined in order to find out vernacular notions of mimesis. Ironically, both classical and contemporary notions of mimesis seem embedded in the idea of repetition. Yet, when we turn to pedagogy, we find that repetition has a pejorative implication which is unwarranted, as for instance in memorizing and rote-learning. The idea of repetition is used to develop a novel idea of ‘pictorial mimesis’ in order to teach critical and creative thinking to students, through substitution, copia and imitatio. This ‘mimetic pedagogy’ is only illustrative and points to directions for future work. Other implications of this foundational understanding of mimesis are also explored in terms of pedagogy.

The objectives of the dissertation are as follows:
1. To get a conceptual understanding of the 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

At the superficial level, ‘learning through imitation’ is a denigrating statement and the singular understanding of the notion of mimesis as ‘art is an imitation of reality’ is misleading. A historical exegesis of mimesis gives us a broader and deeper understanding of imitation as mimesis gets re-configurated through time in the west. The historical development of mimesis
from Plato’s notion of ‘mimesis-as-imitation’ onwards, reveals mimesis to re-formulate itself in at least six avatars from antiquity to modernism in the western world and knowledge paradigms. Each of these was a dynamic, serious and intelligent re-formulation of the notion of mimesis-as-imitation, as we see in the dissertation.

The exegesis of historical mimesis further revealed two assumptions underlying the notion of ‘art is an imitation of reality’: namely, the place of conventions in shaping what is construed as ‘art’, as well as the changing notions of the ‘real’. Thus, philosophically speaking, each of the three concepts in the notion of mimesis as ‘art is an imitation of reality’ – art, imitation and reality ‑ are deconstructed in order to reveal their underpinning assumptions.

While Aristotle’s understanding of ‘mimesis-as-creation’ revealed the place of conventions in deciding what is ‘art’, the three Latin re-formulations of mimesis, which were largely based upon rhetorical traditions, showed that imitation could, in fact, correspond to three different realities: mimesis-as-emulation points to the past as reality, mimesis-as-imitatio points to two or more different realities, and mimesis-as-copia points to a new reality being construed by the same elements simply by re-organizing them.

Some aspects of mimesis are also surveyed in contemporary culture in order to explore whether and how mimesis arises in domains more familiar to young people in India. Five domains of contemporary culture are selected: mimicry, contemporary music and dance, classical music and yoga. In each of these, repetition is used almost mechanically and yet transformation happens. Ironically, it appears that creative work is born through these very notions of mimesis and mechanical repetition. Some of the ways in which mimesis appears in the ‘vernacular’ in the different domains are highlighted.

In the second half of the dissertation, we move into the domain of education. The understanding of mimesis illuminates our pedagogical perspectives, practices and evaluations. We look at Plato and Aristotle as teachers. We see how several mimetic ideas can be of practical use in the classroom, in our understanding of errors, in teaching students to write. We device new conventions for using film as a pedagogical aid in classrooms based upon our understanding of the discourse surrounding mimesis. The surprising implications of ‘plagiarism’ on learning are studied, suggesting that since there is a mimetic impulse in human beings, in fact it should be actively used and allowed more in learning.
We examine the work of the philosopher of education, John Dewey on two mimetic
concepts, imitation and habit, and show that his analysis of these could similarly have been
extended to understanding rote-learning (memorizing through repetition), but curiously wasn’t.
Our examination of several contemporary domains from classical and contemporary music,
dance and yoga, suggests that learning in creative fields ironically depends upon the mimetic
impulse of repetition in order to achieve transformation. Further, a brief survey of ancient Indian
education is undertaken, where rote-learning and memorizing were central and yet resulted in the
knowledge civilization of ancient and medieval India. Thus, the ‘mimetic impulse’ of repetition
is located in ancient and medieval Indian oral traditions as well as contemporary culture, and it
proves to be amenable for later use in developing the framework of a mimetic pedagogy.

Without getting into defending rote-learning, we focus on some key ideas in
contemporary education discourse and suggest it is important to move from ‘meaning-making’ to
‘making interpretations’ - from singular understanding to multiplicity. The mimetic impulse of
repetition is revisited and used alongside substitution to build the foundations of an indicatory
mimetic pedagogy using visuals. We also develop the novel idea of ‘pictorial mimesis’ in order
to teach critical and creative thinking, using some basic semiotics.

The implications of historical mimesis are explored: how mythos, praxis and copia can be
used by teachers, how can plagiarism be understood in a more nuanced fashion to better guide
pedagogical support that students need, what are the implications of mimesis on rote-learning
and how can our knowledge of ancient Indian oral traditions, as well as Dewey, generate a
critique of the denigration of rote-learning. There is also a section on new conventions of using
film as a pedagogical aid in the classroom based on mimesis.

The framework of a new ‘Mimetic Pedagogy’ is laid out based on a new concept of
‘pictorial mimesis’. Predominantly, basic semiotic concepts are used in the conceptual
framework. The idea of ‘pictorial mimesis’ is developed based upon ideas of repetition, mimesis-as-imitatio and mimesis-as-copia as the analytical framework for the innovative pedagogy. In the
first part of the pedagogy, the mimetic impulse of repetition is used by making it dynamic
through the use of substitution, in order to actively teach students to be critical and creative
thinkers. This draws from an understanding of oral traditions as well as the culture of classical
and contemporary music. The second part of the pedagogy uses mimesis-as-imitatio which is
made dynamic through juxtaposing and intertextuality. In the third part of the pedagogy which is
dedicated to creative thinking but really needs the first two parts to make it complete and comprehensive, mimesis-as-*copia* is used and made dynamic through embellishing/ornamenting to make it practically useable. The pedagogy is an indicatory one, used as a pilot in two courses and partially used in three master’s level thesis under the guidance of the author. They illustrate the ways in which these concepts can be used in teaching critical and creative thinking. The ‘Mimetic Pedagogy’ is only an indicatory pedagogical framework and would need to be further developed.

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 configuration of mimesis) towards enhancing critical and creative thinking as follows:

1. The first was based on the mimetic impulse of 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 in the domain of visual education.

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 through the use of visuals. 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 mimetic pedagogy, in other words, a pedagogical praxis. The pedagogy is an indicatory one, parts of which have been used in courses the author has 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.

If we re-look at the objectives of this dissertation, we have achieved all four of them as described above. The dissertation has also 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 artistic 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 is 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 justified them using mimesis;

6. By revealing the underpinnings of learning and creativity in mimesis, we have urged the opening up of teaching-learning domains to more, not less, ‘plagiarism’. In research arena, the norms and practices of academia may prevail;

7. By using mimesis as a theoretical framework, we have developed an innovative, indicatory and mimetic pedagogical method, with illustrations, to show how a new ‘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.