An Idea of Higher Education Renewal

Beginning with the briefest reference to the state of higher education today, this paper overviews moral and philosophical concepts of and disposition to education in ancient Greece from the works of Plato and Aristotle, takes a summary view of the subjects taught, sums up the subject content of liberal arts and the principles of rhetoric. The author assumes that even if a dedicated return to the classical ideals may never happen in higher education today, a few concrete ideas might be helpful. With reference to concrete works of classical authors, a suggestion is made to stop never-ending reforms in universities, to recover the teaching of such subjects as style in language and literature programmes, to renew the subjects of history, philosophy and logic and to introduce memory-based learning while paying tribute to classical antiquity and regaining local traditions.

Keywords: the content of education, training and learning, early education, liberal arts, the principles of oratory; God and a free man, the best, beautiful and decent, good and bad in human activity, education and evaluations.

The problem of present-day higher education and why it has to be discussed is the loss of inherited, time-tested orientation through the unprecedented growth of knowledge in and information from sciences, through the extension of mass media and popular culture, through the inflation of knowledge in “the overinformed world” in which professionals lack the certainty and trust in themselves to take responsibilities. The loss of orientation is due to insufficient respect for professors in authority and to the fallen ethical, moral and academic standards.

Although there was no higher education of the present-day model in classical antiquity, a number of conceptions and caveats known in classical antiquity are applicable today. Some of the precepts of classical antiquity have been retained, although impoverished, in present-day higher education.

Modern higher education has certain features, sometimes acknowledged only formally, which were treated as values in classical antiquity. For instance, in *The Laws*, Plato defined upbringing as that (activity which) leads a citizen to becoming virtuous and obliges him to desire to become more virtuous, to perfect himself, to live, to rule and to subject himself to the law.\(^1\) Some of these features are formally acknowledged in present-day education and distorted while putting too great an emphasis on freedom without any regard to responsibilities in small countries of new democracies.

According to Plato, education is required for the educated to be able to decide for themselves rather than to resort to strangers in decision making

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and “to let them be your masters and judges”\(^2\). This concept is based on a true idea of freedom.

Aristotle assumed that education of youth should be foreseen and regulated by the law, should be one for all and should be executed under the law. Aristotle further posited that, “depending on the singular goal of the state, education should be one and obligatory to all. It should not be private when everyone teaches privately whatever he chooses”\(^3\).

Present-day higher education is regulated by the law in numerous countries, yet this bears little semblance to the classical concept because of corporate, lobbyist and social interference rather than genuine support.

Aristotle mentions discussions of the content of education, i.e. discussions about what should be taught. There was no agreement on this then\(^4\). This question in classical antiquity concerned the subjects in the sense that classical authors deliberated on whether the required subjects were to be those which “develop thinking skills or the character of the soul”, those that were useful in daily life or those that led to abstract knowledge\(^5\) (Aristotle, The Politics VIII. ii, 1337a33). Aristotle himself suggested a fair solution:

“...It is doubtless that useful things should be taught”\(^6\).

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\(^1\)“Does it not seem to you a scandalous thing, and a strong proof of defective education, to be obliged to import justice from others, in the character of lords and judges, in consequence of the scanty supply at home? Nothing can be more scandalous.” (Plato. The Republic, Book III. 405ff)

\(^2\)And just as there must also be preparatory training for all skills and capacities, ..., it is obvious that there must also be training for the activities of virtue. But since there is but one aim for the entire state, it follows that education must be one and the same for all, and that the responsibility for it must be a public one, not the private affair which it now is each man looking after his own children and teaching them privately whatever private curriculum he thinks they ought to study. In matters that belong to the public, training for them must be the public’s concern” (Aristotle. The Politics, Book VIII. i, 1337a11-1337a32). “It is clear that there should be law laid down about education, and that education itself must be made a public concern” (Aristotle, The Politics. Book VIII. i, 1337a33).

\(^3\)“But we must not forget the question of what that education is to be, and how one ought to be educated. For in modern times there are opposing views about the tasks to be set, for there are no generally accepted assumptions about what the young should learn, either for virtue or for the best life; nor yet is it clear whether their education ought to be conducted with more concern for the intellect than for the character of the soul” (Aristotle. The Politics, Book VIII. ii, 1337a33).

\(^4\)The problem has been complicated by the education we see actually given; and it is by no means certain whether training should be directed at things useful in life, or at those conducive to virtue, or at exceptional accomplishments. (...) And there is no agreement as to what in fact does tend towards virtue. For a start, men do not all prize the same virtue, so naturally they differ also about the training for it” (Aristotle. The Politics, Book VIII. ii, 1337a33).

\(^5\)“Then as to useful things: there are obviously certain essentials which the young must learn; but it is clear (a) that they must not learn all useful tasks, since we distinguish those that are proper for a free man and those that are not, and (b) that they must take part only in those useful occupations which will not turn the participant into a mechanic” (Aristotle, The Politics, Book VIII. ii, 1337b4). “It is also clear that there are some useful things, too, in which the young must be educated, not only because they are useful (for example they must learn reading and writing), but also because they are often a means to learning yet further subjects” (Aristotle. The Politics, Book VIII. iii, 1338a17).
But Aristotle also mentioned that there is education which is required for sons not because it is useful in practical life and so necessary but “because it suits a free man and is beautiful in itself” (Aristotle. The Politics, Book VIII, ii).

The discussion continues today and leads to an extreme emphasis on practical things (such as technical execution in manual work or commercial subjects in the humanities at university). The question remains whether this solution is an optimal issue. Without indicating direct cause and consequence relations, classical antiquity had an unarguable position on this. As society divided into free men and slaves, Aristotle thought that “the young should be taught those things that would not turn them into amateur performers and craftsmen. The amateur’s activity was such an engagement, craft or learning which precluded the use of the mind, body and soul the way that is required of a free man, in his virtuous work and engagement”.

Amateur engagements were those which diminish the body and make the mind and soul unfit for virtuous work. Base engagements were those which money buys. This seems too nice to be neglected today, if only we could aspire to such heights.

Classical authors recommended to select the best schools and the best teachers for the young and the best works to be used in school. Classical antiquity had the concept of “a decent man” and had it uppermost in their mind whether they wrote about teachers, orators or philosophers. The initial schooling had to be based on the best selected works of literature and attended by the best teachers as the beginning was the most important for “a young tender being”: it is at the beginning that the features which may be desirable to burgeon in the young take root.

Never letting ethic and morality slip from their mind, authors of classical antiquity highlighted gratitude as a treasure: “the gratitude of a decent man for a kind turn is a real treasure”. Amid the precepts to respect wealth, but only moderately, Isocrates reasoned that it is worthy to aspire to the best while being content with what one has.

Aristotle further posited that there is a limit to which man remains free in his engagements and learning. Too deep and too meticulous engagement

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7“We must reckon a task or skill or study as mechanical if it renders the body or intellect of free men unserviceable for the uses and activities of virtue. We therefore call mechanical those skills which have a deleterious effect on the body’s condition, and all work that is paid for. For these make the mind preoccupied (without leisure), and unable to rise above lowly things. Even in some branches of knowledge worthy of free men, while there is a point up to which it does not demean a free man to go in for them, too great a concentration on them, too much mastering of detail – this is liable to lead to the same damaging effects that we have been speaking of. In this connection the purpose for which the action or the study is undertaken makes a big difference” (Aristotle. The Politics, Book VIII, ii, 1337b4).

8See footnote 7.

9“Then are you aware, that in every work the beginning is the most important part, especially in dealing with anything young and tender? For that is the time when every impression, which one may desire to communicate, is most readily stamped and taken” (Plato. The Republic, Book II, 377).

10Isocratis Orationes: ΠΡΟΣ ΔΗΜΟΝΙΚΟΝ, I.27-29.
and research were not considered good as such engagements tended to the slave’s work. Plinius Secundus also noted of the assumption that it is not required to read much; it is rather required to read diligently. These and other similar precepts have not gone unnoticed. In his excellent practical study, *Style*, a British classicist, F.L. Lucas, gave his judgment on and recommendation of what is required of education, which is to know the best.

Today, we have a similar aspiration in the name of creativity included in the 21st century skills, among which creativity features significantly. However, the background and foundations differ in the concept of a creative man. As has been mentioned, apart from the concept of a free man, classical authors questioned how much the subjects taught contribute to the development of the soul or intellect, which is gone today. We think we know more of intellect, body and economy, but the character of the soul has slipped from our thinking and philosophical bias has gone out of all reasoning.

In the question of the subjects taught, classical authors referred to their essential conception of education: education “should add up to what may be lacking from birth (nature)”13. In early education, imitation, listening to stories and observing lessons initially should feature at the start. Imitation should follow only the virtuous and the best examples. Plato demanded that stories for children had the required harmony. Hence was the requirement of the classics to select what works should be used in education and what should not, as first impressions were the most powerful. A child had to be directed to virtue from tender years and had to develop a desire to perfect oneself15. This principle excluded and forbade immoral pictures and stories.

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1Pliny. Fifty Letters of Pliny: Letter 26 (VII.9).
12“… what matters at school, at the University, and in after-life is not new interpretations of Shakespeare – they are usually false; not new theories of criticism – they are usually futile; but a knowledge of the best that has been said or written, and the power – I admit the limited extent to which this can be taught – speak and write” (F.L. Lucas. *Style*. – London: Cassell, 1955, 25-26).
13“For those who divide life into periods of seven years are not far wrong and we ought to keep to the division that nature makes. For all skill and education aim at filling the gaps that nature leaves” (Aristotle. *The Politics*, Book VII. xvii).
14See footnote 9, above. Cf.: “He (Theodorus, the tragic actor) never allowed any other actor, even quite an inferior one, to appear on the stage before him – because, he said, an audience always takes kindly to the first voice that meets their ears. The same thing is true of men’s relations both with each other and the things they encounter: we always delight more in what comes first” (Aristotle. *The Politics*, Book VII. xvii).
15“But if there is any possibility of persuading them, that to quarrel with one’s fellow is a sin of which no member of a state was ever guilty, such ought rather to be the language held to our children from the first, by old men and old women, and all elderly persons, and such is the strain in which our poets must be compelled to write. …/ …, we ought to esteem it of the greatest importance that the fictions which children first hear should be adapted in the most perfect manner to the promotions of virtue” (Plato. *The Republic*, Book II.378).
The argument was: “If bad speech is forbidden, so should be inappropriate views and performances”\(^{16}\).

The fights and wrangling of Gods even in Homer were not a becoming literature for the young. It took an adult man to learn of Gods’ escapades\(^{17}\).

Plato’s decision on poets was quite rigorous: Plato suggested that the representation of Gods had to follow certain rules: (1) it was required that the poets represented Gods as they are, whether in epic, lyric or tragedy, because “nothing that is good is hurtful”. Further reasoning led to the assumption, that, “being good, God couldn’t be the cause of everything and was not guilty of many things, as good was scarcer than evil”\(^{18}\). The reason of good is definitely God and the reasons of evil are to be sought elsewhere” (Plato. The Republic, II. 379). The second rule in the representation of Gods by the Poets stated that the Poets should not fantasise about Gods and scare the children. It was required not to treat Gods like magicians who change their shapes, “go about by night in the likeness of strangers from every land”, scare and “foster timidity in their children”. Gods do not change their shapes and do not deceive us either by word or action (Plato. The Republic, Book II. 381). Disobedient poets were not suitable as children’s literature and were to be “ousted from the state”. Plato suggested that poetry, even that of Homer, could be expunged. Such lines which blacken Hades and magnify horrors are “neither true nor beneficial to men who are intended to be warlike” (Plato. The Republic. Book III.387). Some praise, it was believed, would be more useful\(^{19}\).

“The upbringing which aims at gaining money, influence or other deceitful, senseless and wrong activity” was not “worthy of the name of education” (Plato, The Laws, I.643-644). Aristotle weighed in saying that it was least becoming to free people and people of magnanimous spirit to look

\(^{16}\) “The legislator ought to banish utterly from the state, as he would any other evil, all unseemly talk; for the unseemly talk lightly dropped results in conduct of a like kind. Especially, therefore, must it be kept away from youth: let them not hear or see anything of that kind” (Aristotle. The Politics, Book VII. xvii, 1336b3).

\(^{17}\) “And since we exclude all unseemly talk, we must also forbid gazing at debased paintings or stories. Let it therefore be a duty of the rulers to see that there shall be nothing at all, statue or painting, that is a representation of unseemly actions, except in the shrines of certain gods (Notably Dionysus) whose province is such that the law does actually permit scurrility. The law further allows men who have reached the appropriate age to pay honour to these gods on behalf of their wives, their children and themselves” (Aristotle. The Politics, Book VI, xvii).

\(^{18}\) “If that be so, then God, in as much as he is good, cannot be the cause of all things, according to the common doctrine. On the contrary, he is the author of only a small part of human affairs; of the larger part he is not the author: for our evil things far outnumber our good things: and the good things we must ascribe to no other than God, while we must seek elsewhere, and not in him, the causes of the evil things” (Plato. The Republic, Book II.379).

\(^{19}\) “These verses, and all that are like them, we shall entreat Homer and the other poets not to be angry if we erase, not because they are unpoetical, so much the less ought they to be recited in the hearing of boys and men, whom we require to be freemen, fearing slavery more than death” (Plato. The Republic, Book III.387).
for profit in everything. Plato specified further saying that “future expectations meant hope, the expectation of suffering bred fear and that of pleasure courage”. Reason ruled above all these and decided what was better and what was worse. Further, “reason, which is the common precept of the state”, becomes the law, in Plato’s understanding (Plato. The Laws, I.643-644). Referring to Pericles in Socrates’s name, Xenophontus thought that “laws is everything what has been decided by the collective meeting of the people and put down, and which determine what may be done and what may not” (Xenophontus. The Memories of Socrates, I.2). More specifically, Pericles was said to have claimed that “the law is what the government of the state decides and fixes in writing on what is obligatory” (Xenophontus, Ibid.). Classical authors aspired to beauty and moderation, sought law and order. This was important as they tended to base education, as mentioned earlier, and moral and immoral behaviour, on law. As we hear from the President of ATINER, the classical dicta of moderation, law and beauty are the living rules in Greece today. It is mainly because of that that this presentation has been prepared for this particular Conference, in Greece and I gratefully acknowledge the invitation.

As we understand today, we do not deny the rule of reason in state organization of education, its administration, curriculae and the establishment as well as in teaching, but trust in authority and therefore respect for reason are gone. We have many speakers, no authorities and no respect for authority, whatever their reason and intention. We no longer aspire to, absolutely, the best. There has even been a Guardian publication online in which, guided by a fixed premise, André Spicer (2019) argued that excellence and being outstanding are overrated and that being good enough, whether in schools, health service and in other spheres, is perfectly sufficient.

Classical authors have left a very definite description of the initial or primary education. Upbringing should be executed through fine arts and gymnastics, as they “train body and soul” (Plato. The Republic, Book III. 411). A man who manages both these subjects for the good of his soul may be considered to have a perfect achievement and to be an excellent creator of harmony. Concerning subjects, arithmetic and geometry were found very useful and were taught as obligatory to the persons “who are destined to take part in the weightiest affairs of state” (Plato The Republic, Book VII. 525ff), while liberal arts and gymnastics were equally fitting to men and women, however their physical strength could differ. (Plato. The Republic, Book III. 412).

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20. "... some useful things /.../ are often the means to learning yet further subjects. Similarly they must learn drawing, not for the sake of avoiding mistakes /.../ but rather because it teaches one to be observant of physical beauty. But to be constantly asking ‘What is the use of it?’ is unbecoming to those of broad vision (‘magnanimous’) and unworthy of free men” (Aristotle. The Politics, Book VIII.iii.1338a37).

21. "Then whosoever can best blend gymnastic with music and bring both to bear on the mind most judiciously, such a man we shall justly call perfect in music, and a master of true harmony, much rather than the artist who tunes the strings of the lyre” (Plato. The Republic, Book III. 412).
Alluding to the knowledge of the efficiency of the Sarmatian woman, Plato claimed that “men and women should be trained in equal measure” because “the state diminishes if men and women are separated in training” (Plato The Laws. XII / Dilyte, 1991,109-110) “No free man should learn any science like a slave” because “compulsory knowledge is weak”22. Education should cultivate reason which is to search further, “instead of trusting the senses, which provide nothing for certainty” (Plato. The Republic, Book VII. vii).

It was customary, wrote Aristotle, to teach grammar, gymnastics, music and drawing to young children. Aristotle considered music to be the beginning of everything (Aristotle. The Politics, Book VIII. ii) and the art which creates pleasant leisure. Plato argued similarly of music but criticized poetry and the poets quite rigorously. The age of schooling divided thus: up to 5 years of age, a child had to be taught at home. From 5 to 7 years, he had to observe lessons of the subjects he was to learn later. From 7 to 21, education was secondary and deficiencies of nature attended to, “For all skill and education aim at filling the gaps that nature leaves” (Aristotle, The Politics, Book VII, xvii). Alongside, the same authors posited that children should be taught through games, but only in tender age. Teenagers were not to have a leisurely life (Aristotle. The Politics, Book VIII.v, 1339a26). Later, Seneca (1991) hinted at life-long learning while emphasising that the young have to learn the most. Xenophonus characterized his friends and man who is worthy of respect: it is “he who knows what is required to know and can express it in words” (Xenphonous. Memories of Socrates, I.2). This dicta features in an inherited definition of good education to this day.

The subjects singled out by Plato (gymnastics, grammar, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy) and Aristotle (grammar, rhetoric and dialectic/logic, music and painting) and mentioned above developed later into septem artes liberales, which were studied by senior young men. Septem artes liberales later (5th-6th century AD) divided into trivium (grammar, rhetoric and dialectic) and quadrivium (music, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy), which were studied in Medieval universities (Zabulis, 1995a). The concept of liberal arts has been retained to this day and, with slight modifications, they have been in the programmes of some present-day higher schools, such as the Vilnius College at the end of the 20th century. The higher level of education in classical Greece was theology (Zabulis, 1995). Greece also developed the theory of rhetoric while minding that a well-speaking man always made a good impression.

22“Arithmetic, therefore, and geometry, … to pave the way for dialectic, must be taught our pupils in their childhood; - care being taken to convey instruction in such a shape as not to make it compulsory upon them to learn. /…/ Because, I replied, no trace of slavery ought to mix with the studies of the freeborn man. For the constrained performance of bodily labours does, it is true, exert no evil influence upon the body; but in the case of the mind, no study, pursued under compulsion, remains rooted in the memory” (Plato. The Republic, Book VII. 536).
In his dialogue, *Phaedrus*, Plato (1996) outlined requirements to a good speech which had to be like a human being, with head, body and limbs, which meant the beginning, development and end. A good speech had to be moderate in length and language. Referring to the opinion of the best orators of his time, such as Pericles, Thaesias, Gorgias, Trasymachos, Lysias and others, Plato put forward the opinion of Socrates that a speech had to be of a uniform composition, moderate in length and subtle, as it was a mixed use of language.

Classical antiquity developed and Aristotle wrote about three kinds of rhetoric: legal rhetoric, advisory or political rhetoric and rhetoric of display or ceremonial speeches which received the least attention (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Book I). The approach in legal speeches could be through the content of the case or through the law. The orator’s purpose changed accordingly: the orator could divulge, delight or move. The material in legal rhetoric had to be worked out in three stages: accumulation, presentation of the argument and oral presentation which included stylistic polish and presentation. Consequently, a speech had to have two-four parts (introduction, which could be cut, the material, the argument and conclusion) in Aristotle’s conception, which gradually became three parts (introduction, development and conclusion). In his work, *Rhetoric*, Aristotle focused considerably on the theory of proof. Keeping the orator in mind, Aristotle singled out artistic and common proof (pistes atechnoi and pistes etechnoi), while the success of persuasion depended on the speaker’s personal character, on the audience’s disposition and on persuasive arguments in the speech (Aristotle. *Rhetoric*, Book I. ii. 4-21). To create the condition of the audience’s disposition, the focus was kept on an introduction. In the development of a speech the focus turned to proof. The followers of Aristotle extended the two kinds of the proof defined by Aristotle, into ethical, emotional and logical proof (Zabulis, 1995a). Aristotle required that proof was based on three premises: the general opinion, opinion derived from evidence and that drawn from examples. He found two kind of examples, actual facts and examples devised by the speaker, which could be fictitious.

Plato, Aristotle and, later, Quintillianus emphasised the orator’s decency above all. Quintillianus made an especially strong point of orator’s decency as he believed that anything could be proven with the help of words (Zabulis, 1995a).

Rome had a similar initial education: primary where pupils learned writing, grammar, secondary and the orator’s level, which is sometimes compared with the present-day higher education (Dilyte, 1991). According to Plato, Aristotle and Quintillianus, the orator had to seek extensive knowledge, as the object of rhetoric was all fields of which a speech may be required. It was not only liberal arts and subjects such as diction, convincing presentation, the ability to use tropes and figures, but also geometry and philosophy that would educate the orator. Although the Romans took over much of the rhetorical heritage of classical Greece, Cicero was the
outstanding orator and author in Rome. Cicero rejected counter statements
in proof and singled out five parts of a speech: introduction (proemium),
narrative (narratio), position statements (proration), proof (probatio) and
rejection (refutatio). Aristotle mentioned repeatedly that he was speaking
about the content of a speech, while artistic presentation of a speech
mattered to Cicero, who introduced elocution, which meant a trained voice
and exemplary articulation, as a fifth part of a speech (Zabulis, 1995a).

Cicero mentioned the physic of a good orator and a possibility to
improve it by knowledge and training, yet warned that physical deficiencies
cannot be overcome (Cicero. De Oratore, Book I.25). Cicero was sensitive
to criticism of the audience and how recognition can be won through
training (De oratore, Book I.29). It was known to Cicero that all orators,
even the major, feel tremor before they make a speech in public and that
this is strongest in good orators. This was not to discourage young people
from studies of rhetoric, it was rather to show the ways. Cicero mentioned a
confident speaker as opposed to the fearful to say that it was not too much
confidence that was a virtue. If an orator could not say anything valuable to
give credit to his name and win the audience’s approval, he was dishonest
and even his nervous disposition in making a speech could not improve his
merit (De oratore, Book I.25).

Cicero wrote about the duty of an orator to speak convincingly, to
analyse his theme with respect to its credibility, of different modes of proof
in legal, advisory and ceremonial speeches and of five stages of of work on
a speech: the selection of a topic, its development depending on
circumstances and the argument, verbal expression and polish, committing
to memory and delivery (De oratore, Book I.31). He wrote specifically of
the selection of words and composition, rhythm and metre in presentation,
and the use of voice (Book I.33).

In Book II of De oratore (Cicero In: Dilyte, 1991), Cicero analysed how
legal speeches should be worked out depending on whether the question was
general or contentious, whether the question could be treated as general or
particular. Cicero acknowledge Greek orators and philosophers, especially
Socrates and Aristotle (De oratore, Book II.38). He emphasized that effort
was essential in the training of an oratore. Science could only orientate the
person in training, while effort and virtue were the most important along
with an insight into the richness of philosophers’ language, which they
developed with resort to their knowledge and verbal wealth bypassing
concrete rules (De oratore, Book II. 35). This shows one extra time that
virtue, talent and decency were prized above all by classical authors, which
indicates the role of work as the essence of studies.

As is obvious to the informed, the subjects in the education of children
and the composition of a speech following the rules of rhetoric of classical
Greece and Rome have been in the programmes of virtually all schools and
universities of Western tradition to this day. Kinds of rhetoric, oratory,
where it still exists, the composition of a speech and, further, the
composition of any essay have been taught following the principles defined
by the classical authors and philosophers mentioned above. The principles
are valuable and subsequent communication by those who master the art is
excellent in whatever genre of speech.

In 1995, concluding his course on aesthetics of classical antiquity, an
experienced classical professor in the University of Vilnius, evaluated the
education of classical antiquity by saying the following: “There is
everything here, you see. It is possible to take the classical model of
education and apply it in schools.” Although the person held a government
post and was in the position to move toward an application of the classical
model of education in present-day schools, he never made a step in that
direction. What has been said indicates why: it is not only that the content
has changed considerably in education. It is also, and most importantly, the
founding principles, especially, morality and, with it, the culture. The
physical potential of man has also changed, as well as his experience, and
with it, the very concepts. What God, the soul, morality and moderation
mean to a Greek, a classical scholar and to a common man in Eastern
Europe today, are very different things. A return to classical ideas, which
can well be called ideals, may take a long way or never happen. However, it
is known how education and, especially, higher education evolved in the last
thirty years, following the restoration of democracy and the regaining of
state independence in small East European countries.

The education that was inherited from the Soviet rule in Eastern Europe
was not really broken. It had had a system, was regulated by the state and
had qualified professors and lecturers. If regulation, called for by Aristotle
in his day, was at times extreme in Eastern Europe in the twentieth century,
it ensured stability and carried along a number of positive prescriptions.
The liberation of the 1990s brought about changes in all spheres of life.
Changes in education were urged most ardently by the narrow-minded and
politically biased. And so, education was being reformed. Ignoring
academic input and experience, systemic stability and academic
achievements, reforms started, went on and have not yet been finished.
Withholding myself from further complaints and minding Plato’s concept of
the dangers of changes in the state, a reference to The Laws by Plato (Plato.
The Laws, IV-VI // Dilyte, 1991, 101-104) is required. In the law in
question, an Athenian discusses the uses of gymnastics for the young and
continues with the question of appeal of the unusual over the usual (Plato
The Laws, VII).

The Athenian insists that it is important that the speaker and the listener
should avoid strange and unusual things. This point takes him to the
question of the state. The argument is this: it is not known in any state that
the manner of games would affect the issue of laws or determine the
soundness of laws in the state. A decision of the state permitting the same
people to engage in the same games preserves the stability of established
laws. Yet if the same games are being altered and innovated by various
changes because of the inclination of the young to despise the same,
whether it is their bodies, dress, general opinion of the beautiful and the
ugly, and to value that who is given to permanent changes, to anything new
and unusual, “we would be right in assuming that nothing can be more
perilous than this to the state. Such processes change delicately the habits of
the young toward despising the past and to adding value novelty. There is
no greater peril to the state than this like talk and thought.” (Plato. The
Laws. VI). Plato’s Athenian elaborates further: “If we attune the ear more
sensitively to one another, we shall be aware that, except for changes in evil
issues, all such changes are very dangerous” (Plato. The Laws, VII, p.105).
Skipping Athenian’s deliberation on changes of the seasons, bodies,
thinking habits and of the soul, it is relevant to focus on Plato’s direct
statement: “Laws under which people were educated for a long time have
become immovable because of some godly sight and nobody heard of them
being altered. Every soul respects laws and fears damaging anything in them
of what was formerly fixed.” (The Laws, VII, p.105). Plato’s Athenian
further assumes that changes in games initiated by the young are not serious
nor vicious entertainments in themselves. That is why the young are not
forbidden their innovations. Yet, any oversight of a possibility that, engaged
in the new games, the young will grow different than the children of the
previous generation, may lead to unwanted states. They will next seek a
different life, different laws and different customs. Unlike some superficial
changes, this will endanger the customs, their praise and blame will change
quickly and the greatest caution will be required in this.

Whether influenced by their inclination to changes or by permanent
changes in the state, the young in small new democracies in Eastern Europe
have been becoming more and more unmanageable in schools. A practical
piece of advice offers itself in the context of the present deliberation. First,
the ugly and damaging sights and texts, against which ancient Greeks
emphatically warned, have so polluted the space of the young through
television, mass media and the internet that they have lost all emotive-
intellectual balance, to say nothing of their sense of beauty. Second, schools
no longer select works of literature, except the established classics, with
diligence and dedication for the young to read, probably because of the
avalanche of published works and certainly because teachers are so
overstrained and exhausted that they do not mind the processes. Selection
was yet practiced by the postwar generation of teachers and as democratic
liberties spread, so the dedication declined. A very modern observation in
this context would be that one of the reasons of the declining discipline in
schools is learning without rules, which is most obvious in language
learning. The idea would be that learning language with rules would teach
the young discipline, accuracy and culture, while dismissing language rules
leads to the opposite of these, to disobedience, aggression and impudence
(Drazdauskiene, 2019). An attempt to alter the described conditions in
school would combine at least two classical principles, those of selection
and discipline, if we bear in mind Aristotle’s recommendation that teenagers
“should not lead an idle life” and that school should preserve discipline.
The first idea in this presentation to be put forward is to curb changes in education. If change is harmful to the state, change is perilous in education. Change and change in education means harm, harm and harm, especially when reforms last indefinitely long. And they do in some countries in Eastern Europe.

The second idea would concern the subjects. This talk is of the renewal of education, not innovation. The word ‘renewal’ has been borrowed from the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal (https://www.jamesmartincenter). Thinking of the greatest achievers from the generation of the 1920s-1930s in statesmanship, oratory and education, remembering the precepts of classical antiquity to the useful subjects for the young (gymnastics, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, by Plato; gymnastics, reading and writing, dialectic, music and drawing by Aristotle) (Aristotle. The Politics, VIII. iii), it is relevant to remember the piece of advice that “it is required to teach not only the useful subjects, but also such subjects which reveal other subjects”. Here belongs drawing, which, to Aristotle, could teach not only orientation among things but also give ideas of the theory of beauty. Music was very special to Aristotle, “the beginning of everything”, as, apart from laborious engagement in its performance, music was known to give pleasure and to teach the delight of leisure (Aristotle. The Politics, Book VIII. v).

As education in oratory in Greece and later, in Rome, could have been compared to present-day higher education, it may be remembered that orators had to seek the widest possible knowledge because the topics of speeches are unlimited, including philosophy, specifically, dialectic, the use of tropes and figures and the training of the voice. It is known that these subjects were in the curricular of EFL and literature in the University of Vilnius in the 1960s-1970s. Most of them have remained to the present-day, yet diminished. Seeking renewal in the field, an idea would be to retain these subjects in the study of the English language, while reviving the teaching of style, which was lost with the success of pragmatics and discourse studies. Style studies have been retained in major Universities and major authors have retained the precepts of classical rhetoric in their books (cf: Corbett, Connors, 1999; Verdonk, 2002; Davidson, 1967). Even the newest textbooks of English and French today include the teaching of language through poems and songs, with other accents on culture and arts. That is reminiscent of the classical selection of subjects. A renewal would also require the focus on history and philosophy in literature studies. A third idea would concern memory-based learning.

A turn to memory-based learning borrowed from classical antiquity might help resurrect at least some of the basic principles and dicta, which might influence the final achievement.

In addition to what has been mentioned as possessed by higher education, may be applicable today and what exists in an impoverished form in higher education, there are more definite ideas to be drawn from classical antiquity. If present-day education can at all be compared to education in
classical antiquity, we may seek ideas of its renewal in Plato’s dialogue
Phaedrus (1996). Among such themes as the soul and kinds of souls, poetic
madness (human madness and godly madness), ethic, erotic and logos, and
criteria of a good speech, in this dialogue, Plato has Socrates deliberating on
the invention of script by the Egyptians. When addressing the Egyptian ruler
Tamus, the inventor of numbers, geometry, astronomy, the game of
draughts and the dice as well as script, claimed that “writing will make the
Egyptians wiser and of better memory, as script was a medicine for wisdom
and memory” (Plato. Faidras, 274d-275b). Socrates had a very straight and
plain observation on this. In the words of the ruler of Egypt, Socrates
replied: “An inventor of script, you have shown favour to the tools. You
have claimed the opposite of their power. The souls of those who learn the
script will gain forgetfulness because nobody will cater for memory. They
will call to memory what the script prompts, exteriorly, rather than
interiorly, from themselves. You have invented a reminder rather than a
medicine for memory and put forward an opinion rather than truth to your
pupils” (Plato, Faidras, 274d-275b).

This particular argument suits the 21st century better than an inventory
of any skills. It is a great loss that present-day schooling and higher
education have veered away from a resort to memory. Whatever the services
of the computer, it has done a major disservice to memory and to the
classical tradition in education. The analogy between Socrates’s story in
Plato’s Phaedrus of the uses of script and the function of the computer is
too obvious. The loss in schools is as distinct. Students cannot overview
books and papers they suppose they had read, in their graduation papers.
They simply transpose fragments of text from relevant literature to their
own papers. In answer to my question, whether he read the book I had lent
him, one student at the University of Vilnius in the 1980s responded saying,
“I have Xeroxed, i.e. photocopied, it”. I have not met many young people
for a long time who would be excited about the books they are supposed to
be reading, excited to discuss the ideas, to hear opinions and evaluations, to
argue about them, outside university. Without a further complaint, I can say
with confidence that the classical concept of learning as the process “to
acquire knowledge of or skill in something through study of experience or
by being taught; to commit to memory” (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 811)
has gone out of fashion. Some dictionaries omit the sense of committing to
memory from the definition of this concept altogether. There are, therefore,
changes in the quality of knowledge and in the knowledge that earlier
generations had had. The retiring postwar generation of teachers is the last
one to have the sense of knowledge as power and knowledge as pleasure.
What a pilot could do from memory with no technology assisting him in the
1940s, a language and literature student today can never do an analogous
task with resort only to his memory. Whatever the grievances of the
humanities, learning has gone out of fashion and, with it, the learned. Some
grievances may be earned. Authority and the trust of authority have been
damaged on two sides: on the side of society where “everyone knows
everything” and on the side of personal deterioration in achievement in learning.

A late classical author, Seneca (1996), to remember, questioned the virtues of the teaching of liberal arts and found none. Seneca stated that liberal arts do not teach morality or purity of the soul by themselves. The manner of learning in the humanities today only demonstrates that liberal arts, altered today, yet integrated in the education system, did not preclude the degradation. Only those in present-day humanities who achieve the highest proficiency esteem the subjects and the people. So, a turn to memory-based learning might be prospective and perhaps productive, if the liberal youth of new democracies were attuned not only to liberties but also to responsibilities so that discipline in schools were not treated as a violation of human rights and a task to learn as psychological pressure. In higher education, a salvation from change, the renewal of several subject mentioned above and at least some emphasis on memory-based learning could improve the much-deplored state of the humanities today.

References

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