

## Plato's Wiki: The Possibility of Digital Dialectic

**Mark Noe, Eloisa Moreno, Regina Welsh, Joy Tanner, Matthew Nolan, Tomas Guerrero, Felicia Perez, Michelle Algewari, Daniel Rodriguez, Jennifer Garcia, Michelle Munoz, Raquel Mata, and Jose Salinas**

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Nothing brings home C. P. Snow's (1961) accusation that "[i]ntellectuals, in particular literary intellectuals, are natural Luddites" (p. 23) more than a discussion among faculty about digital delivery of instruction at the graduate level. In a recent editorial in the *New York Times*, a professor of English at the University of Virginia, Mark Edmunson (2012), complained that an unsurmountable divide exists between instruction delivered in the physical classroom and instruction delivered digitally. The digital environment, he insisted, can produce only "a monologue and not a real dialogue" and "can never have the immediacy of contact that the teacher on the scene can." Real education, for Edmunson, is only possible in "a collaboration between teacher and students," which cannot be duplicated digitally.

The divide Edmunson perceives between digital and face-to-face instruction is itself based on another divide, that between *information* and *knowledge*, a binary that has troubled education since Plato (2013a) distinguished *knack* (*technê*) from *art* (*arête*), and Freire (2002) the banking model from the problem-posing model of education. Edith Ackermann (2004) parsed this binary further. For her, the first is a "a commodity to be transmitted—delivered at one end, encoded, retained, and re-applied at the other." The second is "an experience to be actively built, both individually and collectively" (p. 15).<sup>1</sup>

When the information/knowledge divide is combined with the digital divide, digital delivery is often seen as sufficient at best for conveying factual, commoditized information; digital delivery cannot duplicate the dialectic that takes place when a group of graduate students—under the mentorship of a knowledgeable professor, of course—analyze a text or concept or theory face to face. Technology, or rather the increased incursion of technology into the classroom, has thus created another divide within the humanities, between those who would experiment with the possibilities technology offers and those who would insist that the traditional values of the humanities, particularly students' ability to think critically, depend on traditional pedagogies.

I admit, I have to agree with Edmunson that the result will be "sterile and abstract" whenever digital delivery means "simply repackaging content designed for traditional face-to-face environments" (Hu & Johnston, 2012, p. 493). If, however, digital delivery is with us to stay, I argue that we need to experiment with technology, to find the digital dialectics those technologies don't simply allow, but encourage. These dialectics will neither duplicate nor replace face-to-face dialectic, but will provide new, and I will argue complementary, means for students to critically engage complex texts, their instructors, and each other.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I will describe a semester-long experiment in digital dialectic that uses one such technology: a community, or class, wiki. I encouraged students to contribute to one such wiki in a hybrid graduate seminar in the History of Rhetoric. I will argue that like language itself, a wiki is not a transparent medium of exchange, but one that shapes the

conversation, not simply because it is language use, but because it is a specific form of language use. The synergy between the wiki as a dialectic method and Plato's dialectic method is unmistakable, not simply because of Plato's own Luddite opposition to the written word, but because Plato and the wiki encourage similar questions about language, questions that often don't get asked in the face-to-face classroom. In this article, I will identify three questions that have different answers in Plato, in the classroom, and in the wiki:

- Who speaks?
- Who has the authority to speak?
- What is knowledge?

The answers to these questions reveal whether a wiki can only imitate classroom discussion, or whether the possibility exists for real digital dialectic. I argue that not only is a digital dialectic possible with a wiki, but that rather than simply convey information, wikis have the potential to provide new avenues and perhaps new models for critical thinking that is the end goal of dialectic.

Before I can talk about the wiki as dialectic, I first need to distinguish between dialectical and other uses of this technology. Though additional uses may eventually be found, at this point wikis seem to be used as a platform for shared work on three levels: a simple repository of information, cooperative learning, and collaborative learning

Wikipedia, which is most commonly associated with the term "wiki," is an example of the first. As with traditional encyclopedias, Wikipedia is concerned with collecting information that can clearly and unequivocally be identified as factual. The assumption about Wikipedia is that individuals share what they already know rather than learn through their contributions. Jianwei Zhang (2009), for instance, sees Wikipedia as a repository of shared information, but "relatively vague and weak in advancing community knowledge." In this model, the wiki is simply a "social bibliography" (p. 275), a digital version of the annotated bibliography on three-by-five cards.

The second level can be seen when online wikis in systems such as Blackboard and Google Cloud are used in hybrid classes to facilitate cooperative learning, which Beth Brunk and Shawn Miller (2007) said "often takes the form of 'cumulative talk,' where knowledge is *shared rather than constructed*" (p. 4). Team members download work they have completed independently for review, revision, and integration by the team prior to submission or presentation of a final group project. Here, the cumulative learning of the group is shared and possibly refined on the wiki, but most interaction, and possible dialectic, takes place prior to uploading.

The next level, collaborative learning, is where "knowledge is socially constructed through meaningful conversations between students" (Brunk & Miller, 2007, pp. 4-5). In collaborative learning, a wiki is a space where students construct, rather than collect, knowledge by using the wiki as they might a shared journal.

In the graduate class on the history of rhetoric, "The Most Maligned Art: Why We Hate Rhetoric and Distrust Rhetoricians," students read a wide range of texts that critique rhetoric in the Kantian sense, that is, by testing rhetoric as a discipline against its own standards, particularly as those standards have changed over the 2,400 some-odd years of rhetorical history. In this hybrid course, which met weekly, students contributed to the class wiki, both

before and after reading the texts, and to class discussion in response to a fairly simple set of instructions:

We will use this wiki to explore questions we might have about rhetoric, the rhetorical tradition, its critics and defenders. Every week from now until the end of the semester, each of you should contribute to this wiki in some way. You are welcome to make comments, but you must also add something to the wiki page itself. You may either:

Add new material to the content.

Add a reference with commentary on its usefulness to us.

Rewrite or revise something that has already been written.

Add a sidebar or other peripheral information.

Or, anything else you can think of that will contribute to our discussion.

Think of this Wiki as the ultimate form of DIALECTIC, not so much dialogue as communal monologue. Let's have some fun and see how it works.

Students could write, respond to, rewrite, and overwrite each other. They could continue class discussions on the wiki; they could write their thoughts prior to class discussion; they could explore the thoughts of others and build on those thoughts, or break them apart. My task was simple: I made occasional contributions, read the wiki weekly, and used comments on it as the starting point for class discussions.

Though the use of wikis for cooperative learning has been well established, my goal was to see if wikis could be used for collaborative learning, using dialectic as the test of collaboration at the graduate level. Though some would argue, as Mark Edmunson has, that dialectic depends on face-to-face interaction, I argue that dialectic depends on how we answer the three questions: Who speaks? Who has the authority to speak? What is knowledge? To explore the possibility of a digital dialectic, I turn to these questions and ask them in the contexts of Plato, the face-to-face classroom, and the wiki.

### **Who Speaks?**

In Plato, *who speaks* is emphasized by the form itself, Socratic Dialogue. Socrates tells everyone who will listen of his distrust of monologue in *Gorgias*, where he insists that the give-and-take of dialectic, asking questions and getting answers, is the only way to come to truth. Clearly identifying who speaks is critical in the Socratic Dialogues, where, with the exception of the Athenian Stranger in *The Laws*, each speaker is identified by name. In *Gorgias*, Socrates assures everyone present that he is delighted to have Callicles as his interlocutor; as a man of character, Callicles will not agree for the sake of civility but will test

Socrates. Socrates's insistence that Callicles speak his mind and never waver emphasizes that the character of who speaks, the ethos, the polis, the ancestry, even the accent, matters.

In *Phaedrus*, Plato's (2013a) insistence that dialogue is necessary to dialectic is emphasized even more in his condemnation of writing. In that dialogue, when Socrates compares writing to a painting in which the persons depicted may appear lifelike, and complains that "the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence," his complaint is that the give-and-take of dialectic is absent. As Derrida (1980) put it, for Plato "the cadaverous rigidity of writing" (p. 79) creates an "incompatibility between the written and the true" (p. 68).

Yet we are left with this paradox: Callicles's words, indeed Socrates's, come to us mediated by the all-but-invisible Plato—in writing. We are never sure who is actually speaking, an irony that has led more than one scholar before Derrida to look for new meanings, including Richard Weaver (2001) in his rewriting of *Phaedrus* as a dialogue no longer about the "lover" and "non-lover" but about rhetoric, comparing "a neuter form of speech" and "the kind which is ever getting us aroused over things and provoking an expense of the spirit" (p. 1362).

Our concern is that the question "Who speaks?" is not as clear in the Socratic Dialogues as we might expect—or as we are led to believe by the structure of the dialogues. We do not know if the words we read are Socrates's or Plato's, or Socrates's mediated by Plato or, given Plato's tendency to turn his ironic eye even on his master, mocked by Plato.<sup>3</sup>

In the face-to-face classroom, the tension created by the question "Who speaks?" is evident in the physical layout of the room. One need simply walk down the hallway in any English Department from nine to twelve, when every classroom is full, to take note of *who speaks* in those classrooms. Some rooms have the desks lined up in neat rows facing a lectern or, more commonly today, a screen showing a PowerPoint slide; other rooms have the desks arranged in a circle; others have the desks arranged in clusters of four or five. These patterns mark the physical boundaries of who speaks in those classrooms as well as the continued uncertainty about the decentered classroom, that is, the classroom in which the instructor becomes one of those who speaks, rather than *the one who speaks*. It is easy to forget that decentering, though common in both composition and graduate classrooms where dialectic is esteemed, is far from a common practice and has its critics, particularly when it is defined in the negative simply as "not-lecturing" (Segal, 1996, p. 174).

In one respect, the wiki can be seen as the next step in decentering, moving those desks from the virtual to the digital. As early as 1992, when chatrooms were as exotic to most instructors as wikis are today, Lester Faigley wrote that "communication is more equitable and less inhibited when such factors as appearance, paralinguistic behavior, and the gaze of others is removed in written electronic conferences" (p. 182). He argued that chatrooms democratized the classroom by diminishing the role of the instructor and equalizing the role of fellow students, mitigating the tendency for some students to dominate the class discussion because they are more verbally adept. In other words, chatrooms opened up a space for those who wished to speak.

Yet the wiki, at least the dialectic wiki, forces us to examine who speaks as it denies us clear markers for the speaker or even which words come from different speakers. This absence of clearly marked text can be disconcerting for those of us immersed in the academic project. According to Derrida (1980), "juridical norms," such as "a title, an author, a publisher" (p. 72), clearly "identify and classify" (p. 66) a text and are markers of genre. Many

of these norms that mark a text as *academic* function to identify who speaks: quotation marks, elaborate citation conventions, intertextual identifiers that precede and follow each quotation, even publication dates, editions, and copyright notices. Perhaps the absence of these markers is why so many of us are uncomfortable with Wikipedia. We cannot identify who speaks. We are as insistent as Plato. Only text that has a speaker behind it has the ethos required of academic discourse.

What does it mean when “Who speaks?” not only does not have a clear answer but is a question that makes no sense to ask? When who speaks no longer matters, the possibility for Aristotelian argument as “the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle, 1991, I.2.1) is no longer relevant. Instead of argument, various perspectives are overlaid with other perspectives, and dialogue becomes exploration through revision as participants respond to the words on the screen as both reader *and* writer, even reader/writer, rather than as a reader to the writer or writer to the reader, each as an identifiable *other*. Instead of disagreeing with each other, participants rewrite each other, finding spaces between stances that could be expanded further in the wiki. There is a distinct difference between the dialectic in the wiki and dialectic as conceived by Plato. Rather than question and answer, with distinct questioner and responder, there is in the wiki simply exploration, as in the brief excerpt below:

In one of our first class sessions, Eloisa asked why we were stuck here [reading classical texts]? Why have we not progressed? Yet, Eloisa found herself moved to tears by Plato's words on love. And I think I know why. It wasn't until I was reading Quintilian that I realized that these ancient texts *Phaedrus*, *Rhetoric*, and *The Institutes of Oratory*—read like scripture; they invoke some of the deepest emotions as they either remind us, instruct us, or imbue in us, or interpret for us human nature and virtue.

One of the students, Eloisa, is mentioned by name. The words “Why have we not progressed?” came from Eloisa’s mouth during class discussion the week prior. Yet, in a moment that both is and is not Bakhtinian heteroglossia (1981, p. 263), I have no idea who quoted her, nor who wrote the sentence that follows: “Yet, I think I know why . . . .” This sentence wasn’t written until weeks later, after we had moved from the Greek to the Roman rhetoricians. At least three voices are engaged with each other in this brief passage. Though I know who one of those voices is because another student identified her, the question of “Who speaks?” became less and less significant as the wiki grew.<sup>4</sup>

### **Who Has the Authority to Speak?**

In Plato, the paradox is not simply that the dialogue is actually monologue, but what that means for the authority to speak—a paradox that caused Jasper Neel (1988) to write of the man behind the curtain, Plato, that he “would have us believe that no one is in control, that it is a disinterested movement toward truth set in operation and kept in motion by the power of dialectic as exercised by the superior philosopher, Socrates” (p. 14).

Even here, though, there is confusion about where authority rests. At various moments in Neel’s critique, authority is sometimes seen as Plato and at other times Socrates. There may be multiple voices in the dialogues, but authority rests in a single, identifiable individual who has a recognizable body of work. Neel went on to argue that Plato’s goal is to

become the single authority of Western thought, to be the only one with the authority to speak, the only voice, and that “[a]fter Plato, there will be nothing but continuing repetitions of Plato” (p. 7).

In the classroom, authority is vested in the instructor, not only through the physical layout of the classroom, but through such semi-transparent apparatuses as the syllabus, assignments, assessment, and class policies. These structures fit Michel de Certeau’s distinction between “strategies” and “tactics” in a postmodern environment. According to Certeau, “strategies [are] used by institutions and power structures and tactics [are] used by modern subjects in their everyday lives. The tactics are the ways in which individuals negotiate strategies that were set for them” (as cited in Manovich, 2009, p. 322). Lev Manovich (2009) gave the example of “a city’s layout,” where “signage, driving and parking rules, and official maps are strategies created by the government and corporations. The ways an individual moves through the city—taking shortcuts, wandering aimlessly, navigating through favorite routes—are tactics” (p. 322).

In much the same way, students often use classroom discussion to their own purposes, whether to impress the instructor for class participation points, to advocate an outside agenda, or actually to seek understanding of the topic at hand. Yet, regardless of how much the instructor democratizes the classroom, the instructor designs the strategies that students will operate within. Those strategies might be the limited strategies of question and answer following a lecture, open discussion, or group work, each of which corresponds to the physical layout of the classroom. But the authority, that is, the ability to open or close discussion, remains with the instructor.

Manovich (2009) argued that the expansion of tactics in digital environments and social media is a move toward democratization when “products are explicitly designed to be customized by users” (p. 323). Though there is a parallel movement in decentered and digital classrooms, democratization is still dependent on the pedagogical theories of the instructor. At question is whether the digital environment in and of itself will result in democratization, and more importantly, if democratization will result in more equitable authority to speak. For instance, in the chatroom, as Lester Faigley (1992) argued, the voice of the instructor is diminished. Yet authority as a function of voice remains; it is simply shifted. The authority bestowed by “paralinguistic behavior” (p. 182), the authority of those with heightened social skills and verbal expertise, is replaced by technical expertise. Students are often just as likely to be intimidated in a chatroom, but now because they do not type as quickly or spell as accurately. The old bugaboo of “grammar” suddenly enters classroom discussion, and authority tends to reside with those individuals who already possess textual rather than verbal dexterity.

Thus, in the wiki, even as digital structures open *who speaks* wider, the authority to speak, though redistributed by the instructor, in a very real sense continues to reside with the instructor. This is an irony I try to keep utmost in my mind. By redistributing *who speaks* I remind myself I have not equalized the authority to speak, but simply redistributed it. To ignore that relationship of power inherent in any language use, to attempt to make it anything other than what it is, is to try to create a utopian space that cannot be, and as such, simply disguises power.

Even so, when the collaboratively written wiki dissolves the very idea of who speaks—something I found disconcerting the first time I joined students in the wiki—it quickly redistributes authority from individual speakers (even the instructor) *to the words*

on the screen. I discovered how authority is dissolved along with identifiers for who speaks when, like any dutiful instructor, I started the discussion off with a question designed to engage students with me, with the text, and with each other. I fully expected to have little difficulty distinguishing between student contributions to the wiki and my own and that there would be something totally transparent in terms of style, insight, and theoretical sophistication. I would be able to recognize my words alongside my students. I would ask questions and they would dutifully answer those questions, engaging each other and then looking to me for confirmation (in much the same way his interlocutors look to Socrates in the dialogues). This is the model of dialogue that is all too often the experience in the decentered classroom. Who speaks is diffused, but there is still a center point around which dialogue circulates. There is still a voice that, once it speaks, shuts off discourse and devolves dialectic into didactic.

My expectations, along with my ego, were swiftly deflated. As soon as students started writing, I completely lost track of when I spoke and when they did. Occasionally, a student with a unique perspective—one ardent feminist and one just as ardent classicist—would enter the wiki, and I would see the splash and the ripple as their words dispersed the words already on the screen in concentric circles. I could recognize their unique voices. And then I would watch as those ripples were broken on the waves of other voices. Soon, anything that might have approached a unique, or indeed authoritative, voice was simply pulled along in the flow of discourse.

We might at this point question whether the text of the wiki can rightly be called a dialogue, since individual voice was lost, which has been at the center of critiques of Plato's dialogue-cum-monologue. In contrast to Plato, as participants in the wiki become less certain of who speaks, that uncertainty is neither ironic nor troublesome. For with the dissolution of the speaker comes the dissolution of the authority to speak. When students could no longer identify my voice, their classmates' voices, or their own voices when their unique contributions to the discussion were revised, overwritten, and repurposed as soon as they appeared, no individual had more authority than another.

Notice how the brief passage below initially follows standard citation practices and borrows authority from those practices with clear markers of who speaks:

According to "Augustine and the 'Chair of Lies': Rhetoric in *The Confessions*," there are two kinds of love, "the love of God (*caritas*) and the love of self (*cupiditas*)." When one loves God, then all is right with the world because your love is ordered, you become dependent on confessing your love to God and allow God to guide you on a boat through calm waters, but if you profess your love to yourself and the worldly things around you, you are inevitably going to flow through a river that may be calm at times, but will eventually go through smashing rapids and fall down a luxurious water fall. He calls this centered-love which "leads to vanity (*vanitas*)."

As often happens in academic writing, the authority of a citation is simply borrowed and often lent to another voice. In the passage above, a student took up the thread, tying it to Plato's distinction between the lover and the non-lover. The initial thread is picked up below by another writer, who plays with Augustine's imagery:

No wonder the "lover" in Phaedrus is able to manipulate, we want what is going to make us feel good, but ultimately it comes at a price. The waters of our flowing rivers (used in Augustine) will never be calm as long as we depend on worldly lusts (dare I say) to fill our centered-selves; with that notion, even the "non-lover" has something to gain in the world and is not considered to be a love of God. The "non-lover" is also a "neighbor" and even if we are bringing the "common good" to them, we are still "bringing the common good under its own power, arrogantly looking to domination; one subject to God, the other rivaling him."

The thread is then picked up by a writer who ties the thread back to democracy and the social contract:

Augustine himself is offering these writings in defense of rhetoric because he too recognizes like Plato that rhetoric is more than a simple necessary evil; how we address one another is rooted in our spiritual desires as well as our physical desires. One without the other is like existing without living or living without being aware of what it means to exist beyond work-a-day dictated "reality." Rhetoric as passionate appeal to the soul by means of analogies connecting to our lived experiences has the power to move people to act. What then becomes problematic is when the motive/s behind these collective actions are not wholly disclosed to the demos. And in a democracy, this is the price we pay as cosigners of the social contract.

This thread demonstrates the difference between Platonic dialectic, punctuated by questions designed to challenge interlocutors, and wiki dialectic, in which threads are dropped and picked up by other voices, designed to explore connections among ideas. At question, however, isn't whether technology such as the wiki can duplicate the classroom discussion, but whether it can make room for questions and answers in different ways and thus make a space for dialectic in online classes and provide deeper learning in hybrid classes.

### **What Is Knowledge?**

Our final question, "What is knowledge?", is connected to *who speaks* as well as *who has the authority to speak* in ways that are sidestepped in Plato and in the classroom.

To discover Plato's concept of knowledge, we need look no further than his Allegory of the Cave. In this mind game, he tells us that men are chained in a cave from birth so that they can see only one wall. Behind their backs, puppets are paraded in front of a fire, casting distorted shadows of men and of animals; the chained men are convinced that those shadows are reality. One man, the philosopher, breaks his chains and leaves the illusions of the cave. He walks into the light of the sun and meets the real men the puppet parade imitated. Eventually, he returns to the cave to instruct those who are deluded by the shadow puppets, contrasting his pure knowledge with their ignorant belief in the reality portrayed by the puppets and the fire. These imitations have the appearance of the true, but mislead because they actually distort the true. Critical to Plato's concept of knowledge is that the philosopher does not lead those in the cave out into the real world but attempts to convince them through dialectic that they do not know.



The very concept of *he who knows* questions whether Plato's method is dialectic, or itself an imitation of dialectic. The purpose of dialectic, which Socrates states clearly in *The Apology*, is to expose how ignorant those who think they know actually are—for their own good. Though this method has questions, it has no answers. For whatever Socrates's interlocutors say, it is not knowledge. The asker already knows the answers. Thus, we have only the appearance of dialectic, if by dialectic we mean a dialogue that has the potential to create new knowledge, Brunk and Miller's knowledge that is socially constructed. In Plato, knowledge is not created, it is revealed.

If we were simply comparing Plato's philosophy with the wiki, this might be an interesting theoretical enterprise, but no more. In itself, it would simply be the appearance of theory, since it would not be theory that leads to practice. More important to our task is that Plato's philosophy is at its core a theory of education. Like every theory of education from Cicero to Kant to Dewey, his goal is to "improve the character of the citizens" (Plato, 2013b). Those familiar with Freire might recognize, however, that his theory, or any theory that is based on the teacher as the sole knower, is simply a version of the "banking model" (Freire, 2002, p. 259).

In the face-to-face classroom, knowledge can be difficult to pin down, since it also resides in a theory of education that might often be as individual as the instructor. Otherwise, knowledge is, in fact, whatever the instructor says knowledge is. Our visual metaphor for decentered authority, the placement of desks, only goes so far. Knowledge might rest in received wisdom, as it often is in lectures and most undergraduate textbooks; in class discussion, knowledge might depend on, but not solely rest in, the authority of the professor.

Yet we cannot diminish the value of class discussion, particularly at the graduate level. In the graduate classroom, discussion is valued precisely because *who speaks* and *the authority to speak* have been diffused, if not completely dissolved. In this model, knowledge is now shared as students are encouraged to challenge texts, each other, and the instructor. Class discussion in this model leads to critical, analytical, and evaluative thinking as graduate students feel the freedom to challenge texts they still see as receptacles of the commonplaces of the field, often a heady perfume. Encouraging students to challenge such received knowledge has long been the purpose and value of discussion in graduate classes.

The main question of this essay is whether conducting a discussion via wiki is not simply equally dialectic, but sufficiently dialogic that it would enrich face-to-face discussion already going on in a hybrid course, and even more significantly, provide a stand-alone dialectic in an online course. Critics of digital instruction insist that digital dialogue is essentially different from face-to-face dialogue, and that difference marks deficiency. I would like to embrace that difference for a moment and identify one difference in particular that gives the wiki dialectical potential that the face-to face-classroom lacks. When a wiki dissolves *who speaks* into the flow of dialogue and erases the *authority to speak* by transforming voices into words on the page, the wiki delays closure.

This tendency to resist closure is central to the wiki's value as dialectic. Closure is that point when those in Burke's Parlor have decided they have figured it out. They can now leave; the need for dialogue is over. When we have come to a conclusion, summarized our idea, reached a deduction at the end of our premises, made a decision, when, as Plato's *man who knows* explains it so his listeners know as well, we have closed off dialectic—and learning.<sup>5</sup>

In the classroom, the most common form of closure comes from the voice of the professor. Such statements as "To summarize . . ." or "Let's go on to . . ." move all speakers in

a common direction that effectively closes off dialogue. These strategies, useful in classroom discussion where time is limited, have no place in a wiki, with its potential to return to words that were written weeks before, to revise and rewrite those words, and to push the discussion in directions beyond the instructor's direct control, even past the end of the course.

This tendency to resist closure in the wiki became immediately evident to me when I compared discussion in the wiki to discussion in the classroom for the same course. Though dialectic occurred in both spaces, as the semester progressed, dialectic in the wiki took on a radically different role than dialectic in the classroom. In classroom discussions, students dutifully debated the main points of the primary texts, from Aristotle to Cicero to Augustine, from Kenneth Burke to Victor Vitanza. In each class session, the space for dialectic was opened and then effectively closed, making room for the next session. On the wiki, students focused their attention on Plato's *Phaedrus*, one of the earliest readings, and entered into dialogue with Plato and with each other on the nature of rhetoric, language, and reality. When they referenced later readings in the wiki, they did so in terms of how those readings might illuminate, invigorate, or challenge the ongoing discussion of, and dialogue with, Plato. The semester ended—one form of closure—with the dialogue still about issues that threaded Plato through and throughout the long history of rhetoric. No conclusion was reached.

Paradoxically, this tendency to continue the conversation, to remain in a state of flux in order to continue to learn, is one attribute that the wiki shares with at least some of the Socratic Dialogues. In *Charmades*, the initial question, "What is temperance?", is not answered by the end of the dialogue. Neither is the initial question in *Meno*, "What is virtue?" These dialogues do not close dialectic with clear summaries or conclusions. Just the opposite. Even Socrates admits he is in doubt at the end of these dialogues, which suggests they were intended to begin dialectic rather than end it, as Neel argued.

Continuing the conversation requires that we set aside what we know and remain in a state of uncertainty, for as Charles Sanders Peirce (1987) wrote in that brief treatise on critical thinking, "The Fixation of Belief," it is doubt that "stimulates us to action until it is destroyed" (p. 253). Doubt causes us to seek knowledge. Paradoxically, when we reach that moment when we know—the "belief" of Peirce's title—we need no longer inquire; we come to a state of intellectual inaction in which we "cling tenaciously, not merely to believing, but to believing just what we do believe" (p. 252), a state we, like Plato, recognize as contrary to dialectic, to learning of any kind. Peirce's words resonate with Socrates's complaint about complacency in the *Symposium*: "herein is the evil of ignorance, that he who is neither good nor wise is nevertheless satisfied with himself: he has no desire for that of which he feels no want" (Plato, 1999). From a synthesis of Peirce and Socrates we can take it that inquiry, critical thinking, analysis, indeed philosophy, is very much a matter of the road rather than the destination. If that is the case, then any conversation that continues the dialogue has a higher claim to dialectic than a discourse that closes it, whatever the medium.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Ironically, though Edmunson and Ackermann might agree on the nature of this divide, they just as easily might see digital instruction on opposite sides.

<sup>2</sup>Though this article has multiple authors, each of whom deserves credit for the finished draft, much of the contribution of my co-authors takes place on the wiki itself. My

contribution, as first author, has been to frame theirs. Ironically, this article is as much a hybrid as the *Socratic Dialogues* themselves. Both can be identified as the work of multiple and single authors at different places in the text.

<sup>3</sup>For a bit of Platonic humor, read the opening scenes of *Charmides*. Or, for the full impact of Plato's satire, listen to the LibriVox recording by Geoffrey Edwards: [https://librivox.org/search?q=Charmides&search\\_form=advanced](https://librivox.org/search?q=Charmides&search_form=advanced). My own appreciation of the depth and complexity Plato brings to the dialogues began when I started listening to the dialogues while running in the early morning hours. Plato/Socrates's words came to me aurally, as I think they were intended, as well as uninterrupted by pauses to annotate, take notes, or cross reference. To my delight, I discovered that dialogues I had read many times over the years had more to them than I had suspected when I read them. After a run I often found myself looking up a particular dialogue on Project Gutenberg to locate a point in the text that was particularly pertinent to this project, which is why all the references to Plato in this article are from Project Gutenberg.

<sup>4</sup>The word count for this wiki, one of three generated by the class, is 14,650 words, making it too long to quote extensively. I do not know who wrote this passage, nor who modified it or added to it. I have included all the students in this class as co-authors, since it could have been any of them.

<sup>5</sup>We know that Burke's Parlor is interminable. His metaphor starts with the conversation already going and ends with the conversation still going on long after we have left. Thus, in macro, the academic conversation has no closure. What concerns us in dialectic in the classroom is more local and immediate, and thus more susceptible to the jolts and bumps that make dialogue, and closure, even when that closure leads to a new discussion.

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