

## Plagiarism, rote memorizing and other “bad” student habits in the Greek University and beyond.

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### Abstract

Drawing on my experience as professor of Anthropology in Greece, this paper focuses on student practices like rote learning and plagiarism academics commonly consider inimical to meaningful learning, intellectual empowerment and the cultivation of critical independent thinking. In this paper I refrain from viewing such practices from the standard academic perspective according to which they must be eradicated, and try to appreciate them from the perspective of the students who engage in them. I suggest that they serve as means through which students navigate in and cope with the university environment, but they also provide a point of view from which the university appears as a setting within which the “bad habits” academics so despise are sensible and helpful.

**Keywords:** Greece; university; ethnography; bureaucracy; plagiarism; memorizing.

To my beloved teacher, Robert Knox Dentan.

There is something I don't know  
that I am supposed to know.  
I don't know what it is I don't know,  
and yet am supposed to know,  
and I feel I look stupid  
if I seem both not to know it  
and not to know what it is I don't know.  
Therefore I pretend to know it.  
This is nerve-wracking  
since I don't know what I must pretend to know.  
I pretend to know everything. (R. D. Laing, *Knots*, 1970.)

### Asymmetries and misunderstandings

The egalitarian cliché about learning as a flip side of teaching notwithstanding, the lessons one may draw from and about one's teaching are not always clear and sometimes they do not emerge at all because the circumstances from which they might arise are too embarrassing or painful to acknowledge. This paper focuses on student attitudes and practices that academics generally condemn, sometimes try to explain, but perhaps for the reasons mentioned above, rarely consider worthy of taking seriously. The practices that concern me include rote learning, that is memorizing course material and reproducing it as faithfully as possible even when its content and uses are not clear; equating studying with cramming before exams and successful exam performance with providing answers that conform with professors' expectations; substituting sacred, self-evident truths and common sense notions for disciplinary knowledge; and last but not least, composing essays that include plagiarized materials. The common element these practices share is an assumption that challenges conventional notions of understanding. This is that being able to prove you have learned what you were supposed to does not require understanding it; in other words, trying to make sense of what one learns is not self-evidently sensible

The paper draws on my experience in the Department of History and Archaeology of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, where, from 2000 and until my recent retirement, I taught a mandatory introductory course on social anthropology and folklore and several more advanced anthropology electives. Judging from conversations with colleagues from other departments and universities, the practices it records are quite widespread among

Greek humanities and social science students, especially those in their first year of study. However, there are those who from the start have little use for them, engage in them sporadically, outgrow them as they move on in their studies or even leave them entirely behind. What I focus on here is not the frequency, distribution or variation of “bad habits” among Greek students nor comparisons between university teaching and learning in Greece and in other countries. Rather, I try to understand the positive meanings which ways of learning considered meaningless by academics might have for students. Throughout my teaching years, I remained committed to turning students away from the “bad habits” I discuss here, encouraging them to think independently and critically and enhancing their intellectual self-confidence. Like most teachers, I regularly tried to put myself in the student position so as to access my teaching from their point of view and adjust it accordingly. What I know about the practices I discuss here comes not from ethnographic research, but from my teaching experience and especially from my efforts to turn students away from “bad habits”. Nevertheless, here, I try to leave my role as a teacher behind and concentrate on approaching these habits from the perspective of students.

The paper is composed of four parts each of which explores aspects of unorthodox notions and ways of learning. It begins with a look into the standard academic view of rote learning as mimetic practice that should have no place in modern higher education. In the second part, I show that, although condemned by academics, rote learning is nevertheless encouraged by the exam-centered, bureaucratic approach to learning that is dominant in the Greek university. In the third part I explore students’ definitions of their obligations as fulfillment of professors’ “wants” which are not always transparent. I also suggest that the reasons why plagiarism so infuriates academics are not always transparent to students. Last, I discuss memorizing as a way of shielding oneself from bleak personal futures and unsettling anthropological perspectives.

### **“Learning without insight and without reflection”**

Historically, racist, sexist and nationalist discourses have deployed rote learning as an index of inferiority. For instance, sociologist Robert E. Park, (1937: 27) conceptualized it as “learning without reflection and without insight” that has no place “in a changing, dynamic world, where encyclopedias and reference books supplement and supersede memory, and the important thing is the ability to think and apply the general principles to particular cases”. Rote learning, he claimed, is what happens when the formal education students receive is foreign to their communities and their parents, when it is valued as personal distinction, luxury and pathway to higher status rather than as means of coping with modern conditions or satisfying one’s curiosity about the world and when teaching methods are authoritarian. In his racist view, proclivity for this inferior form of learning was linked with the desire to compensate for having to start from a “lower cultural level than most white people” (Park, 1937: 24).

Park’s arguments for the replacement of rote by meaningful learning may be traced to the enlightenment and the emergence of the modernist ideology whereby social and political order depends on the deployment of language as a transparent, neutral and precise tool that enables speakers to represent the world and their own thoughts accurately (Bauman and Briggs, 2003). Assuming that rote learning was a survival from previous eras, Park (1927: 23) conceptualized his study of it as an inquiry into its “*natural* history” (my emphasis)<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, stereotyped as a practice whereby everyone memorizes the same standard material selected by a figure of authority, rote learning fits into narratives of ‘primitive’ communities as both egalitarian utopias and as fields for the exercise of arbitrary authority. Either way, this mode of learning appears inimical to the pursuit of personal interests and ambitions that is so highly valued in modernity. Indeed, associated with ‘backwardness’ and ‘primitiveness’, rote learning is conceptualized as unfit for white Euro-American males, but good enough or even ‘natural’ for those excluded from this category.<sup>2</sup> As the metaphor of parroting suggests, sometimes the iteration of speech that is unintelligible to the speaker is linked to animality. It should come as no surprise that nowadays rote learning is considered appropriate for small children in their early years of school or adults just entering a discipline who still need to become able to recognize and remember basic facts and information (Mayers, 2002). Academics often explain rote learning among university students as a residue from prior educational stages.

Although dated, stereotypes linking rote learning with ‘backwardness’ continue to influence current perceptions of such learning. Describing his teaching experience in a local university of Chile in the late 1990s, Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2003: 3) recalls his surprise at the fact that his students were “still ‘spoon-fed’” and overwhelmed by “‘school’ discipline”. As a result, they had “serious trouble” with tasks like building arguments and writing essays that require more complex operations. Suggesting that the situation he encountered in Chile is typical of ‘developing’ countries and contrasts sharply with what is expected in western academia, Corsín

Jiménez (2003: 3-4) implies an opposition between modern and non-modern learning. However, Bonnie Vandesteeg (2012) reports that argument building and essay-writing does not come all that easy to the British university students among whom she did research. She suggests that this is because the transition from secondary to university education is too abrupt. Left to their own devices, students fall back on habits and assumptions they have embodied earlier, but which interfere with their ability to cope with their new environment. They often conflate what they need to know with what it takes to pass an exam, equate learning with being taught and expect that all relevant knowledge will come from the teacher. Unaccustomed to studying on their own and not having proper reading and writing skills, they have difficulties with texts they find too theoretical, abstract and often boring and with essays they do not know how to organize. They feel confused as to what teachers expect of them and become quickly disappointed when their need for guidance, direction and personal attention is not acknowledged. The problems Corsín Jiménez and Vandesteeg refer to are practically the same. However, it is perhaps significant that, writing about Britain, she discusses their implications for the personal development of students, whereas, writing about Chile, he links them with prospects of national development.

The “low level” (*hamiló epípedo*) of the knowledge, skills and aptitudes of students who, nevertheless, manage to pass the university entry exam is a common cause of concern among Greek academics and particularly among humanities and social science professors. Almost without exception, they blame the situation on the rote learning habits students embody in high school and especially during the two or three year period of attending private tutoring institutions (*frondistíria*) that prepare them for the state operated university entry exams. Becoming skilled in memorizing long texts is particularly important for students who want to study humanities and social sciences because the university entrance exams for these fields require verbatim textbook citations. However, in preparation for the university entry exams, all students are trained in writing essays on socially relevant topics; they are advised to rehearse worn out composition formulas, clichés and common sense notions freely, but avoid ideas that may sound original or controversial.

Academics and Greek intellectuals more generally agree that Greek secondary education falls short of the humanist, modernist ideal whereby the role of school is to enhance students’ potential for creativity and independent thinking (see Larsen, 2017). Noting that rote learning enhances passivity, docility, conformism and respect for authority, some compare it to castration, amputation and clipping the wings off young birds so that they are unable to fly. However, the argument that rote learning robs students of their intellectual capacities is often combined with the view that memorizing material is something anyone can do; hence, exams in which students are required to iterate memorized material make it impossible for the best to stand out. Although sometimes these criticisms are directed at secondary school teachers, their primary target is the Ministry of Education which is responsible for secondary school education policies as well as for regulating the flow of high school graduates into the university. Thus, the Ministry is blamed for inhibiting the intellectual growth prospects of the younger generation, but also for sacrificing meritocracy and high quality education to the “excessively democratic” or “populist” goal of making university study accessible to as many high school graduates as possible. The contradictory criticisms according to which Greek education is at once too oppressive and too egalitarian constitute variants of a broader and highly diverse discourse whereby thanks to inept governments and poor state policies, Greece has never fully joined the liberal modern world. More recently, rote learning has also been linked to the widespread use of social media. Many academics think that student’s dependence on smart-phones and tablets undermines their ability to concentrate, connect and remember information and write coherently and they consider these gadgets emblematic of a modernity that pertains to “mindless” consumption rather than to scientific or technological breakthroughs. The common assumption that rote learning is a problem or symptom the causes of which are to be discovered outside the university enables academics to avoid disturbing questions regarding the conditions that perhaps invite this form of learning within the university. Paradoxically, efforts to leave “inferior” forms outside are not only ineffective, but make matters worse.

### **Bureaucracy (w)rites**

Obtaining an undergraduate degree in the social sciences or the humanities from a Greek university takes a minimum of eight semesters and an average of about forty five courses. Attendance is not obligatory and student evaluation is based on written and sometimes oral final exams, term papers or both. The first two years of study are mostly taken up by mandatory courses in which students are usually evaluated according to their performance on written exams composed of questions requiring rather short, unambiguous, and mostly factual answers. In large institutions the managerial problems posed by the size of mandatory course audiences are overwhelming and the inherently bureaucratic character of exam procedure becomes all the more pronounced. In the History and Archaeology Department of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki the number of students enrolled in

mandatory courses often exceeds 300 and it is much higher than the number of classroom seats. Professors and invigilating graduate students and staff separate students into smaller groups and usher them into separate teaching halls and classrooms. Even if there is room in the front rows of seats, students rush to the back, which they also prefer when they come to ordinary classes. However, the invigilators see that they are evenly distributed, that every other seat and every other row of seats is left empty and that students carry no mobile phones or any other personal belongings wherein they might have hidden information relevant to the examination. Students are not allowed to use paper brought from home, but are handed out lined sheets bearing the institutional seal. No one is admitted to the exam once the questions have been handed out and for an hour after the onset of the exam, no one is allowed to leave the room. When students hand in their exams, invigilators inspect their ID cards to ensure that they are who they claim to be. The communist and anarchist slogans and radical graffiti that usually cover both the exterior and the interior walls of Greek university buildings and the formal exam procedure make mockery of each other, but no one seems to notice.

Since finals take place at the end of the semester, there is no opportunity for professors to comment on student exam performance except on the rare occasion that individual students ask them to do so, usually in order to find out why they failed and try to negotiate a passing grade. Professors are required to submit exam grades to departmental administrative staff by computer only and using their personal secret coded electronic card issued to them for this purpose. Changing a grade that has been submitted is possible, but the procedure is quite complicated and requires approval by a departmental committee. Exam papers are considered official documents and professors are required to keep them for two years and have them available for inspection. In short, the educational value of the final exam ritual is as limited as that of the state administered university entrance exams that academics are so critical of.

By the standards of some of the newer and smaller humanities and social science university departments in Greece, the final exam procedure followed in my institution is too strict and rigid. However, to varying degrees, throughout the Greek higher education system, finals are ritualized and they play a central role in the enactment of the university as a bureaucratic organization and as a refraction of the state. If bureaucratic action is action in relation to which personal responsibility or choice is inapplicable, and if bureaucrats are themselves subject to the power they embody (Herzfeld, 1982; 1992), professors act like bureaucrats to the extent that they view the final exam procedure as a rather lowly and boring duty over which they nevertheless have no choice. On the other hand, students bring forth the bureaucratic aspects of the exam procedure as they prepare for it by memorizing textbook material without bothering about their meaning and uses and as they treat exam questions as bureaucratic forms they must fill even when they are unclear about exactly what information is required and why. When at a loss as to the right answers, students often resort to common sense notions and clichés of the sort that anthropology instructors spend much time and energy deconstructing: geographic, biological or psychological determinisms and essentialisms; evolutionary assumptions about the progress that comes with civilization; aphorisms about the value of democracy, the family, environmental protection or gender equality; last but not least, idealizations of the ancient Greek past and celebrations of nationalism. Over the years many students have explained to me that they use such stereotypes because they hope that doing so will work for them as it did in high school rather than because they find them meaningful or true or even care about the issues they concern. As a student told me once, exams are formal situations and “in a formal situation this is the sort of thing you are expected to write” (Bakalaki, 2006: 264). It is important to mention here that historically formal and informal situations differed not only in terms of what was said, but also in terms of the language used. Vernacular Greek became the official language of the state only in 1976. Until then, the language of the state and the education system was *katharévoussa* (literally purifying), a compromise between archaic and modern Greek. Rather than a tool for communication, *katharévoussa* was an index of rank among Greeks, while its adoption by the Greek state aimed to convince Europeans that modern Greeks were true descendants of the ancients (Herzfeld, 1987: 51). Perhaps then, there is an affinity between students’ indifference for the meaning of the clichés they feel they have to reiterate in exams and the proclivity of state officials and politicians for delivering speeches composed of seemingly erudite, but actually vacuous formulaic expressions. Although especially marked in the context of the Greek language debates of the past, the reification of words and the perception of language and especially written language as a transparent instrument that does away with contextual meanings (and eventually with meaning altogether) are emblematic of state and bureaucratic language practices more generally (Herzfeld, 1992: 110, 114; Brenneis, 2000).<sup>3</sup>

Nils Bubandt’s (2009) ethnographic observations on the impact of fake letters with provocative political content that circulated in Indonesia in the 1990s are pertinent here. According to Bubandt, these letters, which often triggered violent episodes, imitated the writing appropriate for official documents and were thus posed as analogues and extensions of state discourse. Perhaps, like the authors of these letters, Greek students imitate the style of writing which they hope conforms to the assumptions regarding the formal nature of the exam situation

which they project onto their professors. Moreover, as in Indonesia, in Greece the state is target of much suspicion and the fact that official state discourse is composed of purposefully misleading statements or at best amounts to empty rhetoric is common knowledge (Bakalaki, 2016). Trying to place themselves in their professors' position so as to become able to outguess their expectations and live up to them, students endow professors with the impenetrable, capricious and self-serving authority appropriate to state officials and bureaucrats (cf. Bubandt, 2009: 561,574).<sup>4</sup>

### **“How do you want that, Madam / Sir”? (“Pós to théletekyría / kýrie?”)<sup>5</sup>**

Although in Greek there is a special verb for studying (*meletó*), commonly studying is referred to as reading (*diávasma*) – an activity the pleasures of which most students never have the opportunity to discover and one that is largely conceptualized as the bitter price for passing courses and eventually getting a degree. Often printed or online pages are endowed with the magic power to penetrate one's head and imprint themselves onto the mind of the most absent-minded reader. Despite or because of this, reading is a burden students try to minimize and postpone as long as possible. Many a student who has flunked a course has complained to me that s/he expected to pass because “I spent a whole weekend reading, and it was the weekend right before the exam, I left it for then so I wouldn't forget what I was supposed to remember”.

This subheading title is a common way that students inquire about a professor's expectations. Such phrasing suggests that students conflate the fulfillment of the course requirements with satisfying the professors' preferences or desires, thus presenting the requirements as arbitrary, but also, hopefully, negotiable. Knowing the exact amount of mandatory reading on which exams will be based is crucial. This reading is called “matter” (*íli*), and what students are mostly concerned about is its volume. Students often inquire about the criteria by which professors' “want” them to match exam questions to course readings and about how to organize the essays they are assigned in more advanced courses. I have often felt that professors' ‘wants’ must seem so arbitrary that concern over understanding them exceeds concern over understanding the course material itself. In fact, as countless students have told me, understanding such material is less trustworthy than memorizing as much of it as possible. The point is not that students value memorizing because it saves time; rather, they value it because time is all it takes and time is also the measure of the effort one puts into learning. Although some find it harder than others, memorizing does not demand special intellectual aptitudes and eventually all can succeed. In contrast, making sense of what one reads is more demanding, more idiosyncratic and riskier; students worry that their understanding of the course material will not match the understanding professors ‘want’. Moreover, several times students who tried to do as I ‘wanted’ and used their own words to summarize what they read had told me that they were disappointed because compared to the erudite original texts, their summaries seemed childish. However, the main reason why they are reluctant to use their own words is the risk of making mistakes. The extreme form which avoidance of this risk may take is plagiarism.

Plagiarism may involve hiring tutors – often graduate students or Ph.D. candidates—to write papers which undergraduates present as their own, but usually it takes the form of copy-pasting excerpts from published or online material. Like elsewhere, professors in Greece warn students against plagiarism, and conceptualize it as a form of fake, theft or both. Insofar as faking is motivated by the desire to become like someone else and theft is a means of becoming like someone else by appropriating his/her possessions (Bakalaki, 2003), these conceptualizations may not be far off the mark. After all, identity and subjectivity transformation are part of education. According to Herzfeld (2003), in Crete, apprentices whose masters are frugal with their knowledge resort to “stealing” it; in fact, their aptitude in this cunning appropriation indexes their aptitude in the craft for which they train. However, in the context of academia the criminalization of plagiarism on the part of students detracts attention from the fact that, like Cretan artisans, university instructors are not always generous about sharing the secrets of academic conventions or explaining the logic behind them. For example, they assume that the reasons why copying from another student's exam paper counts as property violation are self evident and thus need no explanation. To many students, however, what is self-evident are the advantages of mutual help. From their perspective, protecting one's exam paper from the view of others lest they copy from it is a breach of solidarity. Uncertainty about what makes plagiarism so wrong is often accompanied by uncertainty over exactly what counts as plagiarism and this generates doubts as to whether professors themselves practice what they preach. As one student recently asked: “obviously, when you lecture, you don't acknowledge all the sources of the information and ideas you present; is this not plagiarism?” Here plagiarism provides a perspective from which the distinction between the original and the copy, the authentic and the fake ceases to be self-evident, but is revealed as relative and fragile (see Taussig, 1993).

## **Risks and losses**

Writing of Greek archaeology students, Michael Fotiadis (2015: 110-111) contrasts their eagerness to learn “the facts” and “the last word of science” to their lack of curiosity for ideas and perspectives that might complicate those “certainties” and render them worthy of closer scrutiny. Fotiadis contextualizes the students’ predilections in the shift from education to training, that is to the transmission of knowledge as commodity to be traded in the market (see also Brown, 2017; Fynsk, 2017; Graeber, 2014; 2015; Strathern, ed, 2000). According to Marilyn Strathern (1997: 315), this shift has involved the emergence of new teaching practices which leave no room for ambiguity, contradiction or hesitation and value clarity above logic, itemization above drawing connections and simplification above argument building. Thus, power point presentations, which are emblematic of these new practices, usually involve the projection of terms and concepts that are disconnected save for the bullet points that make them equivalent. Such presentations simplify not only the circumstances and operations to which they refer, but also the prospect of simplification itself; they are ideal for copying and memorizing. In addition, perhaps, their appeal to students has to do with their aesthetic qualities, their affinity with social media communication and their widespread use outside the academic environment.<sup>6</sup>

However, the transition from education to training has gone hand in hand with rises in tuition and increasing job insecurity. Although higher education is free in Greece, the majority of students are admitted to universities away from their home towns and have to cope with considerable living expenses. Already thinning by the turn of the century, faith in university degrees as gateways to white collar employment has diminished dramatically since the onset of the country’s financial crisis in 2010 and the metaphor of university degree documents as toilet paper (Bakalaki, 2006a: 262-264) has become ever more apt. In the context of the public expenditure cuts necessitated by the austerity measures imposed on the country, the public service employment prospects of social science and humanities graduates have practically vanished. Most recent graduates live with their parents and take on private tutoring or other low paid, temporary jobs. Under the circumstances, many protest that not only the financial cost, but also the effort it takes to get a degree, is too high: “why is it so hard to get the degree, why don’t they make it easier, professors insist we should learn, but what is the point, after all we will never get to use this stuff?”. Academic knowledge and academic work appear as equally irrelevant to students’ present and expected future lives. What counts within the introverted, almost virtual academic environment counts for almost nothing outside. Moreover, in justifying their indifference to their studies by saying that university degrees are useless in terms of employment, students imply that commitment to one’s studies may lead to professional aspirations that are almost impossible to materialize. They seem to be saying that it is better to have low but realistic expectations, than high hopes that are likely to become disappointed.

Moreover, distancing oneself from one’s field of study may be a form of protection from potentially unsettling discrepancies between the taken for granted world in which they see themselves situated and the world according to disciplinary knowledge. As Patrick Alexander (2012: 1) notes, education inherently involves loss of previous knowledge and thus may undermine important attachments to cherished places, stories and people. To the extent that anthropology courses invite students to distance themselves from the common sense notions and values they grew up with, threats of emotional and social losses are likely. In Greece, anthropology is not taught in secondary school the majority of students encounter it in the university for the first time. Some students admit being surprised or even shocked by the discrepancies between the assumptions and perspectives of anthropology and those of disciplines they are familiar with. However, as Mary Douglas (1984, 38), suggested, anomalies and contradictions that threaten the order of classificatory systems are often ironed out or even go unnoticed. Indeed, most students try to spare themselves the disorienting effect these discrepancies may have. For example, they insist on assuming that in anthropology, concepts like ‘social relations’, ‘kinship’ or ‘politics’ mean the same things they do in everyday conversation or in the context of the ethnocentric secondary education they have gone through.

But as the Greek financial crisis deepened, as disputes over Greece’s northwest neighbor’s right to the name Macedonia escalated,<sup>7</sup> and as more and more people started seeking refuge and political asylum in Greece, the contrast between anthropological relativism and the resurgent nationalism became harder to ignore. Although this contrast enhanced most students’ curiosity about anthropology, some found the discipline’s opposition to cherished ethnocentric narratives disturbing. My introductory course classroom discussions became increasingly punctuated by versions of the longstanding narrative whereby Greece is victim to powerful western economic and political forces and the aggression of neighbor nation states (Herzfeld, 1987; Sutton, 2003). These narrative served as background for the argument that the financial crisis was orchestrated by exactly these powerful forces and that by calling itself “North Macedonia” the neighboring state engages in a form of theft that may legitimate territorial claims. For students who make such arguments, becoming influenced by the relativist perspective of

anthropology entails the risk of becoming alienated not only from the nationalist narrative they take for granted, but from patriotic friends and family. On the other hand, they know that passing an anthropology course involves being able to show that they have familiarized themselves with this perspective. Perhaps, viewing disciplinary concepts and ideas students personally find meaningless, disturbing, or even dangerous as exam materials to be memorized and iterated, but not worthy of serious consideration enables students to get passing grades and at the same time hold on to cherished private opinions and values. Such a response perhaps belongs in Annette Weiner's (1992) category of "keeping while giving" practices; giving professors what they assume they want, they get to save what is essential to themselves.

## Conclusion

This paper has been premised on the understanding that, albeit scandalous from a standard academic perspective, student practices like rote learning, exam cheating and plagiarism deserve ethnography study. Rather than asking how these practices may best be eradicated, my question is what can we learn about them and also from them. I have tried to show that far from being self-evidently blameworthy, at least for the Greek university the students who engage in them, these practices are usually part of what university study involves. Not only are they not recognized as problems, but they constitute rather standard responses to the challenges university education entails. For these reasons, I suggested that student 'bad habits' provide a perspective from which academics may reexamine the taken for granted conventions these habits violate and the binary oppositions between depth and surface, original and copy, and rightful ownership and theft on which these conventions rest. I also drew attention to the discrepancies between the university as an environment wherein the practices I addressed are taken for granted as part of being a student and the university as an environment in which they are stigmatized or even criminalized from which they should be eradicated. These discrepancies challenge the standard liberal understanding of the university as an environment shared by students and teachers. While being a teacher involves putting oneself in the student position and vice versa, the other's position in which each party puts itself is not necessarily the same as the position the other party recognizes as their own.

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## **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup>However, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1921), far from a relic from the past, learning by memorization and repetition was emblematic of the corruptive effects of civilization on “Man’s” nature.

<sup>2</sup>Park’s portrayal of rote learning as a practice by which blacks fell victim to their impatience for upward mobility contrasts sharply with bell hooks’s memories. The women teachers of the all-black schools she attended as a small child were “committed to nurturing our intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers and cultural workers – black folks who used our ‘minds’”. Instead, the white teachers of the desegregated schools to which she was bussed later perceived themselves as political reformers whose task was to teach black children obedience and respect for white authority rather than to fuel their curiosity (hooks (1994,2-3). Like Park, hooks’s white teachers believed that educating black people meant disabusing them of the notion that the boundaries of the learned white modern world may be easily crossed.

<sup>3</sup>Many thanks to Kostis Kalantzis for pointing out the relevance of the linguistic aspects of situations defined as formal or official in the past for understanding current exam practices.

<sup>4</sup>I thank PanosPanopoulos for reminding me that the appearance of exam papers is also relevant here. Indeed, many seem to be written hastily and carelessly, they are full of syntactical and spelling mistakes and the handwriting is often barely legible. Indeed, my emphasis on the formal connotations of the exam procedure may be excessive. On the other hand, filling out forms often goes with bad handwriting as what people are required to put down are formulaic declarations and statements which bureaucrats may classify without reading individually. Moreover, perhaps the poor quality of exams handwriting is purposeful – students use it hoping that professors will skip the effort to read the whole thing and give them a passing grade on the basis of the few appropriate keywords they can spot. Or perhaps, students do not assume that grading exams involves reading them carefully.

On the ambiguities involved in the standard practice imitating the ways of prestigious and powerful others in Greece see Bakalaki, 2007.

<sup>5</sup>The appropriate way for students to address professors is by their last names preceded by Mrs. or Mr. However, many students use “Madam” and “Sir”, the common form of formal address for adults including school teachers.

<sup>6</sup>Pointing me to a meme widely circulating in the web, “What if I told you that reading a power point aloud is not the same as teaching” Kostis Kalantzis suggested that perhaps this mode of communication is no longer self-evidently trustworthy.

<sup>7</sup>The issue of the name of the neighboring state that emerged after the dismantling of Yugoslavia remain unresolved because Greek nationalists would not accept any name other than F.Y.R.O.M (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). When the Greek socialist government (SY.RIZ.A) entered international negotiations aiming to a mutually agreed on name nationalists were infuriated and many spoke of treason. Apart from heated debates in the Parliament, the “issue of the name” sent many to the streets – often clad in attire made up of flags and other assemblages of national symbols. For several months before the (Prespa) agreement over the use of the name “North Macedonia” was reached in June 2018, and especially before it became effective on February 2019, demonstrations were common and passionate.