



Imitation, Representation, and the Eclipse of the Original: School as Noah's Ark

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Abstract: We are at the dawn of a revolution in communications technology far outstripping the transformative power of the printing press, possibly approaching the significance of the invention of the written letter. Large language models, combined with conversational agents forming C-LLMs, have already – both openly and clandestinely – made an impact on schools and businesses, academic research, and the mass media. In this paper I discuss some important challenges that these technologies pose to some prevailing core ideas of education. Against the background of the safe assumption that C-LLMs are here to stay, I here explore the notion of the school as a possible space for counteraction through the lens of the critique of the technology of the written word in Plato's Phaedrus and his notion of arete or virtue. The aim is to see what opportunities open for a reimagining of the school as a place for learning in a time when the patterns of language use are being radically transformed.

Keywords: technology, literacy, LLM, C-LLM, generative AI, deschooling, Plato, Phaedrus

INTRODUCTION

We are at the dawn of a revolution in communications technology, the social and cultural impact of which potentially outstrips that of the printing press and the internet, very possibly approaching the impact of the invention of the written letter. Generative AI, especially in the form of large language models, LLMs, accessed through conversational agents such as chatGPT, has already – both openly and clandestinely – made an impact on schools and businesses, academic research, and the mass media. I will here follow Cope and Kalantzis

and call the combination of a large language model and a conversational agent a C-LLM (Peters et al., 2023). In this paper I discuss some important challenges that these technologies pose to some prevailing core ideas of education and a possible strategy for their mitigation.

The dual objectives of socialised conformity achieved through imitation and the pursuit of excellence via emulation are both undermined by the introduction to education of mimetic tools such as C-LLMs. These tools obviate the need for, and so undermine, the development of the individual's own communicative skills, and, more importantly, remove the very



objects of the social negotiations involved in representing reality in a community. With this in mind, adopting mimetic tools may or may not be seen as a bad thing, depending on one's outlook or ideology. From a more authoritarian point of view, the linguistic conservatism potentially effected by technologies that are essentially and unavoidably mimetic – and so normalising – may be seen as a safeguard against, or at least an inhibitor of, dissenting speech and thought. From a more egalitarian point of view, one where the chief aims of public education are the mitigation of class difference (for either humanitarian or economic purposes or both) and the promotion of civic participation, the new technologies must seem a mixed blessing at best. On the one hand, the new tools may help level the playing field for students with special needs; on the other hand, the mere presence of the technologies undermines teachers' efforts to train students' communicative skills, skills that are considered essential for all schooling from a basic to an advanced level, and also essential to the white-collar jobs for which an increasing core section of the students has been intended. And so the teacher is now battling "cheating" students who are headed for a real world in which they are becoming more and more redundant.

In order, however, to start imagining our future with the technology in question in more detail, we need to get a grip on what the technology is – to remind ourselves what it can and cannot do. In the first section we will look at what generative AI is, and in particular a C-LLM, since

this is the form of AI that will have the most radical impact on teachers. Next, we will hint at the probable dystopia we are currently headed for with an enthusiastic and uncritical adoption of these tools in the sphere of education. And against the background of the safe assumption that C-LLMs are here to stay, we will finally explore a contrasting notion of a re-imagined school as a possible space for dialogue, a school seen resolutely through the lens of the critique of the written word in Plato's *Phaedrus* and a Platonic understanding of *arete* – of virtue or excellence. The aim is to see what opportunities there are for a re-imagining of the school as a place for learning in a time when the patterns of language use are being radically transformed. The suggestions will be controversial, because they challenge modern egalitarian assumptions as much as the logic of commodification which necessarily accompanies these assumptions. The suggestions will also be controversial in that they point toward the necessity of radically rethinking the ideal student-teacher relationship and rejecting the prevailing democratic conception of truth as somehow linked to majority opinion.

Generative AI for text builds on – and feeds on – the technology of writing, and so it is with the technology of writing, and our attitudes to and apprehensions about *it*, that we must begin.

AUTOMATION

A text without an author is like speech coming from nowhere and everywhere. It



may be the words of a god. The text contains the tales of old, ever to be remembered. The text is Scripture; it is the Bible. Even when the hands of humans are known to have touched it, the text with no definite author tends to retain much of its magic. It is the word of an unseen collective “we”, including our innumerable unnamed ancestors. It is not simply an opinion. It is the wisdom of the ages. It is not simply the will of a prince. It is the law of the land. Its stated facts are irrefutable, its commands inescapable, its advice irreproachable. Or so it seems, at least to the enthralled. Its grip on us used to be stronger, but it is still there. Here is where marketing gets at least some of its incredibly strong hold on us. This is at least partly why we are inclined to trust Wikipedia. And this is why we now bow in awe to the uncanny utterings of oracular machines such as ChatGPT.

Then again, all texts are without an author. Looking at the paper or papyrus or screen, we find the author is no longer there. And it is no coincidence, I believe, that in the passage in the *Phaedrus* where we get Plato's most elaborate critique of the technology of writing, we find Plato irreverently toying with the power of the mythological form. Socrates is relating the myth – purportedly ancient and so, of course, Egyptian – of Teuth, who is presenting his invention to Ammon. The new piece of tech, the written word, will lead to trouble, according to the latter:

“O most expert Teuth, one man can give birth to the elements of an art, but only another can judge how they can ben-

efit or harm those who will use them. And now, since you are the father of writing, your affection for it has made you describe the effects of it opposite of what they really are. In fact it will introduce forgetfulness in the soul of those who learn it: they will not practise using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs which belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing. And they will be difficult to get along with, since they will merely appear to be wise instead of really being so.” (274e-275b)

Invoking the god here is, I suggest, Plato's ostentatious feigned attempt to transcend that beautiful self-referential mess which is his own critique of writing *committed to writing*. Socrates immediately gets slammed by Phaedrus for making the whole myth up on the spot. And Socrates responds by insisting that when we are dealing with truth, the source and sender of that truth is of no consequence whatsoever (275b-c). If there is sulking here in Socrates's indirect admission of guilt, then the sulking is in jest too, surely. Plato is pitting old against new, natural against artificial, the spoken against the written, the divine against the human,



and truth against lie – or perhaps rather against the more insidious half-truth – all in one go. The result, I suggest, is a radical demystification of the technology of writing and a dethroning of those who master it. Plato tries to move us outside the occult force-field of the text, from where we can clearly see and appreciate the scope of his critique. Socrates is lifted out of the text and placed right there in front of us in the shade of the tree, and his witness to the truth is direct, unmediated, personal. We will return to the content of that critique shortly, when we also update it to our own times – the era of the self-replying email. First, however, we need to put the technology of generative AI into that intense, penetrating light Plato shines on writing. Or at least we will try.

On the most general level, a C-LLM is not the sort of tool that enables people to do what they could not otherwise do. Essentially, like most tools, it first and foremost provides automation of a task (Pasquinelli, 2023, 12). Instead of a person writing a text, the C-LLM can write the text for that person. In order for the machine to be able to produce a text, it needs instructions as to the content of that text, and preferably also style and other characteristics. The machine can only automate the task successfully to the extent that the task is standardised. If the person wants something completely unique, then that person will end up having to give word-by-word instructions to the machine, in which case there is no longer any automation, and the machine is completely redundant.

Now, turning to a particular situation, the machine can, of course, do what some persons cannot. Such may be the case when students use C-LLMs to write assignments for them. The school is a place where standards rule. The C-LLM can help the student live up to those standards by providing the student with a product that – while perceived as somewhat lacking in originality perhaps – would rarely be deemed inadequate. Often, the product will even be hailed as perfect because of its precise adequacy and unassuming unoriginality. While the teacher's aim is to teach skills, those skills can only be measured by the products that flow from those skills. Measurement requires standards to measure by. Now, because linguistic skills are social, the standards in question are socially set. They constitute a pragmatic, implicit, tacit consensus, i.e. a norm or – expressed mathematically – the statistical *average*. The individual student's skill should ideally be brought up to the level of that of the typical competent language user. This is the primary aim of the teacher. Beyond that standard and that norm lurk the shadowy spectres of naked subjective judgment, personal responsibility, elitist ranking, and personal exceptionalism. Yet within the seemingly safe confines of the standard, the machine now stands impatiently waiting to simply replace the student – and the teacher. In the realm of standardised procedure, in the sphere of the average, the machine is simply totally invincible. However, since the product is language, and language is social, there is an interesting catch. The machine is dependent on us.



A C-LLM is a mimetic machine. Its products mimic human written communication (Bender et al., 2021). The machine is an algorithm working off a set of data, the structure of which is extremely complex, in turn the output of an algorithm. Because the machine simulates human communication, it is nearly impossible to talk about it without anthropomorphising. In order for Plato's bright light to really penetrate the phenomenon, we ought perhaps to avoid such misleading speech. For the sake of brevity, we will here stick with the normal, standard way of speaking. Reader beware. But the C-LLM "needs" humans.

The machine is "trained" on vast amounts of text produced by humans. The machine "learns" the normal way words are put into sentences, which are put into paragraphs, which are put into texts. At bottom, and in principle, the process is deterministic: though its output is completely unpredictable from our standpoint, the algorithm constitutes what mathematicians call a function. For the machine there is really one optimal solution to each problem that is posed. Asked a question, the machine calculates the one perfect answer, based on the data on which it has been trained. The perfect response is stitched together as a weighted average representative of all the answers given to similar questions embedded in the dataset. Randomness can be – and has been – introduced, but this comes at a cost. The success condition is imposed on the process from without. Human beings want the process to produce reasonable and in-

telligible results – sensible speech. Yet the reasonableness and intelligibility of the product can only be attained by making it conform to the norm, to the average. In consulting its data, the algorithm will make sure the resulting component piece of speech is always picked from the centre of the innumerable bell curves implied by that same data. Any divergence from this principle simply reduces – however slightly – the chance of successful completion of the task. Alternatively, and as the result of direct human intervention, the results can be tweaked, censored, or – at the extreme – hard-coded. But this hardly alters our point about the nature of the C-LLM, since the machine has now simply been partially de-LLM-ed and converted into something like a Madame Zita mechanical fortune teller.

The C-LLM thus provides a simulation of human communication. From the C-LLM's point of view, comprehension and intelligibility and veracity are all the same as the mathematical average, elevated to a norm. Through its dependence on training data, the machine is fully a parasite. It requires actual human communication to be able to produce something that will pass for human communication. It is not able to produce its own training data, of course. Indeed, the machines need to be isolated from their own output in order not to start unravelling quickly (Alemohammad et al., 2023; Briesch et al., 2024). The tiniest amount of feedback into the process starts shifting those innumerable bell curves towards an unpredictable but predetermined endpoint



– a singularity we might say – of singular empty stupidity, of incomprehensible rigid sameness.

Here we clearly see the limitations of the technology. The dream of the thinking machine starts looking silly, not because it is some kind of unattainable ideal but because thinking machines are so ubiquitous. We have built a machine in our own image – we, ourselves imitators and pretenders. Are we not mere ‘mimics’, for the most part? It is enough that we think of the output of these machines as human language, however, and we tend ourselves to become a part of a feedback loop. If I ask a C-LLM, “Is this the correct way to talk?”, and its answer makes an impression on me, then I will start feeding the machine with its own output. Autophagy ensues. The linguistic parasite is now feeding off of itself.

The machines are thus far from stable and dependable. As already implied, they must be shielded from themselves. And they must be shielded from humanity. They must be constantly tended. Their training data must be curated with ever more diligence. They cannot be exposed to an uncontrolled environment, like that of the dynamic flux of human social life. And even when treated with the utmost care, C-LLMs are, of course, known to go off the rails – frequently. Someone must always hold the machine’s hand. A “democratic” deployment of the technology will therefore never be possible. Not only does the vast quantity of computational resources required to run it keep this technology out of the hands of ordinary

folk and mere states, but the very nature of the machine necessitates and implies centralised control – albeit out of sight, by design. The machine exudes impartiality, freedom from bias. But if the generative AI is working for the moment, it is working for someone.

Socrates says: “You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You’d think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn’t know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father’s support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.” (275d-e)

The technology of the written word automates aspects of the delivery of a message. Written down and multiplied, a message can be delivered in many places at the same time or at different times, over and over again. The transition from oral to literate culture brought about by the introduction of this technology was famously explored by Walter Ong (1982). The text works by aiding and enhancing memory. The text is a collective memory



on which complex institutions and advanced sciences are built. The technology also gradually transforms the human being herself. In the Middle Ages, scholastic institutions formed around a new breed of human being – the bookish person (Illich, 1993).

Our fascination with the text, with language made flesh and enduring, can be mitigated by reminding ourselves that a text is a tool, not a god, and not even a mere human person. Plato reminds us of the text's blindness, its essential idleness. The extension of that technology, the C-LLM, we must remind ourselves, is even blinder, and its idleness is even more acute. The illusion of animation is not easily broken as we interact with it in a simulated dialogue. But the machine is really no more flexible than a calculator. The text that comes out has no author, or perhaps millions of authors and no one in particular, depending on how we want to look at it. What comes out is a mirror image, an image created by averaging a large, but finite, set of images.

SCHOOL

Our spellbound fascination with technology will probably never be broken, but will accompany us till the end. And the adoption of new technologies is in any case as if necessitated by the logic of the market, where automation means freeing up resources and cutting costs. The use of this technology will spread fast, and it will transform the school, it will transform society, and, through the school, society.

While the use of a tool may not necessarily lead to the total atrophy of a skill, the risk is clearly there. Plato thought about these risks with regard to writing. The power of memorising is surely weakened by an increased dependence on written records. And when I use typewriters and computers, my handwriting suffers. While I use calculators, my mental arithmetic deteriorates. But what if we automate the production of linguistic utterances, communications, text? In order to have sufficient competence to evaluate whether the output of a C-LLM expresses the message which I want to send off and pass off as my own, I myself need to be a competent language user, which means I need to be a practising speaker and writer myself. If I start depending more fully on the machine, always or for the most part, at least two things will happen. From the point of view of the human community, I will unwittingly act to reduce the signal-to-noise ratio not by raising the noise floor but by helping introduce feedback. Having abdicated from the opportunity to help negotiate a collective description of the world from a distinctly personal point of view (a negotiation accomplished not by averaging, but by any and all other means), I join the choir of an exploding number of identical horns drowning out the remaining variation by issuing one single clean tone. The bell curves have now turned into one single sinusoidal curve, as it were. But from the point of view of the maintainers of the machine, I will also have stopped being helpful. When the machine needs new stuff to train on, my



input will simply compromise the quality of the dataset.

To the extent that the school is committed to egalitarian ideals and these ideals lead to conforming practices, the school stands completely defenseless against the power of generative AI. If the ideal student is the average student, then the school is training the student for redundancy. This is true regardless of whether the conforming practices take the form of a “Rawlsian” enterprise of bringing all students up to a certain standard or if they take the form of a more aggressive counteracting of difference (Rawls, 1971). The problem is the standard itself, and the notion that training those communicative skills is simply the effecting of the internalisation of – and compliance with – certain rules and norms.

A contrasting view of education comes into view once we see that Plato’s *Phaedrus* is not simply about (erotic) love (cf. Fisher, 1966). It is about the relationship between teacher and learner, and between both of these and truth. In it, Socrates shows that his own position as the teacher is as precarious as that of the student, if not more so. Teaching is a competitive practice, on all sides. Under his cloak Phaedrus is hiding a scroll containing a speech of the master orator Lysias. Phaedrus wants to enlist Socrates as a mere listener in order that he himself may learn that speech by heart. Socrates, after learning about the contents of the speech, responds by emulating Lysias. He delivers a speech on the very same topic as the latter, arguing for the same theses (237a-241d). His aim is to

excel. But next comes the critique. Lysias is woefully wrong in his speech, and so Socrates goes on to deliver a second speech in which he refutes the theses and corrects the conclusions of the first (244a-257b). Socrates is proving himself a worthy teacher by making manifest his desire and ability to teach. And he is playfully trying to win Phaedrus over from both Lysias the man and Lysias on the scroll. Education is here the instilling of virtue and excellence. And it is done by showing the student what being better is, and through awakening the desire for improvement.

Plato’s view of education as described in the *Phaedrus* flies in the face of most of those norms and purposes that inform schools today. The *Phaedrus* teacher is everything but professional. The teacher is personally attached to, and invested in the fate of, the student. The student is not replaceable, and the message delivered could never be codified and standardised and packaged. A sort of competition is central to this understanding of the educational setting, because in Plato’s world, as in our own, truth and goodness are always under attack, always contested. What is settled, what is considered the norm, is normally off the mark, because it is the by-product of mere power struggle and not the outgrowth of virtue. And the teacher, in order to be a worthy teacher, must really be better than the student. The teacher is a better human being. The teacher is more honest, more brave, more insightful, and more inspired. The student’s desire to learn is the same as the student’s desire to become like the teacher, and to become



even better. Here is the unadulterated form of learning by emulation.

The hazards of Plato's proposal are as obvious as they are unavoidable. The teacher-student relationship is both uniquely delicate and delicately unique, and managing abuses is a problem which must be treated as an inescapable human problem. But the problem lacks a universal and technical solution. And while all personal relationships come with risk, especially hierarchical relationships, we have to move away from that mindset which deems these risks to be unacceptable and introduces a regulated safety distance. Safety plays straight into the hands of automation in the form of the machine, AI, because safety here is accomplished through automation in the form of organisation and thus a form of impersonal and dehumanising normation. In order to keep cultivating a living language capable of being a vehicle for truth and a medium of meaningful interchange in a society of responsible citizens, schools must at the very least be moving towards the Platonic teaching ideal.

Pursuing the Platonic, unprofessional ideal constitutes a "deschooling" of society much in the same vein as that proposed by Ivan Illich (1970), but it should be noted that here deschooling is pursued precisely in order to avoid that other deschooling which inevitably will come upon us as AI gradually proceeds to make communicative skills (appear) redundant by overloading all communication channels. The first sort of deschooling would make society less reliant on organised education

and more on "disorganised", personalised forms of skill transfer and knowledge seeking. The second sort of deschooling, which is instead a direct effect of technological development, makes organised schooling less relevant by automating the tasks for which the students were trained. This second sort of deschooling follows upon yet another sort of deschooling, namely, the seemingly democratising process of what Peter Jandrić has called a deschooling of virtuality (2014), which especially characterised the early World Wide Web. The suggested anarchism of institutions such as Wikipedia seemed – for a while at least – to wrest some of the power over knowledge distribution out of the hands of the monopoly of (public and private) organised education. But as Jandrić notes, this came at the price of another kind of monopoly – indeed what Illich called a "radical" monopoly – manifest in the prospective learner's total dependence on the technologies required to access the new outlets of learning (Ibid., 94–95). With the new technologies that are now being deployed, this same sort of radical monopoly is becoming radically all-encompassing. And so one monopoly is simply replaced by another, and the second sort of deschooling is associated not with individual emancipation but with an unprecedented degree of centralism and even feudal subjugation (cf. Zuboff, 2019). The first kind of deschooling removes organised schooling by shifting initiative and responsibility to the individual person. The second removes organised schooling by replacing it with mechanisms that



make redundant those activities that have characterised the institution. The second is now under way in schools as part of a greater shift of power in society at large, although this shift is not inevitable, strictly speaking (Ibid., Ch. 7). Counteraction, however, requires a conscious choice and a determinate strategy on the part of the human being – the teacher, the learner. The result of the reactive reorientation we are pondering here must be a radically transformed school.

RESILIENCE

The technologies built on generative AI are now being deployed at an exponential rate and the time to reflect and react is now. The stakes are high. What lies in store is not merely a society where demand for qualified language users – writers, journalists, diplomats, politicians – is dwindling, but a society where sense-making itself is being challenged and brutally overcome. As Cope and Kalantzis have suggested, what emerges already at an early stage is a gradual change of our human meaning capacities, and in particular a semantic shift away from human-social towards cyber-social meaning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2023). I have here tried to lay bare the destructive potential which is tied to the unavoidably parasitical character of this cyber-social meaning paired with raw digital processing power. As the social space is getting more and more filled up by simulated communication, actual communication is increasingly pushed to the fringes. And to the ex-

tent that there is no way on the social (i.e. textual) level to distinguish between an original communication and an imitation of such an actual communication, we are quickly approaching the total eclipse of the original. Here only imitation remains. But as we have already seen, this is also where generative AI as a tool loses all usefulness and functionality, at least as long as we measure its usefulness in terms of the possible benefit to the individual language user. It may still be practicable as an instrument for surveillance and control for someone outside its scope and reach. Properly shielded from its corrosive social effect, a governing group could use it – as long as they do not need or value a citizenship or consumership possessing communicative skills or which is grounded in the real world. I assume the evolution is here simply driven by a blind struggle for power, and for money, i.e. the illusion of power (Schindler, 2009). And the individual's only defence is to find a way to control her own will to power through her own grip on the truth – a truth cultivated with others, and learned, and taught – lest she be pulled again into that vortex which is simply the mesmerising, fantastic output of a control system, or – in Plato's words – the wall of the cave. We end up here because we fail to contain our appetite to dominate.

A prayer closes the *Phaedrus*. “O dear Pan and all the other gods of this place, grant that I may be beautiful inside. Let all my external possessions be in friendly harmony with what is within. May I consider the wise man rich. As for gold, let



me have as much as a moderate man could bear and carry with him.” (279b–c) It is Socrates who utters it, and Phaedrus asks that the prayer be made a prayer for him as well, because “friends have everything in common” (ibid.). If school becomes a space for a wholly unprofessional preoccupation with the individual person, for friendly but spirited competition, for brutal honesty and an uncompromising commitment to excellence and to what is exceptional, and if school manages

to find sufficient support for its new (or old) core values among the citizenship at large, then school might help counteract the monumental power shift that is under way. Only true diversity – a diversity of virtuosity – can save a society on the brink of the social-cultural and epistemic counterpart of ecological collapse, the end-point of which is what Byung-Chul Han calls “the hell of sameness” (2017). In the coming flood of the same, I pray that school will become our Noah’s Ark.

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EKENBERG, T. Imitace, reprezentace a ztráta originálu: Škola jako Noemova archa

*Jsmo na úsvitu revoluce v komunikačních technologiích, která dalece předčí transformační sílu knižtisku a možná se blíží významu vynálezu písma. Velké jazykové modely (LLM) v kombinaci s konverzačními prostředky tvořícími C-LLM již – otevřeně i skrytě – ovlivnily školy a podniky, akademický výzkum i masmédiá. V tomto článku se zabýváme některými důležitými výzvami, které tyto technologie představují pro některé přetrvávající klíčové ideje vzdělávání. Na pozadí jistého předpokladu, že C-LLM jsou zde již napořád, zde zkoumáme pojetí školy jako možného prostoru pro protipatření optikou kritiky technologie psaného slova v Platónově díle *Faidros* a jeho pojmu arete neboli ctnost. Cílem je zjistit, jaké možnosti se otevírají pro novou představu školy jako místa pro učení v době, kdy se radikálně proměňují vzorce užívání jazyka.*

Klíčová slova: *technologie, gramotnost, LLM, C-LLM, generativní umělá inteligence, odnaučování, Platón, Faidros*