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## **Competition, education and assessment: connecting history with recent scholarship**

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### **Abstract**

In this article we investigate competition in education, asking if it is good or bad and especially if it is old and necessary or new and questionable. Using philological methods, we trace the history of competition and relate it to contemporary educational ideas. In history and modern pedagogical research, competition has a 'dark side' as well as energising qualities. We question the inseparability of competition and education and, weighing up the moral and pedagogical benefits and dangers, we advocate moderation in educational competition.

**Keywords:** competition, assessment, norm referencing, history of ideas, philology

### **Learning to avoid competition**

Higher education is competitive in every sense. Students compete with one another for the highest marks (Sadler, 2005), for limited educational resources (Bound, Hershbein, & Long, 2009; Giesinger, 2011), for scarce scholarships, and ultimately for a better place in the “rat race” of a competitive graduate job market (Moen, 1999). Schools and universities compete with one another for the best students, research funds and rankings (Pusser & Marginson, 2013). And lecturers compete with one another to get into the most prestigious journals, to win highly contested funding, vying with one another to score high teaching evaluation scores and other performance indicators, tallied in a cocktail of metrics that determine their prospects of promotion. Though built into the structure of academic life, however, competition is not necessarily essential in education, nor has it been universally accepted in practice. Radical educational thinkers, like the influential Ivan Illich, have complained that ‘Today all schools are obligatory...and competitive’ (Illich, 1970, p. 61) and that ‘school pushes the pupil up to the level of competitive curricular consumption’ (Illich, 1970, p. 42), a tendency which he also deplored in the sociology of science, where ‘what used to be an international network of scientific information has been splintered into an arena of competing teams’ (p. 86).

Competition is not without its discontents, both in education and society at large. But critiques of competition in educational practice and theory pale beside mainstream expectations in favour of competition. True to the surrounding capitalist structures, education respects a kind of market-place of talent, where choices are made between contending bidders for what investments are available; and it could be argued that the rise of competition in education also reflects the way that education is seen as a market phenomenon. There is

scarcely a greater slur in the mainstream of commerce and industry than to label a product as uncompetitive, which is to say either backward and doomed or artificially propped up at the expense of net economic welfare. Perhaps just because of the alignment with the bedrock structure of capital, competition is seen not only as necessary but good for society. In business, competition is protected by law and anti-competitive forms of collusion are illegal and punishable. There are obvious parallels in assessment, with real tensions between collaboration and collusion (Barrett & Cox, 2005).

So ingrained is competition in our society that we find it difficult to separate education from competition. But in the same way that it is possible to learn without being taught by a teacher or to become educated without undergoing assessment, so it is possible to learn without competition; and, we assert, neither is essential to the other. In parts of the professions and vocations, competency-based education models are popular, which privilege students' abilities to do certain tasks rather than their relative excellence (Frank et al., 2010). The workplace itself can be viewed as a participatory learning environment (Billett, 2004), without teacher or assessor. Rank order educational assessment methods are less useful in these settings: what matters most is a student's absolute ability to do something, rather than their ability relative to others. Implementing these models can be challenging, because specifying competence in absolute rather than relative terms is difficult, and competency-based systems are critiqued as reductionist, or a race to the lowest common denominator (Frank et al., 2010).

Our intention in writing this paper is somewhat to set aside the contemporary mainstream of educational practice, and to examine the historical record of attitudes to competition. The history of ideas allows us to provide a portrait of virtues and drawbacks of competition in cultures of enormous and prestigious production. Throughout, we use original texts not

because they constitute a systematic philosophical treatment of the theme of competition—which seems nowhere in existence—but because writers in various philosophical and poetic traditions have left an invaluable record of what they meant by the concept. Our contention is that an understanding of competition has never been stable and absolute but is mutable according to the context. Any pedagogical advantages or disadvantages of competition must therefore be located within a historical framework that lets us deconstruct any assumptions of competition as an inevitable constant in educational practice.

The need for philosophical research on competition in education has been identified as far back as the 1970s (Dearden, 1972), with promises of “drawing out presuppositions, clarifying concepts and examining validity” (Dearden, 1972, p. 133). There is a particular need for a historical sort of philosophy about competition; Fielding (1976) states that this is “importantly true and worth re-emphasizing frequently” (p. 136). However, since these calls to action in the 1970s little work has been undertaken that considers the origins of competition. Although ideas of competition are old, educational competition is relatively new, with critiques only dating back to Ruskin’s work in 1853. In the following sections we move further back than Ruskin and connect the notion of competition to contemporary educational ideas.

### **A modern anxiety?**

Starting near the beginning, there is no evidence of competition in the kind of learning that Socrates expects, which was also free of assessment (Nelson & Dawson, 2013). The key positive conception of competition (*ἀγών*) is associated with sport and sometimes music (Herodotus 6.127, 2.91, Plato, *Laws* 658a, Aristophanes, *Plutus* 1163) and sometimes battle (Thucydides 2.89) but not education; it strongly connotes struggle and—not by accident—is the origin of our word agony. An even more stressful conception was also used to describe

competitive conflict or a contest for superiority (ἀμιλλὰ) which could sometimes apply to striving for wealth or marriage or children (Euripides, *Medea* 546, 557, *Andromache* 214) or even virtue (Plato, *Laws* 731b). The closest Latin counterpart (*certamen*) could be associated with a contest for eloquence among young people (Quintilian 2.17.8) or language (Livy 10.22.6) but, on the evidence of the words, does not appear to be integral to Roman learning and teaching.

The historical record of a non-competitive educational structure is valuable; otherwise we could easily neglect the relatively few contemporary circumstances of mainstream education which are not constructed competitively. ‘Pass grade only’ course units that are not assigned a numeric score are one example; and, in many countries, the early years of education are blissfully free of competition, where the experience of very young people is supposedly quarantined from competition. But even in those tender years, the fact that some children can read fluently by the end of a Preparatory year and others cannot read without great difficulty causes zeal and anxiety among the respective parents, yielding a *de facto* form of competition which we hope the children are too young to understand.

Anxiety might be said to sit in a reciprocal relation with students and teachers respectively; and competition is the fulcrum around which the one is happier at the other's expense. If there is no competition between students, some teachers may become anxious that the students are not sufficiently motivated; indeed entire pedagogical approaches have been developed around promoting competition (e.g. Burguillo, 2010). But with every degree of competition that is introduced to goad their performance, students experience anxiety. Competition is a circumstance where every winner has a loser as a counterpart. If I cannot be a winner, I fear disappointment, as if I am a failure, even if I have learned something in the process; but of course if I already feel the failure that I fear, my learning will be discouraged. I may have

become competent but I have failed the competition. We countenance this somewhat demoralizing economy, rightly or wrongly, on the basis that living with competition and risk of failure are themselves a learning experience. But studies on students have found that an insecure striving to compete is associated with psychological harm: “fears of rejection, need for validation, hypercompetitive attitudes, feeling inferior to others, submissive behaviour and indicators of stress, anxiety and depression” (Gilbert et al., 2007, p. 633). Insecure competitive striving is also a significant predictor of psychopathologies (Gilbert et al., 2007). Students with depression are particularly vulnerable to the ‘dark side’ of competition (Gilbert, McEwan, Bellew, Mills, & Gale, 2009).

The stakes around competition are high; but there is limited pedagogical literature identifying exactly when it is good and, by implication, when it is bad; and, for the cases where it might be felt to be destructive, there is little mainstream prescription as to how it might become avoidable or the worst effects mitigated. Because globalized culture is saturated in motifs of competition—from manufacturing and services to politics, and from media and advertising to sport—there is a supposition that competition is not only inevitable but socially and psychologically desirable. Competition is responsible for people “lifting their game”, where they would otherwise be lazy. Competition is responsible for goods and services constantly improving or prices falling; it is held to be the origin of progress among nations, whether military or industrial or even scientific and artistic. It is not just a mechanism but an ideology, a kind of attitude that institutionalizes struggle as social hygiene.

### **Sport and animals**

As a culture, we are almost indoctrinated to think thus because of competitive sport, which is pure competition in the sense that it constructs a struggle at largely arbitrary stakes.

Competitive sport is used as a cypher for performance in life. You will only be good at tennis

to a quaint degree if you only practice hit-to-hit; but if you want to improve radically, you have to play competition tennis. In turn, the metric for being good at tennis is configured around winning; so we measure success by how successfully one competes. One does not measure how much conversation is enjoyed while playing tennis or how long the players manage to keep the ball going or how pleasurable they make the strokes for one another to return. These would all be reasonable alternative motifs for the enjoyment of tennis and edification of the players; but they do not structurally belong to the way that tennis has been defined by its own rules, which faithfully reflect a competitive sporting culture. Competitive sport gives us an excellent example of competition as an end in itself, rather than a means to “better sportsmanship [*sic*] and friendlier feelings, and as an outlet for excess energy” (Prvulovich, 1982, p. 78), and its role in developing educational competition leaves some squeamish (Meakin, 1986).

Beyond these cultural patterns, evolutionary psychology can be used to argue that competition is natural (Gilbert et al., 2009), an integral part of the planetary economy that we share with every other creature and even plants, as they vie with one another for light, water and air. The implication of this Darwinian persuasion is that competition is eternal, beyond culture and an absolute law throughout all of life, irrespective of the ways that nature is artificially controlled or instincts are suppressed. However, even amongst the earliest peer-reviewed sources on educational competition (Dearden, 1972) there is a dispute about the inevitability of competition, arguing that it requires a sort of cooperation by the competitors; though this scepticism is not universal (Fielding, 1976).

### **Excitement and competition**

European literature is full of tipping points, where affection towards competition turns one way or the other. Sometimes, the flavour of competition is bitter. For example, in the famous

story of Romeo and Juliet that the sixteenth-century writer Bandello gave to Shakespeare, the Montagues and Capulets have a rivalry of enmity (*nemichevola gara*, *Novelle* 2.9). But in a more jocular vein in another novella, Bandello describes the banter between Isabella and Rocco as everlasting competition (*perpetua gara*) to see who was the ruder, the more brazen and presumptuous (2.51). Similarly, the social philosopher Guicciardini notes that in Florence, after a public scandal, one does not punish the shameless person but people compete with one another (*cercato a gara*) to deliver him or her into impunity (177). The same author also produces the first critique of competition when he described the cheapening effects of capital. Industries and the arts of profit (business) are best when not yet universally known; but when they enter the world of opinion, they decline because, when they are “turned around by many”, the competition (*el concorso*) makes them shabbier (178).

The code breaks down most conspicuously and catastrophically with war, where the productive striving of one country against another turns to mass violence, which ironically has its own energizing dimension, apart from being overwhelmingly destructive.

Unfortunately, and here is the rub, these motifs are hard to disentangle, even from the faculties of creativity. In his *Twilight of the gods* (*Götzen-Dämmerung*), Nietzsche demonstrates well the essential ambivalence that competition involves for the creative soul. In a confronting text, the subjectivist philosopher speculates on the necessary physiological changes that contribute to art. Going against his own anti-mechanistic tendency, Nietzsche analyses the inspirational euphoria or intoxication that stimulates artistic work. The peculiar excitement that he calls *Rausch* heightens the whole organism, else there is no art (8). Nietzsche then lists many types of creative ecstasy: first, there is sexual excitement which, impressively anticipating Freud, Nietzsche calls the oldest and most original form of *Rausch*. Then there are great desires arising from strong affections, the headiness of festivity, of



competition (*des Wettkampfs*), bravery, victory, the intoxication of cruelty or destruction, certain meteorological events, like the ecstasy of Spring, the influence of drugs, an engorged and swollen will: the essential in *Rausch*, he explains, is a feeling of increased strength and exuberance. Culture does everything to reduce it.

Against the disciplined spirit of his age, Nietzsche is in favour of giving free reign to creative intoxication; but he nevertheless recognizes that it contains some disagreeable ingredients. To the headiness of festivity or the ecstasy of Spring, we have no objection. But cruelty and destruction are plainly awful causes of excitement, though undeniably strong. Competition, in this bracing perspective, sits fairly in the middle, with its self-generating incentives and sometimes lack of intrinsic sense. As suggested, one has only to think of the fury that possesses people in the quest to shove a leather ball behind one set of goal posts or another to appreciate that the spirit of competition involves (a) a kind of frenzy and (b) a purpose which can be quite arbitrary. It can be quite tempting to harness this spirit for productive purposes; if assessment competition were to produce greater time on task, surely this would be a positive result. Above all, it can be good or bad in equal measure, good for producing energy and bad when the energy is directed to an uncritical purpose.

### **Competition or competence?**

The word for competition derives from a Latin preposition meaning ‘with’ or ‘together with’ (*cum*) and the verb ‘to strive’ (*petere*) which structurally reflects the Greek for striving together (*συνάγω*) which usually denotes peaceful congregation (*Iliad* 6.87, Herodotus 2.111, 3.150) but is sometimes hostile, associated with battle (*Iliad* 2.381, 5.861, 14.448). The striving is not coupled with a conjunction like ‘against’. Through this linguistic image, we strive with someone, not against someone. Competition is etymologically the same as our word competence, that is, a faculty of doing things, a capability or skill, which does not

presuppose a competitor but only knowledge and ability. Across the Romance-language countries from the renaissance, these meanings are in the balance. In Spanish, for example, ‘*competencia*’ does not mean competence so much as competition—striving against someone, without a resolution—rather than striving with satisfaction, which is what we mean by competence.

Higher education assessment practices involve a strange mix of competition and competence: norm-referenced assessment, which evaluates students against each other, and criterion-referenced assessment which evaluates students against predetermined criteria. Norm-referenced assessment has long been criticized as fostering unhealthy competition and not being fit for purpose (Turnbull, 1989): knowing a student’s rank does not tell us how well he or she has achieved a particular educational outcome. But criterion-referenced assessment is a challenging and diverse landscape; and our best efforts revert to an implicit norm-referenced competition when we read through a batch of student work before grading to get a feel for how the cohort has met the criteria relative to each other (Sadler, 2005). In a truly criterion-referenced system students and teachers strive with each other, but most realities include an element of striving against.

The ambiguity may be structural, because it matches that of another important Romance word for competition, *concurrentia* (Italian *concorrenza*) which again begins with the Latin preposition ‘with’ (*cum*) and adds the motif of running (*currere*). So competition means running together with others, without necessarily a sense of one runner being pitted against the other. It might seem excessively subtle: after all, on the racetrack, the runners do technically run together—because clearly following a single direction—and cannot run apart from one another; but this physically parallel course does not prevent them from running against one another psychologically, in the sense of the one outrunning the other.

Nevertheless, the kindly preposition (*cum*) disposes the concept in a positive way; and that is the reason that in English, concurrence—or more strongly in the verbal ‘to concur’—has no competitive connotations but quite the contrary: it suggests a concerted flowing together in time and place, without a suggestion of rivalry. But the nastier meaning lurks in the nearby French from which we borrowed the word, as in the seventeenth-century tragedian Racine, who disposes of an angry competitor to the throne (*fâcheux concurrent*, *La Thébaidé* 1.3) or whose character declares with sinister calculation: for a competitor (*concurrent*) I only have my brother (*Phèdre* 2.2). This tension plays out often in higher education assessment, for example in high-stakes group projects where students “navigate complex trajectories where they collaborate and fight for their marks” (Orr, 2010, p. 301).

### **Competing creatively**

In the illustrious epochs that created polyphony, atmospheric painting, humorous literature and the grand ceremonial architectures of Europe, there was definitely an understanding that competition existed and was used instrumentally to compare the work of artists for the award of commissions. It is implicitly acknowledged that such competition is necessary and good; but it has limits. For example, reflecting on the early Florentine painter Tommaso di Stefano (Giotto), the sixteenth-century art-biographer Giorgio Vasari makes some very telling points. When painting is competitive (*presa in gara*) and practiced by emulating artists (*emoli*) with much study, and when artists work in competition (*lavorano a concorrenza*), without doubt those good wits find new ways and new methods...for those who see them competing (*gareggiare*) in art. One artist, Vasari goes on, will do well with novelty, another with harmony; but the artist who paints with integrity (*unitamente*)...deserves the greatest praise and shows rightness of soul and intellectual conversation (*Life of Tommaso di Stefano*).

Among the remarkable aspects of the text is Vasari's acknowledgement of competition as an effective incentive in boosting performance. Artists come up with novelties under pressure. But while it is good for smart progress, he suggests, it is not necessarily good for a deeper vein of artistic integrity. That quality is left to the highest level of art, which is implicitly defined as somehow beyond the spur of competition.

Without doubt, the great ideals of the renaissance arose in competitive circumstances. In certain cases, works were commissioned on the basis of a competition or tender system, a bit like architecture today. But the mood of these events is not necessarily competitive. Vasari records the famous competition of 1401, when the commission for the doors of the Baptistry in Florence was decided. In his biography of Lorenzo Ghiberti, Vasari explains that key sculptors were set against one another (*a concorrenza*) but they ended up in admirable solidarity. Seeing that Ghiberti's work was superior and more apposite, Brunelleschi and Donatello created a deputation to cede the palm to their talented rival (whose pre-eminence subsequently caused Brunelleschi to drop sculpture in favour of architecture). This commendation was accepted and Ghiberti was awarded the famous job, which is one of the treasures of Florence. 'Happy spirits', Vasari says, 'who granting affordances (*girovavano*) the one to the other, enjoyed (*godevano*) praising one another's labours'.

In the *Life of Verrocchio*, Vasari returns to these giants and describes how others were in competition (*gara*) on their behalf, some who favoured one and some who favoured the other. In the *Life of Francesco Francia*, anticipating the popular theories of Richard Florida, we read about cities being rivalrous for the prestigious work of artists: cities are pitted against one another but not the artists themselves.

The Baptistry Doors give us a charming example of peer assessment initiated by the assessed. Although a formal jury was assembled, it was consensus of the semifinalist artist peers that

made history. But in higher education would we expect students to reach a consensus that one piece was the best, and worthy of great reward, whereas the others were not worthy of any? In practice students resist processes of peer assessment, with concerns about reliability, expertise, power and time (Liu & Carless, 2006); and when it is implemented students tend to bunch each other around the middle of the grading band (Snowball & Mostert, 2013). We suspect modern university students would have begged the jury to make the decision about the commission for the Baptistry Doors. Recent work tends to privilege peer feedback rather than peer grading as the active ingredient in peer assessment (Liu & Carless, 2006); if we were designing the door commission as a learning activity we would have asked the artists to provide formative feedback to each other before submitting their work.

Competitive feelings seem to be necessary but in need of management. In the nineteenth century, Nietzsche still noted that the upbringing of genius invokes the passions of envy, hatred and competition (“*ruft sie den Leidenschaften Neid, Hass und Wetteifer zu*”, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* 233). The basis for this assertion is visible in many candid renaissance texts. Vasari is conscious that the artists whose lives he documents are not immune from jealousy. At one point, Brunelleschi is blinded by wild envy, which is brought on by the race of ambition (*per la gara della ambizione*) and damages a reputation.

For all that, one notices distinguishing features when artists are pitted against one another (*a gara*), as in the *Life of Ercole Ferrarese*. It is also true of Il Cecca the engineer. The great architecture and gardens and sumptuous possessions “that everyone wants but few can have” goads people into competition (*eccitato la gara e le concorrenzie*), which makes the world more beautiful and comfortable (*fanno e bello e comodo il mondo*). In contrast, the rarity of high grades created by competitive norm-referenced assessment is an artificial scarcity and does not make the world beautiful and comfortable.

Culture, one might say, maintains jealousies with subtle etiquette (Nelson, 2009). Zeal and competitiveness on the one hand are in constant diplomatic strife with propriety and generosity on the other. Somewhere inside it lies the faculty of learning, which is both stimulated and mortified by competition. If we have concentrated on artistic production, it is because it visibly entails learning, a study which was talked about incessantly in the studio; because every new work that contributes to culture is evidence of profound learning having taken place. It is learning in a gently competitive circumstance. The seventeenth-century poet Giambattista Marino describes poetry itself as a noble competition (*nobil gara, Adone* 14.304) with its magnanimous lies, piling on the oxymorons in lofty baroque extravagance, which compares with the idea of honorable or decorated competition (*onorata gara*, 16.159.1 or 17.159.1), perhaps implying that some competition might be less than honorable.

In searching our motives to learn, there are many confronting theories, among which is Freud's belief that curiosity has a sexual origin, because the child wants to know about the erotic function which is only available to its parents and which is mostly inscrutable and certainly untaught in normal families; but even this somewhat devious and unconscious incentive to know must be reconciled with a competitive economy, as the male child in the Oedipal scenario enters into competitive relations with the father. Competition is a facet of learning from which there is no escape. Echoing Marino, even Nietzsche acknowledges the essential motor of competition in the most hallowed cultural productions. Under the words of artistic ambition (*Künstler-Ehrgeiz*) Nietzsche affirms that Greek art is inseparable from competition (*nicht ohne Wettkampf zu denken*) and a will to win. He instances the tragedians, each one of whom wanted to beat his rivals (*den Sieg über Nebenbuhler*), though this victory is to excel further (*vortrefflicher sein*) and not merely to appear so or be rated thus in common judgement for the sake of vanity and pride (*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* 170).

## Suppressing competition

Nietzsche considers that it is difficult to understand creative rhetoric and poetry if one has not been brought up with them and, he adds, competed in them (*gewetteifert, Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* 35). But against this recognition, there are powerful reasons to suppress the competitive feelings, and not just because we make ourselves objectionable among our peers by always suggesting that we want to get ahead of them. Nietzsche identifies a further reason for avoiding competition: we do not want to be crushed by figures with whom we cannot compete. The mechanism for avoiding this self-annihilation is to erect a construct of genius that puts superior performances beyond the scope of comparison.

Nietzsche's theory of genius as an institution of self-protection for the mediocre is original. Almost everything that humans do can be seen as a wonder; but, Nietzsche says, our vanity does not enjoy the prospect that we cannot produce a sketch like Raphael or a scene in a Shakespeare play, so we need a label to take care of this unobtainable excellence, to post it as miraculous, extraordinarily godly, so that one need not live up to such high expectations. Great and wonderful things are reachable by all people but one constructs categories like intuition, a genius-being, in order to take care of our envy. The cult of genius puts the potential outside our power, because the genius is outside our realm of competition. To call someone divine means: "no need to compete here" (*hier brauchen wir nicht zu wetteifern, Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* 162).

Through vanity, the genius is prized at the expense of the genial. It would make more sense not to be fazed by great things in the world and rather to proceed innocently and with fewer inhibitions. Without grand comparisons intimidating us, we have the greatest chance of learning and enjoying confidence in the effort of creating afresh. In the pragmatic terms of the renaissance, even creative people also need protection against the prospect of unreachable

greatness. In his *Life of Fra Filippo Lippi*, Vasari decrees that it is temerarious presumption and foolhardy madness to want to compete with people who are better than you, lacking the halter of shame (*il freno di vergogna*). Even in the fourteenth century, if you want to flatter your lover, you can say that he or she can compare herself or himself with the most perfect (*si paragona pur coi più perfecti*, Petrarch 346.10). It is implied that no one else should.

‘Genius’ and synonymous terms have likely appeared on many norm-referenced assessments. These sorts of lazy labels and superlatives allow us to avoid setting a real standard; we merely say that one student’s work is immeasurably and unachievably better than their peers. In contrast, recent work on sustainable assessment and the development of student judgement encourage task design that enables students to “appreciate, articulate and apply standards and criteria for good work in this area” (Boud & Soler, 2015, p. 11).

### **Competition compromises curiosity**

In spite of Marino’s description of poetry, the common striving that is magically accelerated through competition is somewhat ignoble and contrary to the best spirit of education, art, science and all disinterested learning. The critique of competition, which had been incipient throughout many centuries of creative achievement—where authors scrupled so much about the debilitating and superficial consequences of competition—is arguably clinched by Nietzsche in a passage concerning rhetoric or “The hours of eloquence”, as he calls it. Nietzsche describes two kindred kinds of speaker, one who is spurred on to speak eloquently in the presence of someone who towers above him or her in rhetorical prowess, and the other who finds complete freedom in happy and persuasive expression when talking to somebody junior. Both cases, he says, follow the same pattern: one only speaks well when one is in one’s comfort (for which Nietzsche uses the French term *sans gêne*, without embarrassment) because he or she is free of the impetus of competition and does not feel rivalry (*den Antrieb*



*der Concurrentz, des Wettbewerbs nicht fühlt*) with either someone superior or lesser. But now, Nietzsche announces, there is a whole other kind of person who will only speak well when in competitive zeal (*Wetteifer*) with the intention of winning (*mit der Absicht zu siegen*). One thinks of certain politicians today. Finally, he asks, which of these two kinds of person is the more nobly ambitious (*ehrgeizigere*): the one who speaks well out of honorable ambition (*Ehrsucht*) or the other who speaks poorly or not at all from the same motif? (*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* 367)

If it is true that competition skews our interest away from free curiosity toward a preoccupation with winning, it is bad for learning and hence educationally evil. Competition stifles the disinterest that is necessary for free curiosity, which in turn is needed for imagination and research. In certain circumstances, competition has to be eliminated, lest it cause pedagogical devastation, almost in the same way that Bandello narrates how all the Ottoman royal males are suffocated so that only one remains the leader without competitor (*senza competitore* 2.13). Despatching competitors is ugly and desperate; and we do not want to go to those lengths to avoid competition. Nevertheless, if the strangulatory economy of competition can be avoided entirely, we would be better off.

As in swatting for exams, where the objective is to do better than others and distinguish oneself, competition makes us learn superficially. With excellent and monastic self-discipline, we may learn profoundly in these circumstances; but the chances are against it. Meta-analyses by Richardson, Abraham and Bond (2012) suggest the student who wants to win the university GPA competition choose strategic learning over deep learning; grade goals over intrinsic motivation; and concentration over agreeableness.

The energizing thrill of competition is good for circumstances where the aim is manipulation. For example, there is definitely a valuable skill in debating, which throws us into a high-

adrenaline arena. In a debate, we want to trounce or deride the opposition. But our performance at this competitive contest is more about how cleverly we put things together—admittedly a kind of learning—rather than absorbing new ideas and knowledge that correspond with natural curiosity. In relation to the patient and humble quality of deep learning, the excitement of a debate (which is structurally adversarial) is more on the destructive side, as if activating blood-lust from an archaic warlike phase of our evolution.

If we are to cultivate curiosity-driven learning, such as the renaissance and baroque artists acquired prodigiously in their studios, we need—at the very least—a moderated form of competition that allows for wonder, for an enthusiasm grown from within the learning and its intrinsically beautiful subject matter rather than pressure from outside it. There are grounds for thinking that competition might be bad for learning, because the motivation for performance involves an ulterior energy, which alienates the subject matter of the learning from the incentive to learn. An analogy occurs in performance management in the workplace, where differential pay is considered a dubious reward for good work, because it suggests that the incentive for high performance is extrinsic to the work itself; over the past few decades performance pay schemes have not consistently increased productivity (Perry, Engbers, & Jun, 2009), but we suspect they may have increased competition.

Our hope is that the integrity of learning might be restored; and for this enlightened step to be taken, we must abandon the assumption that education is about sorting people with discriminatory marks that necessarily sets them up in competition with one another. There are numerous educational paradigms that avoid this pedagogical catastrophe, which is entrenched in the mainstream, of dubious necessity and in need of review.

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