

SOCRATES IN THE SOUTH BRONX

Gregory Marks

Faculty at Hostos are often encouraged to “meet students where they are” and then help them achieve their goals. To me, this phrase means faculty should be aware of the varied skill levels and perspectives of our students, and be understanding of their needs not only as learners, but also as parents, workers, etc. I think “meet students where they are” is not just a fine phrase but a sound pedagogical approach, for rightly understood, it implies not a condescending sympathy, but a recognition of student potential and distances to be bridged. Hostos is a *community* college: it serves the south Bronx community as it encounters it in the space of the classroom, be it a developmental course or an Honors lab.

I was thinking of these words because of an English 091 course I taught last fall. 091 is a developmental writing course that aims to get student skills up to college standards (as measured by the CUNY-ACT Writing Exam). In all my writing courses, I try to have substantial readings, and in the past I have had some success with Platonic dialogues. They make sense in composition courses: they are dramatic, with great characters, clear topics, punchy dialogue—a lot of literary elements that students like. From a teacher’s perspective, the dialogues also do a lot of heavy lifting, for they focus on forming sound arguments, defining terms, and using words accurately to describe reality. So Socrates fits in pretty well with the goals of a freshman writing course.

However, I had never done any Plato in a developmental course. As any of us who have struggled to learn a foreign language (or any new subject) know, it is often better to start with simple assignments, grammar, straightforward readings, etc. But I threw *Phaedo* into the mix last fall just to see what would happen, figuring, that my 091 students, like most Hostos students, were up for a challenge. And a challenge it is: in *Phaedo*, Socrates is on death row, and his friends meet with him one last time to discuss whether the human soul outlives the body. Because Socrates is about to die, it is certainly a timely issue; several arguments for the soul’s immortal-

ity are offered, objections are raised, etc. Honestly, I did not expect too much: it is a really long dialogue, and with key notions like *opposition*, *life*, *origin* and *causation* under scrutiny, it can be pretty laborious reading. But actually, to my surprise, it was the most successful unit of the course. Students grasped the text, spoke coherently of it, and wrote with real sophistication about it. So my question became, how did *Phaedo* “meet students where they were”? What shared place in the south Bronx did these 091 students and this 2400-year old fellow occupy?

The answer is, I think, that our students are often in a place of faith. Like many college students and Americans generally, our students are a religious folk. And to my amateur sociologist’s eye, they seemed to have not merely passively received their many faiths from their families, but really performed them, and often linked them to a whole theory of moral action. That is why *Phaedo* appealed to them: what happens to the soul after death, what earthly life has to do with a possible next life, how even to speak about “soul”—these are all relevant, if not urgent, questions for them. Their success with *Phaedo* is the more surprising in that it is not a “religious” text—not at all. There are hardly any references to god(s), and certainly no arguments built on faith: it is straight up philosophy, pure argumentation, with a questioning, ironic, often skeptical tone. *Phaedo*’s purpose is not to convert, but to force rumination on whether the human soul has enough energy to survive death. Yet it is a philosophical text that engages theological and moral questions. That is where my students met Socrates.

What I take from this is that Hostos students occupy places and meet figures we oftentimes cannot imagine.

Gregory Marks
English Department