

FREINET AND PAIDEIA: COMPLEMENTARY EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES

The International Summit on Dialogic Instruction is co-sponsored by the Mimer Academy and the National Paideia Center, but behind these two organizations are two philosophies. The Mimer Academy is one of hundreds of Freinet schools in Europe that are based on the writings of Celestin Freinet (1896-1966), a French philosopher and educator who believed in the power of active learning. The National Paideia Center was founded by Mortimer Adler (1902-2001), an American philosopher and educator who also believed in the power of active learning. They both owed a great deal to the progressivist movement in Western education and were influenced by John Dewey among others.

Celestin Freinet began teaching in 1921 and shortly thereafter became a member of a communist teachers' organization. He lived and taught in France and eventually worked in various European countries during and after World War II. His political and theoretical beliefs led him to a very practical approach to student work as part of a real world production process: His early classes featured newspaper publication and class journals through which students recorded their learning on a daily basis. . His classes also practiced a wide range of democratic decision making—about curriculum and evaluation in particular.

Mortimer Adler was a high school drop out who enrolled in Columbia University in order to pursue his passion for philosophy. He eventually received a doctorate in philosophy without earning either a high school or college diploma. Directly influenced by John Dewey, whom he heard lecture at Columbia, he became fascinated with the power of a classical education. During a long career at the University of Chicago, which included a close friendship and working relationship with Robert Maynard Hutchins, he became convinced that American public education had to become both more rigorous and more equitable. During the 1980s, he published (with the original Paideia Group) three books describing the Paideia Program, which argued for a radically new and more active education.

In philosophy, both Freinet and Adler believed that students spent entirely too much time in passive relationship to their teachers, sitting silently while being lectured to about irrelevant details. Both believed that students needed to take a much more active



role in their own education, working to master skills and generate understanding. In fact, the original Freinet classrooms are very like contemporary American classrooms that feature the Paideia Coached Project in their focus on student production for an authentic audience.

Freinet's original pupils wrote down their own personal adventures from inside as well as outside the classroom. They conducted "field investigations" in all subject areas that helped them relate what they were learning to the real world. Based on independent inquiry; students set their own plan of work for a certain time period. The schedule was discussed and evaluated with the teacher, but the students had a strong voice in what and when they learned. Instead of following a set curriculum, the teacher and student planned individualized courses of study. In addition, Freinet advocated for a continuous and collaborative assessment process; whereby students often presented early versions of their work to the classmates for feedback.

Since the mid-1990s, the National Paideia Center has advocated for similar units of product-oriented study called Paideia Coached Projects. Like Freinet classrooms, Paideia classrooms that emphasize Coached Projects feature student planned productions and performances fed by student self-assessment. In addition, Adler's emphasis on the democratic nature of public education has led to many Paideia teachers using democratic decision making, especially with regards to assessment, another echo of Freinet's philosophy.

In contrast to Freinet classrooms, most Paideia classrooms have to deliver a standardized curriculum, and teachers must work in collaboration with their students to plan projects containing that curriculum. Paideia classrooms also feature the consistent use of formal Seminar discussion of ideas and values leading to increased conceptual understanding by teachers and students alike.

The two philosophies complement each other, in that both stress individual inquiry. The teacher is a leader who helps guide, correct, and assess student products and processes. Both advocate for a real world investigation and a school set up for learning through work—featuring work shops, labs, and gardens rather than traditional classrooms. In fact, the two philosophies work so well together that one goal of the International Summit is to introduce Freinet educators to Paideia and Paideia educators to Freinet so as to inspire more schools like the Mimer Academy, which has successfully blended the two philosophies into one program.

