

PLATO PERSIMMON

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PLATO Celebrates 25 Years

It's hard to believe we have been enjoying the wonderful learning opportunities that PLATO offers for a quarter century. We are truly fortunate to have so many meaningful and fun chances to learn, share, and socialize. You are all invited to our official 25th anniversary celebration! The festivities will be held on Oct. 12, 2012, at 5 pm at the Pyle Center. There will be a short program honoring PLATO's founders. We will introduce all of the past presidents in attendance and thank them for their parts in making PLATO such a success. Marv Beatty will give a brief history of PLATO for those newer members who attend. Fred Ross will serve as MC, and the PLATO Chorus will provide a musical interlude. And, of course, there will be food, a cash bar, and time to socialize with old and new friends. Stay tuned for more information as the date draws near.

Learning and PLATO

Over the past few months I have been thinking a lot about the type of environment that promotes real learning. PLATO is an excellent laboratory for exploring this issue. Our courses and special events are meant to stimulate discussion, promote dialogue, and explore different points of view. This seems to work best when we engage in reasoned discourse and dialogue, rather than only advocating for "our" point of view. Seeking understanding of other viewpoints and willingness to question some of our own assumptions seems crucial in this regard.

When we confront differences it's important to determine if they are due to different values, strategies, techniques, etc. Differences in strategies and techniques often lead to discussions

of data, observations, novel approaches, etc. Values often reflect deeply held beliefs that can be very interesting to explore as long as one can suspend judgment while doing so. When we no longer question or explore the assumptions upon which our values and beliefs are founded, we often act in ways that are not conducive to learning. Instead, we become bullhorns saying hurra for our side and denigrating those we perceive as disagreeing with us. How much better it is when we engage in dialogue about our values, beliefs, assumptions, etc. We may still disagree with someone. But, at least we will have better understood the reasons behind our and their beliefs. If the differences are about strategies to accomplish a common goal (shared beliefs and values) then the discourse often will be about what is the best way to proceed. (This, of course, may take us into another discussion of values and beliefs.) The point here is that learning is not about planting a flag and defending a position, rather it is about reasoned dialogue and discourse about issues that leads to a deeper understanding and then leads to more questions.

Promoting an environment in which reasoned dialogue and discussion occurs is at the core of what PLATO promotes. I have seen this work in many of our courses with lively, vibrant, and passionate discussions, almost always respectful, that often result in a better understanding of the issues at hand. Occasionally we fall short, especially in the area of politics. We all have witnessed, and possibly participated in, instances where comments—usually by the majority group—are made in which the only real purpose seems to be to ridicule the other side. (In these cases, I often wonder how those being ridiculed feel. Vengeful? Afraid to speak? Ready to quit participating?)

In any case, this does not promote learning, and we all suffer as a consequence.

Recently we had a speaker at a PLATO event. He chose to "advocate" for a position by basically mounting a political attack on those who he perceived as opposing the position he favored. While many in attendance liked his speech (agreed with his position?) there were a number of others who were offended by the strident remarks (disagreed with his position?). Whatever the case we were left with a speech in which there was no dialogue, discussion, or the presentation of ideas; thus very little was learned concerning the topic of the speech.

In another situation, the Supreme Court recently ruled that the individual mandate of the Affordable Care Act was constitutional under the taxing authority granted to Congress. In the days and weeks leading up to the decision almost all discussions were about the conservative/liberal split on the Court and why the decision would just be a reflection of the divisive politics in our country. To the surprise of many, what we got from the Court was a result of careful discussion and deliberation about whether certain provisions of the Constitution allowed the mandate to apply. People might still disagree with the majority conclusion, but the process was one in which the exchange of ideas prevailed. This is the type of environment that we strive to promote in PLATO, in which we approach issues by trying to understand the various points of view and then form conclusions, rather than trying to make information conform to our pre-established conclusions (beliefs and values).

It is a real privilege to be a part of PLATO, and its commitment to fostering an environment of learning through dialogue and discussion. We might not always agree with each other, but we are all enriched by the contributions and informed viewpoints of our members.



With support from Continuing Studies at UW-Madison

Impressive Start for PLATO Fund

The recently launched PLATO Fund, aimed at enabling PLATO to expand significantly its charitable activity, is off to an impressive start. Details of the fund and the call for gifts was formally announced to members in mid-May, but already by the end of June, almost 40 gifts had been received, totaling close to \$12,000. As will be the case with all gifts to the fund, these have been added to the \$80,000 the Board of Directors originally transferred to the fund from PLATO's financial reserves.

In the past few years PLATO has donated \$3,000 annually for scholarships to financially disadvantaged adult students attending UW-Madison. This year, because of the financial resources now available through the fund, the Board of Directors is looking to budget \$6,000 for these scholarships.

Although scholarship recipients are funded by PLATO, they are not actually selected by our organization. Rather, selection is done by Continuing Studies, following criteria that seeks to identify returning adult students "whose unusual determination and perseverance have enabled them to pursue academic goals and to contribute to the community by demonstrated leadership and/or service."

The PLATO Fund is an endowment fund within the UW Foundation, controlled by formal agreements involving PLATO, the Foundation, and Continuing Studies. These agreements assure that PLATO's Board of Directors will always have control not only of the fund's earnings but of the endowment balance itself.

Creation of the fund was guided by an ad hoc Fund Development Committee Co-chaired by past PLATO Presidents Marv Beatty and Fred Ross. Other committee members included current PLATO President Tim Otis, Treasurer Mike Lovejoy, Board Member Arden Trine, and Past President Ann Falconer, along with PLATO's Continuing Studies representative Barry Orton.

The Board of Directors has replaced this ad hoc committee with a new standing committee, to be called the Financial Resources Committee. The expanded mission of this new committee is to assist the treasurer and board by providing oversight of PLATO's financial affairs, and to propose actions to promote and grow the PLATO Fund endowment. An early task for the Financial Resources Committee will be to organize its leadership and membership structure.

If you have not already done so, please consider making a tax-deductible gift to the PLATO Fund. You can do so either online, via the PLATO website, or by completing the donor form you recently received, and mailing it to the UW Foundation.

With your help, along with that of many other PLATO members, a college degree can become not just a dream but a reality for deserving adults who seek to better not just their own lives but the lives of others.

Curriculum Committee Report

by Lauren Blough and Harold Green

Fall Preview Sept. 19

Mark your calendars and save the date for the Fall Preview on Wednesday, Sept 19. It will be held at the Madison Senior Center, 330 West Mifflin St, from 1:30-3 pm. Coordinators will present brief course descriptions during the first half, and you'll have a chance to talk to them personally after the refreshment break. Course materials will also be available. If the enclosed schedule indicates that pre-registration is required, you can contact the coordinator directly via phone or email; don't wait for the Preview if the class has a size limit. Nonmembers are welcome to attend to get an idea of what a PLATO membership can offer. PLATO volunteers will be on hand with applications.

Fall 2012 Schedule of Courses

The Fall Schedule of PLATO courses is included in this issue of the *Persimmon*. In addition to the long-running favorites, there are three new classes for you to consider:

- *The Sacred Feminine* will "explore the role of women as defined by the religions of ancient cultures and Judaism through images and sacred texts of ancient goddesses, female prophets, and historic figures."
- Over the course of two semesters, *A Critical History of the Catholic Church* will "examine church legends, doctrines, personalities, and practices from the birth of Jesus to the papacy of Benedict XVI."
- Jan Fulwiler will offer *Finding Happiness: Positive Psychology and You*. Jan's sessions will be hosted by a new location—the Middleton Public Library.

After a shortened spring run, *My Favorite Philosophers* returns for the fall on Tuesdays from 1-3 pm at Capitol Lakes.

Check the enclosed schedule for the details on all 40 of the compelling discussion groups. The information will also be posted on the PLATO website at: www.seniorlearning.wisc.edu/plato/courses.htm.

Course Proposals for Spring 2013

The Curriculum Committee invites proposals for new courses for the winter interim period and the spring 2013 semester. In addition to the regular weekday 10-week semester schedule, PLATO has offered and is open to a variety of other options, such as evenings, weekends, and the shorter interim sessions. As long as the proposal suits the coordinator, participants and the host site it will be considered. Completed forms are due Oct 1 for both the winter interim and spring offerings. See our website at: www.seniorlearning.wisc.edu/plato/course_proposal.pdf to print the form. You can also contact Curriculum Committee Co-chairs Lauren Blough at laurenblough@att.net or Harold Green at harlgren@aol.com.

PLATO Membership Update

by T. Greg Bell

It is still renewal time for PLATO members. Go to www.seniorlearning.wisc.edu/plato and click on Membership. Notice that we welcome all people to PLATO membership and the only requirement is the love of learning and a willingness to participate in discussion with others. In an era where political discourse has become bombastic and uncivilized in the media and on the streets, PLATO is where you can find thoughtful and respectful discussions. Scroll down to "Join or renew" for the PLATO Membership Renewal form.

If you prefer printing a copy and mailing it to us at 21 N Park St that is just fine, too! Be sure to include your annual dues of \$50 in the envelope. Renewal means you are a full-fledged PLATO member. We have created a 2" sticker you can use for your name tag, a circular 4" sticker with our new emblem logo, and new bookmarks that feature our PLATO website. Please use these items to promote PLATO to your friends, neighbors, new acquaintances, and other organizations you belong to. Course coordinators will have these for you at your first class. Through all our efforts, PLATO will grow naturally and continue to be a value to all its members.

PLATO is our source for more than 40 courses on topics of interest to all 900-plus members. Course coordinators are excited for the fall term to begin, the new PLATO Fund (see article) has already contributed to the learning environment for members but will begin providing scholarships to worthy students to reach their goals as well. Our Special Events Committee has provided a host of new travel tours, lectures, and special events for PLATO, and a new theater tour is just starting this fall. Welcome to Fall 2012.

About PLATO

Vision

PLATO is an acronym for the Participatory Learning and Teaching Organization. PLATO's vision is to provide high-quality learning, teaching, and social opportunities to the Dane County senior community in close cooperation with the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Mission Statement

PLATO is a member-directed and participatory learning-in-retirement organization committed to developing, offering, and promoting opportunities for intellectual and cultural enrichment for its members, and to providing scholarship support for adult students with significant financial needs enrolled in post-secondary education courses, or such other charitable purposes as the Board of Directors may determine.

PLATO Structure

Board of Directors: The Board of Directors is made up of five elected officers, the President, Treasurer, Secretary, and President-elect, the Immediate Past President, a representative from each standing committee, and five at-large directors. The board collaborates with the University's Division of Continuing Studies (DCS), which provides administrative support for PLATO's programs as a part of their mission to enhance senior learning opportunities in the Madison area. A representative from Continuing Studies is a nonvoting member of the board.

Committees

Curriculum: Plans a balanced educational program of discussion groups and courses proposed and led by members, negotiates meeting spaces, and supports discussion group and course coordinators. The committee also organizes the Fall and Spring Previews. Co-chairs: Lauren Blough, 249-0258, laurenblough@att.net; Harold Green, 831-6126, harlgren@aol.com

Communication and Membership:

Tracks and promotes membership and internal and external communications, including publishing the *Persimmon*

newsletter and maintaining and updating the website. Chair: Greg Bell, 836-9547, tgregbell@tds.net; *Persimmon* manager: Patricia Herrling, 833-1684 pjherrli@wisc.edu; Website coordinator: Scott Kolar, 230-5786, kolarsmm@gmail.com

Special Events: Sponsors the Annual Spring Luncheon and plans topical lectures, travel programs, summer and between semester bus trips, and other social events as member interest indicates. Co-chairs: Mary Boyd, 222-7673, boydma2322@sbcglobal.net; Linda Bunger, 232-1725, bunger40@aol.com.

Financial Resources: Provides oversight and consultation to the treasurer and the Board of Directors on broad financial affairs and oversees actions to promote and grow the PLATO Fund endowment. Co-chairs: Marv Beatty, 238-8726, mtbeatty@wisc.edu; Fred Ross, 833-8315, rossfm@chorus.net.

The PLATO Agora: An annual literary journal created for and by PLATO members. Submissions in poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and the visual arts are juried for inclusion by the *Agora* Editorial Board, which facilitates publication and distribution to members. Editor-in-chief: Vaunceil Kruse 467-8769, vaunceil@yahoo.com; managing editor: Edna Canfield, 249-9367, ednacanfi@gmail.com

PLATO Website:

www.seniorlearning.wisc.edu/plato

Honoring PLATO Committee Members

The PLATO Board will be extending thanks to members who serve on our committees at a luncheon in their honor on Thursday, Sept. 13. If you are one of those helping to make our courses, discussion groups, special events, and publications happen through your work on one or more of PLATO's Standing Committees (Curriculum, Special Events, Communication and Membership, Financial Resources, and *The Agora*), please join us at 11:30 am on Thursday, Sept. 13, at Biaggi's Ristorante Italiano, 601 Junction Rd. In the meantime, we invite the rest of you to consider adding your talents to the creative work that makes PLATO happen.

Special Events Committee Activities— Past, Present and Future

The committee, Mary Boyd, Judy Bogue, Linda Bunger, Carla and Mike Dilorio, Bob Gersbach, Suzy Griffiths, Cynthia Hiteman, Aleta Murray, Diane Salzer, Joann Savoy, Tim Otis, Jill Hiestand, Norma Standing, and Bob Blitzke met nine times in the past year and we have enjoyed planning the events listed below. We are looking forward to 2012-13 when our newly formed theater subcommittee will add several theater events to our itinerary. We are always looking for new ideas and we would love to have new members join our group. In addition to planning events for PLATO, we schedule some events for the enjoyment of the committee. For more information about the committee or upcoming events, call Mary Boyd at 222-7673.

Past Lectures 2011-12:

- *Agriculture Station*—Vegetable Preparation and Talk, Mineral Point Rd. (September)
- *Madison History and its Visionary Planners*—David Mollenhoff (October)
- *New Healthcare Law*—Dr. Eugene Farley (November)
- *Muslim/Judeo/Christian Religious Heritage in the Middle East*—Prof. Joe Elder (January)
- *Wisconsin's Recall Process*—Prof. Dennis Dresang (February)
- *A Film: Being Muslim in India*—filmed and presented by Prof. Joe Elder (March)
- *Forward Theatre Presentation* (March)

Past Day Trips 2011-2012:

- *Milwaukee Art Museum*—Impressionist Exhibit (November)
- *Milwaukee Public Museum*—Cleopatra (March)
- *Tour of Chazen Museum/Luncheon*—University Club (May)
- *Great Lakes Naval Station* (May)
- *Trip to Dubuque River Museum* (June)

Other Events:

- Provided hospitality support for Previews (September/February)
- Assisted board in organizing Spring Luncheon/Annual Meeting (May)
- Committee field trip to "scout" future trip—Attica/New Glarus (June)

Coming Events—Fall 2012:

- *Sept. 11, Day Trip to Old World Wisconsin*—Eagle, Wis.
- *Oct. 4, Theatre Trip to Chicago, Goodman Theatre, Sweet Bird of Youth*

The Agora Volume 2

The Editorial Board of *The Agora* is pleased to announce the publication of *The Agora Volume 2*. The enthusiastic response from Volume One resulted in a greater number of submissions for this next issue.

The amount of submissions made the task of the board members Vaunceil Kruse, Edna Canfield, Ellen Last, Lauren Blough, Phil Paulson and their juries even more challenging than last year. We think you will be as delighted as we are with the selections for this year's *Agora*. We will distribute *The Agora Volume 2* to PLATO members at the September Preview.

We know you will enjoy the wonderful selection of poetry, prose, and visual arts in this year's *Agora*—PLATO members at their creative best.



Milwaukee Art Museum bus trip, November 2011

Photos provided by Mary Boyd.



Mississippi River Museum bus trip, June 2012