

The Socratic Method

Socratic inquiry is emphatically not “teaching” in the conventional sense of the word. The leader of Socratic inquiry is not the purveyor of knowledge, filling the empty minds of largely passive students with facts and truths acquired through years of study.

As the people in the School of Education would say, the Socratic teacher is not “the sage on the stage.”

In the Socratic method, there are no lectures and no need of rote memorization. But neither, as you might expect, is the Socratic teacher “the guide on the side.”

In the Socratic method, the classroom experience is a shared dialogue between teacher and students in which both are responsible for pushing the dialogue forward through questioning.

The “teacher,” or leader of the dialogue, asks probing questions in an effort to expose the values and beliefs which frame and support the thoughts and statements of the participants in the inquiry. The students ask questions as well, both of the teacher and each other.

- The inquiry progresses interactively, and the teacher is as much a participant as a guide of the discussion. Furthermore, the inquiry is open-ended. There is no pre-determined argument or terminus to which the teacher attempts to lead the students.
- Those who practice the Socratic method do not use PowerPoint slides. Without a lesson plan, the group follows the dialogue where it goes.

Essential components of the Socratic method

1. *The Socratic method uses questions to examine the values, principles, and beliefs of students.*

Through questioning, the participants strive first to identify and then to defend their moral intuitions about the world which undergird their ways of life.

Socratic inquiry deals **not with producing a recitation of facts,** or a **questioning of the logic of various and sundry abstractions** which are held up for comparison, but demands rather that the participants account for themselves, their thoughts, actions, and beliefs.

Socratic inquiry aims to reveal the motivations and assumptions upon which students lead their lives. Thus, practitioners of the Socratic method may want students to know facts, but they want to focus more on what the student thinks about these facts, not what others think! It's no use citing authorities.

2. The Socratic method focuses on moral education, on how one ought to live.

Socratic inquiry necessarily proceeds in an ad hominem style. That is, rather than making arguments or asking questions designed to convince any or all people, all comments in a Socratic inquiry are directed at specific participants in the discussion.

The subject of inquiry is not what is thought or said about the world in general, but what each participant thinks or says about the world. The goal is not to consider depersonalized propositions and abstractions, but to probe the underlying values and beliefs of each inquirer.

Since the substance of Socratic inquiry is the belief and value system of the participants, when those beliefs or values are challenged, or refuted, it is nothing less than the coherence of the lives of the people that is at stake. As Socrates says often in Plato's dialogues, he is primarily concerned with how one ought to live.

Socrates is famous for saying "the unexamined life is not worth living." Equally true, though less appreciated, is the fact that the un-lived life is not worth examining.

3. The Socratic method demands a classroom environment characterized by “productive discomfort.”

In the best of Socratic dialogues, there is real tension among the interlocutors. The stakes are high. Will one be called on, be called to account?

4. The Socratic method is better used to demonstrate complexity, difficulty, and uncertainty than at eliciting facts about the world.

Bertrand Russell once wrote, “As usual in philosophy, the first difficulty is to see that the problem is difficult. If you say to a person untrained in philosophy, ‘How do you know I have two eyes?’ he or she will reply, ‘What a silly question! I can see you have.’ It is not to be supposed that, when our inquiry is finished, we shall have arrived at anything radically different from this un-philosophical position.

What will have happened will be that we shall have come to see a complicated structure where we thought everything was simple, that we shall have become aware of the penumbra of uncertainty surrounding the situations which inspire no doubt, that we shall find doubt more frequently justified than we supposed, and that even the most plausible premises will have shown themselves capable of yielding implausible conclusions.

The net result is to substitute articulate hesitation for inarticulate certainty.”

The Socratic Professor

In the Socratic method, the Socratic professor is not the opponent in an argument, nor is he or she someone who always plays devil's advocate, saying essentially

: “If you affirm it, I deny it. If you deny it, I affirm it.” This happens sometimes, but not as a matter of pedagogical principle.

Neither does the Socratic professor possess all the knowledge or the answers, nor is he or she “just testing” the students. The professor is a participant in dialogue, and must always be open to learning something him- or herself.

It follows from this, that the Socratic professor does not seek deference to his or her authority. Nor does he or she create a cult of personality by seeming aloof, cold, and distant. Instead, the Socratic professor knows his or her students’ names, and the students know each other’s names.

The Socratic professor aims for “productive discomfort,” not panic and intimidation. The aim is not to strike fear in the hearts of students so that they come prepared to class; but to strike fear in the hearts of students that they either cannot articulate clearly the values that guide their lives, or that their values and beliefs do not withstand scrutiny.

Tips for Using the Socratic Method

1. Set down conversational guidelines:

- **Learn** student names and have the students learn each other's names.
- **Explain** that participation requires listening and active engagement and that it is not enough to just insert a single comment in class and then be silent for the rest of the day.
- **Emphasize** that students should focus their comments on concepts or principles, not first person narratives.

2. Ask questions and be comfortable with silence.

- **Silence** is productive. Be willing to wait for students to respond. There is no need to fill a conversational void; silence creates a kind of helpful tension.
- **Use** the “ten-second wait” rule before you attempt to re-phrase your questions!

3. Find ways to produce “productive discomfort.”

- Cold-calling works, but temper it with small group work so students can talk to their neighbor.

4. Above all else, use **follow-up questions**! Get students to account for themselves, not just to regurgitate readings and lectures.
5. Always **be open** to learning something new. Don't be a sage on the stage, or a guide on the side. Be willing to say, "I don't know the answer to that question."
6. **Welcome** the "crazy idea" that offers a new perspective on the topic, but discourage those ideas which are not serious.
7. **Brevity** and short interventions from the professor are most welcome. No speeches or long lectures.

8. **Discourage** obsequious deference to authority and status. Break this down if at all possible.
9. **Find** a classroom space that encourages interaction.
10. Finally, **don't be scared of size!** All of this is possible even in large classes. The Socratic method is possible in a class as large as 70. Just use more small groups.

The Socratic method is a dynamic format for helping our students to take genuine intellectual risks in the classroom and to learn about critical thinking.