

SOCRATIC QUESTIONING IN THE CLASSROOM

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“Let [Truth] and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?” -John Milton, “Areopagitica”

A 1787 painting by Jacques Louis David entitled *The Death of Socrates* depicts Socrates’ last moments before his execution by means of poison hemlock. In the painting, Socrates’ friends, who have gathered to mourn his imminent death, stare down in grief and sorrow; yet Socrates sits assuredly, teaching his friends of the immortality of the soul and encouraging them to look heavenward, where he will soon find release from earthly injustice. The painting refers to events in the year 399 B.C. when a jury of 500 Athenian citizens convicted the seventy-year-old Socrates of state crimes and sentenced him to death. Plato, Socrates’ most brilliant student, recounts the proceedings of the trial in the *Apology*. In this work Socrates argues that the accusations brought against him are insupportable; and he suggests, instead, that his accusers are trying him for his demanding, probing, and unsettling search for truth—a probing search into art, mathematics, science, and politics that often embarrassed and enraged some of the most prominent citizens of Athens. Socrates’ demanding search for truth has been systematized and used as a pedagogical method for over 2000 years; it is called the Socratic Method or Socratic Questioning. Philosophers and teachers have valued this method as the most effective in sounding the depths of ideas.

In our search for the latest teaching strategies, let us not overlook one that needs no multimedia consoles nor Internet connections. Instead, all that is necessary is a teacher who models thinking and students who are interested in improving their own. This pedagogical method is a budget accountant’s dream, for the only facility necessary is a location where teacher and students can meet. (Socrates and his students met outdoors; but with our climate being a little different than that of Athens, we had better meet our students in a building.)

Socrates questioned his students to encourage them to refine their thinking about issues. Noting the similarities between the occupations of Socrates’ parents—his father was a sculptor and his mother was a midwife—and that of a philosopher, William F. Lawhead, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Mississippi, explains:

A sculptor takes a raw hunk of marble and chisels away at it, removing all the extraneous material until a finished, polished statue emerges. Similarly, in his conversations with the citizens of Athens, Socrates would take raw, unrefined ideas of his contemporaries and hammer away at their opinions, removing what

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was unclear or erroneous, until he gradually achieved a closer approximation to the truth. Thinking, no doubt, of his mother, Socrates referred to himself as the “midwife of ideas.” He claimed not to be able to teach anybody anything, but instead he asked artful questions that sought to bring to birth the truth that lay hidden within every human soul. (16)

Asking artful, significant questions, then, is the method of Socrates.

SOCRATIC QUESTIONING

Socratic Questioning is reflective thinking aloud. Socratic Questioning is the same path an educated, reflective thinker would follow in thinking about any significant issue. It is a logical method of examining the reasons, evidence, assumptions, and implications of an issue in a more systematic and rigorous session than is typical in a classroom discussion. It is a method that assumes that good questions lead to good answers.

Teachers often forget and fail to emphasize to students that academic disciplines consist of answers to significant and foundational questions raised by earlier thinkers. Questions have always preceded the answers we impart to the students, but we and they often do not realize it. In fact, answers are resting places as we determine what are the next best questions to ask. An answer is rarely final, for each answer only suggests other, more interesting questions waiting to be asked.

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Socratic Questioning is best used in the classroom when addressing an argumentative issue; it is not an effective means of delivering content. It can be used to address questions such as “What is virtue?” “How should a particular political tension be resolved?” or “What are the characteristics of Romantic literature?” It is an effective means of defining concepts, establishing parameters, and discussing the implications of the content material. In other words, Socratic Questioning can be used to clarify issues, define concepts, seek examples, evaluate evidence, uncover assumptions, follow implications, and acknowledge objections.

When conducting a Socratic Questioning session, a teacher must keep the questions focused and the discussion significant and stimulating. A teacher may want to write down ahead of time potential questions to be used in class. These questions can be arranged logically in a question chain, for example:

1. What is history?
2. How do historians determine what to include or exclude?
3. What variables might influence a historian’s viewpoint?
4. How can we evaluate a historical interpretation?

Teachers must also be prepared to ask questions spontaneously to follow the paths created by various student answers. These questions can be drawn from the types of questions that constitute reflective thinking. In a Socratic Questioning session, a teacher will often ask questions about the basic elements and standards of reasoning:

SAMPLE SOCRATIC QUESTIONS

Questions about the Question: Can we break this question down? To answer this question, what questions must we answer first?

Questions of Clarification: What do you mean by ____? Can you give me an example?

Questions about Assumptions: What are you assuming? What could we assume instead?

Questions about Reasons: Could you explain your reasons? What would convince you otherwise?

Questions about Evidence: Do you have any evidence for that? What other information must we know? Who is in the position to know if that is the case?

Questions about Viewpoints: What would someone who disagrees say? How could you answer that objection?

Questions about Implications: What are you implying by that? What effect would that have? If this is true, what else must be true?

THE CHALLENGES OF SOCRATIC QUESTIONING

Of course, it can be quite difficult for a teacher to think on his or her feet, continually asking follow-up questions as the students examine an issue in depth. When Socratic Questioning is not done well, the teacher can easily lose control of the class as students jump from one issue to another in a free-wheeling discussion. Socratic Questioning takes practice and courage as the teacher and students tackle some of the most significant questions in our academic disciplines. Most important, a Socratic Questioner must be sensitive to his or her audience. It is sometimes uncomfortable to be asked to examine our own assumptions and reasons on a particular issue; for we may find them wanting, just as Socrates often found those of his contemporaries. Socratic Questioning should never be used to abuse students intellectually or spiritually but rather to help them refine their thinking.

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THE GOAL OF SOCRATIC QUESTIONING

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In a talk entitled “An Eternal Quest—Freedom of the Mind” given to BYU students in 1969, President Hugh B. Brown of the First Presidency states:

One of the most important things in the world is freedom of the mind; from this all other freedoms spring. Such freedom is necessarily dangerous, for one cannot think right without running the risk of thinking wrong, but generally more thinking is the antidote for the evils that spring from wrong thinking. (84)

Socratic Questioning is a pedagogical method to teach our students good thinking. The result of good thinking will be closer approximations to the truth, for as President Hugh B. Brown points out:

We have been blessed with much knowledge by revelation from God which, in some part, the world lacks. But there is an incomprehensibly greater part of truth which we must yet discover. Our revealed truth should lead us stricken with the knowledge of how little we really know. It should never lead to an emotional arrogance based upon a false assumption that we somehow have all the answers—that we in fact have a corner on truth, for we do not. (86)

Socratic Questioning can be one means for us and our students to move toward that “incomprehensibly greater part of truth which we must yet discover.”

Have we remembered President Brown’s message to the students at BYU? There are innumerable questions to be asked and answers to be sought about our world. Socratic Questioning guides thinking to what President Brown calls that “incomprehensibly greater part of truth which we must yet discover.” In John Milton’s essay on virtue and truth, from which the epigraph of this essay comes, he declares, “I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat” (“Areopagitica” 1431). With Socratic questioning, students and teachers sally out, exercise themselves, and run the immortal race—in all its dust and heat—for truth. ∞

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