SOCRATIC INSTRUCTION

PURPOSE
This tool introduces the principles and practices of Socratic inspired instruction and seeks to clarify the various forms. Socratic instruction has proven extremely powerful in teaching students to think carefully about their own assumptions as well as the questions which define the contours of the discipline they’re studying.

DESCRIPTION
Concept. In the 2400 years since the death of the philosopher Socrates, the instructional method that now bears his name has seen multiple permutations. Terms such as Socratic Dialectic, Socratic Dialogue, Socratic Method and Socratic Questioning are sometimes venerated as pedagogy par excellence, while being little understood or distinguished one from the other. While these variations on a theme all share some common characteristics, they also differ significantly.

Although these definitions are fluid and overlap somewhat, usually all of the approaches share the following characteristics:

- There is a topic of discussion agreed upon by instructor and students. Often this is a text or a case which students study beforehand. One may also start a discussion relying only on prior student knowledge.
- Students understand that questions are meant to deepen and clarify thinking, not bait them with their own words. The method isn’t a debate.
- The relative value of ideas is judged based upon logically and correctly reasoned arguments. Often, improved reasoning itself becomes the learning goal rather than content mastery.
- This method is typically used to examine an issue too complex to understand starting from first principles.
- The goal is not necessarily to arrive at a pre-determined, correct answer (because there might be multiple correct answers resting on different but equally defensible assumptions), but rather to:
  - Explore the contours of a particularly complex or ambiguous question, problem, or text.

- Closely examine the assumptions upon which an argument is based or the issues it claims to span for a more nuanced understanding.
- Help students examine and refine their own thinking process by drawing understanding out of the students, rather than pushing it in.
- Help students recognize and explore abstract principles at work in a concrete setting.

As was the case with Socrates, who was wise because he recognized his ignorance, Socratic Instruction aims to bring students to recognize the limits of their own understanding. It helps students define their ignorance around a topic, but in doing so, it gives them intimate experience with the structure of the dilemmas still requiring resolution.

Because these methods dissect the makings of an argument rather than present new information, the discussion often ends with students reaching an intellectual impasse. They don’t know ‘the answer’, but they explore the questions as far as they know how to. At this point, the discussion is often followed by a short review of the general principles and tensions brought to light by the discussion.

In place of the more formal dialectic, you may use the method of sequential questioning referred to as Socratic Questioning to help students grasp a particular concept. Unlike the other forms, which are about eliminating false or incomplete understandings, this method of questioning uses carefully prepared and sequenced questions to walk students down a particular logical path, avoid common misconceptions, and arrive at a self-reasoned understanding of the instructor-chosen concept. It is important to emphasize that these questions are logically leading, but not leading in a here’s-what-I-want-you-to-say way.

Both of these applications of Socratic Instruction require meticulous preparation on your part. You must have a clear understanding of the underlying logic and complexities of the issue addressed and the likely directions the discussion might take. While the dialectic doesn’t define a predetermined outcome to the discussion and the questioning method does, both require you to know what you
hope students will learn from engaging in the discussion.

**Definitions.**

**Socratic Dialogue:** The Socratic Dialogues refer to a *literary genre* in which Socrates explores ideas by means of a structured conversation.

**Socratic Dialectic:** The Dialectic refers to an evolved, *formalized version* of the questioning approach used in the Socratic Dialogues.

**Socratic Method:** The Socratic Method refers to any method of inquiry that uses *questioning of premises* to reveal internal inconsistencies. This tends to be a less structured and more informal application of the Dialectic.

**Socratic Questioning:** Socratic Questioning is a way of responding to student inquiries with logically leading questions, where an original inquiry is responded to as if it were an answer. The purpose is to bring students to reason their way to a correct understanding or conclusion. This is also referred to as teaching by questioning.

**EXAMPLE**
The following are some questions that may be applied in any of the Socratic inspired forms of instruction:

**Clarifying underlying concepts**
- What does this mean? Can you elaborate?
- What do we already know about this?
- Can you give me an example or analogy?
- Are you saying ... or ... ?

**Probing Assumptions**
- You seem to be assuming ... ?
- What else could we assume?
- How did you choose those assumptions?
- Please explain why/how ... ?
- How can you verify or disprove that assumption?
- Do you agree or disagree with ... ?

**Probing rationale, reasons and evidence**
- Why is that happening?
- How do you know this?
- Show me ... ?
- What do you think causes ... ?
- Are these reasons good enough?
- What evidence supports what you are saying?
- How reliable is that evidence?
- On what authority do you base your argument?

**Questioning viewpoints and perspectives**
- Is this approach reasonable, justifiable?
- What are alternative ways of looking at this?
- What kind of person would accept this?
- Who might disagree? Who benefits from this?
- What is similar/different between ... and ... ?

**Probe implications and consequences**
- Then what would happen?
- How could ... be used to ... ?
- What are the implications of ... ?
- How does ... fit with what we learned before?
- Why is this approach considered the best ... ?

**Questions about the question**
- What was the point of asking that question?
- What is needed to answer that question?
- What kind of question is this?

**TIPS**
- **Pause.** Be willing to pause and allow gaps in the discussion while you formulate the next question. This is more important than simply keeping the discussion moving.
- **Choose a lens.** In the Dialectic, take your questioning cues from how students are thinking; in the Questioning method, from the logical structure of a correct understanding.

**PITFALLS**
- **Learning curve:** Some students may dislike this method claiming that the instructor doesn’t ‘teach’ anything and the discussion has few conclusions.

**KEY ARTICLES**

**OTHER RESOURCES**
- Socratic questioning
- Film clip
- Critical Thinking Community


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