

WHEN SOCRATIC DIALOGUE IS FLAGGING

QUESTIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING STUDENTS

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Abstract. The author studied the pedagogy of Socrates looking for teaching techniques that help maintain students' interest in an ongoing discussion. Socrates' use of such strategies as asking probing questions, expanding the discussion into its relationship to other ideas, assuming the role of the devil's advocate, and spending time on group maintenance can be extremely helpful.

Keywords: *classroom management, faculty teaching, teacher as researcher, teacher education, teaching strategies*

The idea for this paper began as a response to having observed two different professors demonstrate Socratic dialogue in leading undergraduate seminars. The first professor's method reminded me very much of the "shared inquiry" approach of The Great Books Foundation, where the emphasis is on the professor asking interpretive questions. He did ask excellent questions, yet there were many long lulls in the conversation and a high degree of student non-participation. In contrast, as the second professor emphasized Socrates' role as an insti-

gator, all of the students were engaged in and participated in the discussion, but I felt that the professor had unnecessarily dominated the flow of the discussion.

I thought that it would be useful to revisit Socrates for a refresher on leading discussion with an eye toward teaching techniques that are instructive and that would improve discussion. In a somewhat Aristotelian process, then, I have studied and catalogued techniques that I have "discovered" in the Socratic dialogues that are instructive. I have identified five particular strategies that Socrates used. They are that he:

- asked probing questions about the ideas and issues being discussed;
- asked expansive questions about the relationships among ideas;
- utilized the devil's advocate role and other comic relief;

- spent time on group maintenance and the group process; and
- took advantage of positions and roles taken on by others in the discussion.

The remainder of this article matches the examples of Socrates with my efforts to make my own maieutic seminars more successful.

Asking Probing Questions about the Ideas and Issues Being Discussed

Asking Questions about Ideas

But speaking of this very thing, justice, are we to affirm thus without qualification that it is truth telling and paying back what one has received from anyone, or may these very actions sometimes be just and sometimes unjust? (Plato, *The Republic* 331c1-4)

Just as Socrates found it possible to engage his students by asking questions about ideas like justice, here are a dozen issues with relevant questions that are likely to engage students in discussion whatever books or issues are before them.

Knowledge. What constitutes valid knowledge? And how do we know what we know (epistemology)? Is Truth absolute or relative? Most works have assumptions if not declarations about this idea.

Heroes. The examples of Antigone (Greek), Aeneas (Roman), David (Hebrew), and Peter (Christian) offer very different understandings of what is best meant by being heroic. Most works offer some variation of this theme.

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Justice. Ask students to place a work's view of justice somewhere in the polarity between Plato's view of justice as "differentiation" and John Stuart Mill's emphasis on egalitarianism.

What is the meaning of life? Why does Aeneas leave Dido? Why does Achilles return the body of Hektor to Priam? Why does Medea kill her children? Such variations of the "meaning of life" question are among the best at encouraging students to interpret texts.

Good and evil. Is good a "lack of true knowledge"? A separate entity? What then?

Human nature? What makes one human? What is the relation of emotion and intellect? Are humans basically good, bad, or neither?

God. Is God understood as a form, a cause, a person, an idea, Nature, or Fate?

Government. Is the work "conservative" or "liberal"? Does it assume a preference for a strong central authoritarian scheme of governance or a more democratic one? Is it like Plato where a "town is greater than a man" or like Emerson where "after all, isn't a man greater than a town"? And what is the relationship of the author's view of government to the view of human nature?

Freedom. What is the relationship of freedom and responsibility? What is the view of liberty versus license? Is the view of freedom one of a freedom of thought? What about the freedom to walk safely in one's environment?

Beauty. Is beauty truth and truth beauty, as Keats suggests?

Being/becoming. Is the emphasis on "being" who one was born to be, or becoming something that is preferred and yet attainable?

Essence/existence. What are the assumptions about this issue? Does the author share Plato's conviction that essence precedes existence, or Sartre's that existence precedes essence?

Most texts have their "answers" to these issues, and, while separate in emphasis, each idea has implications for the others, and questions based on these ideas are very useful in helping students interpret ideas and texts.

Getting at Problems in Comprehension

But I don't mind telling you the truth about Love if you're interested; only, if I do, I must tell it in my own way. (Plato, *Symposium* 199a6-b2)

Clearly Socrates would stop to explain. Despite his emphasis on questions, Socrates would occasionally stop and "tell it in his own way." Superior works in philosophy tend to be known more for the benefit of multiple readings than the ease with which one can easily comprehend their meanings. Interpretive questions do not work if the text is misunderstood. What to do then? The following devices tend to keep the discussion in the interrogative mode and yet spur students to better comprehension:

1. Asking students to find and read passages with which they had trouble.
2. Asking students to find and read passages they have neglected but that will help them sort out an issue.
3. Asking students to read a passage aloud (while interrupting periodically for a summary of what has been read).
4. Asking students to clarify a key term (usually with a few page references to study that term in context).
5. Asking students to walk through the basic organization or logic of the text on a step by step basis. (If one is not careful this very easily can become the teacher asking the student to "guess what's in my mind" instead of a true walk through the material.)
6. Asking students who have come to an early grasp of the material to summarize key points or understandings.
7. Asking students to explain two passages that might seem in contradiction to one another.
8. Asking students to try to find a key sentence or paragraph that suggests the meaning of the whole work.
9. Asking students for their best question about the text.
10. Asking students for their best remaining question about the text (toward the end of an otherwise worthy discussion about a key issue in a text).

Keeping the issues real and meaningful is an essential part of the inquiry, or the arguments simply become empty sophistry.

With Problems of Class Size, Use Smaller Groups

The emphasis of the colloquium must be on the shared conversation. Dividing

the class into smaller units has its limitations because any work done in that smaller unit will not be a part of the total class experience and memory. However, with a particularly difficult text, groups of four or five asked to work through a series of pre-written questions that expect them to help each other work through a series of issues about specific key passages can be of great help to comprehension. At least this forces the students to do their own work with comprehension instead of relying too much on the professor.

Expansive Questions about the Relationship of Ideas

Well, surely we can see now that the soul works in just the opposite way. It directs all the elements of which it is said to consist, opposing them in almost everything all through life, exercising every form of control, and conversing with the desires, passions, and fears as though it were quite separate and distinct from them. It is just like Homer's description in the *Odyssey* where he says that Odysseus,

Then beat his breast, and thus reproved his heart. "Endure, my heart; still worse hast thou endured." (20.17)

Do you suppose that when he wrote that he thought that the soul was an attunement, liable to be swayed by physical feelings? (Plato, *Phaedo* 94c9-e2)

A great joy for the discussant can be in considering competing ideas about the great issues. Just as Socrates asked a question about the soul with regard to Odysseus, the discussant can ask the students to relate an idea to any number of other characters and/or authors. The possibilities include:

- Compare and contrast this text with that text. How is it the same? Different?
- If the idea has a fairly obvious antecedent, ask, "Where have you seen this before?"
- Profile this text in terms of all the other texts previously read. With which other work does it share the closest world-view?
- Almost every class period someone will say something is "good" or "bad." This is always an invitation to ask the student how they define that term and whether they have a Platonic, Christian, utilitarian, or other definition in mind.

The Devil's Advocate and Other Comic Relief

Socrates: I am that gadfly which God has given the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. (Plato, *The Apology* 30e3–31a1)

In a sense, Socrates was an entertainer in his role as gadfly. Likewise, Theodore Roethke reportedly crawled through the snow on the ledge of the third story window of his literature classroom and announced that “the cardinal sin of an educator is to be boring.” Ways to be a gadfly might include:

Playing the Devil's Advocate

Polus: What, Socrates? Is what you are saying your true opinion about rhetoric? (Plato, *Gorgias* 461b3)

The implication is that the discussant can take a point of view that is not necessarily her/his own.

- Add a neglected point of view to the discussion.
- Make an outlandish generalization like “this work is more important than *The Communist Manifesto*.”
- Mischaracterize (with wit) a student's position so that students will have to correct and clarify the point.

The Perplexed Man

Meno: Socrates, even before I met you they told me that in plain truth you are a perplexed man yourself and reduce others to perplexity. (Plato, *Meno* 80a)

It would not necessarily have been out of character for Socrates to use:

- use malaprops;
- use puns (the lowest form of humor?);
- ask students to read odd passages from the texts (like Plato saying small people cannot be handsome);
- use gentle brow beating (with good humor); or
- ask students whether an answer is either (a) or (b) when the “true” answer is neither (because students need to learn they do not necessarily have to accept the parameters of a question).

Setting Problems Straight

We ourselves grow old and make slips, you younger people present may set us right

both in actions and in words. (Plato, *Gorgias* 461c6)

- If the class needs a concrete example from a text, provide it.
- Focus in on one student and ask the question “Why?” To each subsequent answer, ask another “Why?” in a very Aristotelian, back-to-the-original-cause kind of way.

The Ruin of Men

Callicles: For philosophy, you know . . . is a pretty thing if you engage in it moderately in your youth; but if you continue in it longer than you should, it is the ruin of any man. (Plato, *Gorgias* 484c3–8)

Callicles was a foil for Socrates. If nothing else is working pick on the foil. Accuse her/him of either great heroics or low-down meanness. The foil must always be one of the best students, respected and liked by all the other students, and the proud owner of a great sense of humor. The faux attack changes the general frame of mind in the class and picks the energy level back up. This must be done with conspicuous good humor.

The Pumpkin King

Ion: And I judge that I, of all men, have the finest things to say on Homer. (Plato, *Ion* 530c7–d3)

Cultivating a little audacity, such as that of Ion, is not entirely bad. It helps with the energy level of the class.

Look for the Contradiction

A contradiction arose in the argument—which is just what you love and you yourself steer the argument in that direction. (Plato, *Gorgias* 461b3–c3)

Look for the contradiction that will provoke healthy debate between two students.

Confusion and Uncertainty

All of us as we afterwards remarked to one another, had an unpleasant feeling at hearing them say this. When we had been so firmly convinced before, now to have our faith shaken seemed to introduce a confusion and uncertainty. (Plato, *Phaedo* 88c1–5)

Develop a classroom atmosphere where confusion and uncertainty are appreciated.

Time Spent on Group Maintenance and the Group Process

We should recognize that we ourselves are still intellectual invalids, but that we must embrace ourselves and do our best to become healthy. (Plato, *Phaedo* 90d9–91a)

Socrates recognized that the group process deserved his attention. A seminar is not a lecture course; the results are entirely dependent upon the participants; it is a group and as a group has particular needs. While the academic worth of the course is presumably based on the quality of the dialogue, it is quite possible to use the concepts and issues studied in class to help with group maintenance and the group process.

Some of the strategies might include discussing questions such as, how do we decide? This is implicit to any text about government. It also applies to aspects of the course. The final schedule and book list are ordinarily pre-determined. But how many exams? When? How should we decide? How have the texts helped define this issue?

Students will tend to speak in the direction of the discussant. When two student positions are clearly in conflict, say, “Tell that person.” If a conversation is “stuck,” sometimes move to a different seat in the classroom and that will change the dynamics of the discussion.

Eventually your questions will have to include everyone. Frankly, some of your questions will be too elementary for your quickest students. Sometimes you have to forestall that student and try to pry the answer out of a more reluctant student.

If someone says something otherwise objectionable, ask the epistemological question of how they think they know what they know?

Polling can be quite valuable. It includes each and every student on a course-related issue. Questions might include: Do you agree? Is this how you understand it? Can you add to this? Also, while the emphasis of shared inquiry is on interpretation, once students do grasp a work, it is worthwhile to survey their evaluation of the significance of the ideas or work.

Related to poll taking, discussions do not ordinarily result in “a” conclusion. The issue is whether the students have argued the issue to their satisfaction.

Ask students who have not committed to a particular discussion who it is they think has had the “best” idea and why.

It is all too rare that students will perform the “gatekeeping” role for a group. The discussant must protect any “struggling” member of the group. The discussant must also try to identify the value of the many different kinds of contributions to a discussion. Participants are often only caught up in their own particular contributions,

ers to go back and look specifically at the text. If you are trying to keep the momentum of the conversation going, it is not always possible for you to pinpoint that exact passage you were looking for.

The risk taker. This role is as important as that of the foil. Many students will tend to hold back until they are absolutely sure of what they think about something. As the discussant, you cannot let the conversation always wait that long.

truth was suffused with the robustness of his personality. That, too, should be an inspiration to the leader of the maieutic seminar.

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IT IS ALL TOO RARE THAT STUDENTS WILL PERFORM THE “GATEKEEPING” ROLE FOR A GROUP. THE DISCUSSANT MUST PROTECT ANY “STRUGGLING” MEMBER OF THE GROUP. THE DISCUSSANT MUST ALSO TRY TO IDENTIFY THE VALUE OF THE MANY DIFFERENT KINDS OF CONTRIBUTIONS TO A DISCUSSION.

but the group needs to see the benefits of the whole.

Personal comments of encouragement and recognition of individual students outside the class can be very helpful to the group process.

Roles Participants Assume (and That the Discussant Can Take Advantage Of)

If you feel any difficulty about our discussion, don’t hesitate to put forward your own views and point out any way you think my account could be improved. . . . Very well, Socrates, said Simmias. I will be quite open with you. We have both been feeling difficulties for some time, and each of us has been urging the other to ask questions. (Plato, *Phaedo* 84c1–d6)

Recognizing roles that participants can assume can help with the direction of the colloquium. Some of the roles to look for and encourage:

The summarizer. This student is invaluable. At the end of the conversation when the summarizer is able to sum up what has gone on, it is often more helpful to the group than any summation the professor would have tried to do.

The foil. See above under comic relief.

The textual expert. Validate the students who will consistently ask oth-

Conclusion: Using these Techniques

The detached studies . . . will now be brought together in a comprehensive view of their connexions with one another and with reality. (Plato, *The Republic*, 535a)

The teaching techniques that Socrates used cannot be “detached” from their “connexions” with the substantive issues of the seminar/colloquium. If the class focus is not on understanding and critically assessing the arguments of the primary texts, the discussion would be mere sophistry. The utility of such teaching strategies is measured by their contribution to the overall goals of helping students learn to analyze logic and assumptions, to critique the validity and soundness of arguments, and to come to true understanding. These are only devices toward higher goals, but that Socrates used such methods is evidence of the importance of working one’s group of students. Further, while the goal of the dialectic is to approach truth, a secondary benefit of students having engaged in the process is their having been introduced to the mind of the discussant. The evidence is that Socrates’ engagement in the search for

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