

## **Teach Less, Lead More** **- Using the Socratic Dialogue to Teach Social Studies**

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**Abstract:** This workshop focuses on the quality of thinking that students can develop in class. Socratic Dialogue is used to develop thinking skills. Students are trained to think clearly by questioning assumptions, asking insightful questions and exploring alternatives. In the Socratic Dialogue, entire lessons are devoted to fielding questions from the students instead of teaching from the textbook. A safe and inclusive environment is created which encouraged students to query and debate.

**Keywords:** Quality of thinking, Socratic Dialogue, Thinking Skills, assumptions, explore alteranative

### **Introduction**

I experimented with my classroom teaching method by using the Socratic Dialogue with a class of social studies students. This experiment was inspired by my participation in Singapore's one and only Philosophy Café, started by a professional philosopher, Mr. Lau Kwong Fook.

In addition, I was not satisfied with just content teaching. It was difficult to engage my students if I used the traditional talk and chalk method. Moreover, quality thinking seldom took place. Thus, I saw the need to change my teaching style so as to engage students in critical thinking.

Like many teachers, I used to focus on covering the syllabus and content at the expense of engaging students in thinking through the issue. For example, my students were able to explain factors involved in an issue without demonstrating their ability to provide comparative answers, where they can judge the relative importance of different factors in relation to an issue discussed.

I have come across two other educators using a similar method. The first was a math teacher, Rick Garlikov, who used this method -- to teach his third grade students binary arithmetic by asking them questions. He discovered that students did not get bored or lose concentration if they were actively participating in a classroom activity. However, he cautioned that this method takes a lot of energy and concentration, and that a teacher cannot do this for every topic or all day long. It demands a lot of preparation and thought.

The second was Assistant Professor Xiang Cheng from the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department of National University of Singapore (NUS). He used this method to teach control system design for guided weapons to graduate students pursuing a master degree. Like Garlikov, he discovered that the Socratic Method was one of the most effective ways to get students involved, as they had to figure out the answers by themselves. However, he warned that because of the complexity of the concepts involved, as well as time constraints, he could not implement the purest form of the Socratic Dialogue -- where only questions were used to arouse curiosity and to guide the students logically to figure out a complex subject through their own thinking. Thus he modified the method: he gave students hints when they got stuck.

My Socratic Dialogue, however, differs from both their approaches in one significant respect. Instead of me asking my students questions, I demand that my students ask the questions, either addressed to me or to each other.

### **Definition of Pedagogical Approach**

Three outcomes can take place each time a teacher and students engage in class.

First, teaching occurs when most responsibility and power are laid on the shoulders of the teacher. He or she decides on the content, the pace and the quality of teaching that will take place in the classroom. Students are passive receivers of knowledge waiting patiently for the right moment (usually during the exam) to release back to the teachers what they had received.

Second, learning takes place when the focus is on the students. Teachers act as facilitators ensuring that students are engaged in their assigned activities. Normally, group interaction and exchange of information among students are paramount. Here the responsibility of learning rests on both the teachers and students. Teachers provide the worksheets, and students use them as a guide to their learning.

Third, education happens when teachers and students learn from each other. I experienced this process through the use of the Socratic Dialogue in my classroom teaching. Here power and responsibility lies in the students as they decide on the pace of the lesson and the quality of the lessons conducted. Students are given the right to lead the lesson to where they want to go depending on the quality of questions that they ask. Often they will ask me questions that I cannot answer, and that will encourage me to seek the answers and in the process I am educated.

### **Inquiry-Based Education as the Pedagogical Principle**

The pedagogical principle underlying the Socratic Dialogue is based on the inquiry-based education as envisioned by John Dewey (1859 – 1952), an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer.

Fundamentally, this approach is learner-centered. However, defining inquiry-based education is a challenge as it ranges from constructivism, problem-solving approaches to project-based learning. It is a multi-prong educational approach, with as many interpretations of Dewey's version as there are teachers.

Underlying all these approaches is the learner, what he knows and what he wants to learn, and not on what can be taught. Dewey acknowledged that a learner has the instinctive desire to find things out and that he wants to communicate this discovery through conversation. He also recognised that schooling is not just about the individual but the coming together of the individual's interest with those of society. The Socratic Dialogue is one approach where teachers can weave a child's interest with those of society.

For learners, the Socratic Dialogue ends the listen-to-learn paradigm of the classroom and offers them an authentic opportunity to engage in learning through questioning. Through this, they make discoveries for themselves in their search for new understanding, and power is given to them as they decide on their pace of learning.

For the teachers, it ends their paradigm of talking-to-teach and recasts them in the role of a guide and mentor engaged in the same quest as the learners in class.

### **The Socratic Dialogue in the Classroom**

In the Socratic Dialogue, the stress is placed on broadening the intellect of the learner and the development of their critical thinking skills, rather than simply on the memorization of lessons. It gives the students the chance to discover thoughts, ideas and concepts for themselves. With this method, they arrive at the understanding of the concepts by themselves and the responsibility for learning lies with them.

The teacher is the catalyst directing students' discussion rather than the bearer of all information. Open-ended questions are asked instead of closed-ended questions. The teacher talks less and allows the students to lead the discussion. A successful lesson is one where the discussion is student-dominated.

One of the desirable outcomes of this method is to observe the student see the light at the end of the tunnel. Often the student's eyes light up when he or she figures out the solution to a problem. It is a way to refresh the student's curiosity about the world, encourage him to be open and to take more risks and responsibilities in class.

The Socratic Dialogue is a simple process to implement. Students are forced to ask questions (failing which silence reigns) about a topic which they have been asked to read or research on. Based on the questions asked, the students will determine the quality of the lessons produced.

The difficult part is establishing this process of asking questions. Most students do not like to ask questions -- for a variety of reasons. They might not have a clue about the type of questions that need to be asked. They might feel shy and worried that their friends would laugh at them or worry that the teachers might scold them if they ask the wrong questions. The greatest obstacle is that they are seldom given an opportunity to question the teacher, as they have been conditioned in the classroom to accept everything that a teacher says.

To establish this culture of asking questions, I start the first lesson by playing a game of 20 questions. I will invite them to ask me 20 questions about anything under the sun. The questions can range from the silly ones like asking for my name, weight or height to serious ones like why are we in school. I promise the students that I will answer any question that they ask me, and I usually uphold my promise. I want to create a safe environment where students can feel secure asking questions. Once this rapport is established, it becomes easy to conduct the Socratic Dialogue with the students. Their curiosity aroused and satisfied, they will want to continue to using this method to study social studies.

### **Implementation in the Classroom**

There are two stages in conducting the Socratic Dialogue. In the first stage, students are asked to read the textbook chapter which will be discussed in the following lessons. I make the critical assumption that students will read the chapter assigned to them. Only if they do so will this method be successful.

In the second stage, where the Socratic Dialogue takes place, I will produce a stimulus for the students to consider. Usually this can be a cartoon, a text from a newspaper cutting, a picture, an extract from a website or any other relevant material related to the topic that they have read about. They are then invited to ask questions using the sources provided as a springboard. My role as teacher is to act as a resource person to answer some of the questions asked while asking some questions to encourage students to probe further. Sometimes I will redirect the questions to other students.

Although this method looks simple to implement, it demands a great deal from both the students and the teacher.

This method demands that students reflect and think independently and critically. In the process, it promotes self-confidence in one's own thinking. At the same time, it promotes socialization skills as the class as a whole works together to search for truth in answer to a particular question. The aim of the class is to reach consensus as a way to deepen the examination of a particular issue.

Some of the questions that I have used for classroom discussion include

- Does size matter? (On the constraints that hinder the development of Singapore)
- Should Singapore aim to be a New York or a Tokyo? (On the type of development that Singapore should pursue with New York representing a creative and vibrant society, and Tokyo representing a hardworking but conformist society.)
- Is the Integrated Resort a boon or a bane?

For this method to work, I have to ensure that the discussion is grounded in the following areas.

First, the discussion must be held in the context of their experience. In this way, my students would see the relevance of pursuing an issue in depth.

Second, students must work at a particular question until it is answered. They should not be satisfied with the first answer that is provided, but should test it with empirical evidence, contextual knowledge or cross reference it with other sources.

Third, students are trained to be open to the views and opinions of others, and to examine seriously both their own views and others so that everyone is working towards a consensus.

### **Personal Reflections**

Using Socratic Method in the classroom, I have discovered that given this environment students can be as engaging and serious as the academically stronger students. In addition, they have ownership of the knowledge and concepts because they have discovered it by themselves. I also observed that they have begun to ask more in-depth and probing questions. They are also motivated to read up on their own.

However, I have observed that each student develops at a different pace. The more outgoing and outspoken students would buy in to this approach while those who are shy or have less confidence in themselves tend to be satisfied to be observers.

Some students argued that they have been taught in the traditional teacher-talk method since young and found it difficult to think and to come up with questions. They also found

this method unstructured and ill-defined. They'd rather rely on notes where they can exercise their memory power. They requested for notes to be given to them and they promised that they would be able to learn the notes for the examination.

The greatest challenge thus is to break the paradigm that students have about teaching, learning and education. Students still feel uncomfortable when autonomy, responsibility and power are given to them. Perhaps their creativity and curiosity have been eroded over the years in their relentless pursuit of examination grades

The second challenge that I face is to ensure that the syllabus content is covered. Often, I have made the wrong assumption that if I have taught a chapter, then learning has taken place. This is not always true.

By using the Socratic Dialogue, I have an opportunity to check on the level of understanding of my students. When several students asked me a set of similar questions surrounding one particular topic, then it is an indication that they have a problem handling this topic. I would then take time to cover this topic in detail. In this way, students would not be bored when they are forced to listen to all the topics that are found in a textbook, even those that they do not have any problem with.

### **Professional and Personal Development**

As a result of using the Socratic Dialogue with my students, I have come to respect them more. I have encountered many instances when I have an opportunity to learn from them. The type of questions that they asked during these sessions have educated me and forced me to examine the many assumptions that I had about them.

For example, many teachers believe that these students do not like history or social studies and feel that it is close to impossible to arouse an interest in these subjects. By using this method, I have discovered that students no longer view these subjects as far and remote but as having a bearing on their personal lives.

I have also learnt to trust these students to be responsible with their learning. Sometimes I have observed that they are disengaged or disinterested when they are attending lessons that are mainly teacher centered and when a teacher does most of the talking. However, when it was time for social studies lesson, they are alive and eager as they are given an opportunity to be engaged, to express their feelings and opinions and to critically examine their classmate's views and thought processes.

### **Conclusion**

I am glad that I was given an opportunity to participate in a Philosophy café. It was through this experience that I brought this method of inquiry into my classroom. In this journey, I learn to respect everyone in the classroom. I have come to realise that everyone can think. Given a safe environment to explore and engage, any student can come up with interesting and original thoughts.

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