



Socratic Questioning

Introduction: One effective method of questioning is the ‘Socratic Method’ which uses certain kinds of questions for certain kinds of tasks or situations to scaffold and guide the students in answering, so that they can see more clearly what they do and do not yet understand or know, and so that the educator also has a better idea of where there may be gaps that need to be covered with further activities or assessments.

During Socratic questioning, the teacher is a model of critical thinking who respects students' viewpoints, probes their understanding, and shows genuine interest in their thinking. The teacher poses questions that are more meaningful than those a novice of a given topic might develop on his or her own. The teacher creates and sustains an intellectually stimulating classroom environment and acknowledges the value of the student in that environment. In an intellectually open, safe, and demanding learning environment, students will be challenged, yet comfortable in answering questions honestly and fully in front of their peers.

Goals: Encourage cooperative argumentative dialogue between individuals, based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas and underlying presuppositions.

Preparation:

- 1) Faculty members plan significant questions that provide structure and direction to the lesson.
- 2) Follow up on students' responses and invite elaboration.
- 3) Faculties do not pose yes/no questions, as they do little to promote thinking or encourage discussion.
- 4) Faculty members do not pose questions that are vague, ambiguous, or beyond the level of the students.

Methods / Procedure:

- 1) Questions are phrased clearly and specifically.
- 2) Wait Time: Students are given at least 5 to 10 seconds to respond.
- 3) Faculties keep the discussion focused.
- 4) Discussions are stimulated with probing questions.
- 5) Faculty members periodically summarize (e.g., on blackboard or overhead projector) what has been discussed.
- 6) As many students as possible are drawn into the discussion.
- 7) Examples of Socratic questions that are used for students:
 - a) Getting students to clarify their thinking and explore the origin of their thinking
 - i) Why do you say that?
 - ii) Could you explain further?
 - b) Challenging students about assumptions
 - i) Is this always the case?
 - ii) Why do you think that this assumption holds here?
 - c) Providing evidence as a basis for arguments
 - i) Why do you say that?
 - ii) Is there reason to doubt this evidence?
 - d) Discovering alternative viewpoints and perspectives and conflicts between contentions
 - i) What is the counter-argument?
 - ii) Can/did anyone see this another way?
 - e) Exploring implications and consequences
 - i) But if...happened?
 - ii) what else would result?
 - iii) How does...affect...?
 - f) Questioning the question
 - i) Why do you think that I asked that question?



- ii) Why was that question important?
- iii) Which of your questions turned out to be the most useful?

Significance of results:

- 1) Thinking is not driven by answers but by questions.
- 2) Questions define tasks, express problems and delineate issues.
- 3) Answers on the other hand, often signal full stop in thought.
- 4) Socratic questioning raises basic issues, probes beneath the surface of things, pursues problematic areas of thought.
- 5) It helps students to discover the structure of their own thought, develop sensitivity to clarity, accuracy, and relevance.
- 6) It helps students to arrive at judgment through their own reasoning.

Presentation:

- 1) Faculty members organize Socratic Seminars every alternate week requiring students to summarize the content learned during that interval.
- 2) Handout: For students who have not participated in a Socratic Seminar or find it difficult to phrase responses, the Socratic Seminar Stems handout are made available.

Reflective critique:

- 1) Students are given the opportunity to evaluate the process in general and their own performance specifically.
- 2) Reflecting on the seminar process helps students improve their ability to participate in future discussions.
- 3) Some questions that are discussed or have students write about when reflecting on the seminar:
 - a) At any point, did the seminar revert to something other than a dialogue? If so, how did the group handle this?
 - b) What evidence did you see of people actively listening and building on others' ideas?
 - c) How has your understanding of this text been affected by the ideas explored in this seminar?
 - d) What parts of the discussion did you find most interesting? In what parts were you least engaged?
 - e) What would you like to do differently as a participant the next time you are in a seminar?



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