

The Idiot's Guide to Socratic Dialog

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CT² Faculty Institute, August 2016

What we really, really want

- * We want students who get that education is more than just regurgitation.
- * We want them to appreciate the reasons behind their own positions as well as the strengths of other possible positions.
- * We want them to really engage with and actually care about the material as something that's important to them.
- * We want them to be able to articulate all this in a compelling way.

Problem

This is easier said than done.

It is very difficult (though not impossible) to get students to do this if you assess them with objective test items.

Discussion engages students, but they often do not get what we would like them to from the experience.

A 3,000 Year Old Solution

- * Socratic Dialog
- * Many people think they are doing this when in fact they are not.
- * To qualify, a discussion must:
 - * Address a particular question.
 - * Have a strong critical component
 - * End with consensus of some sort, even if it's consensus about the state of our ignorance.

SD OG

* Socrates' method:

1. Formulate a question (What is justice?)
2. Identify an expert (judge)
3. Ask the expert
4. Critically examine the answer
5. Prove the answer inadequate
6. Loop back to step 3 until expert quits
7. Summarize what we have learned (often in negative terms: justice is NOT any of these 4 things).

DO

- * Explicitly and continuously talk about reasoning: what it is, why it matters, how to do it properly.
- * Involve them in the process
 - * Have them help formulate rules of good argument to structure class discussions
 - * Allow them a role in enforcing these (even with you).
- * I like to open by asking them what it means to *know* something.
- * So, what *does* it mean to know something?

Plato on Knowledge

- * One is said to know if and only if:
 1. One has the correct answerAND
 2. One can explain WHY this is the correct answer.
- * Do you like this?
- * Q: Why?
- * One way of thinking about this is that SD is about the process of reasoning as much as, perhaps even more than, the answers generated.

Don't

- * Do things or allow things which terminate discussion prematurely:
 - * Never let students know your personal views about the subject at hand until the discussion is over (and maybe not even then).
 - * Don't allow students to assert things in ways that don't allow discussion (EX: "Well, that's just my religious view.")
 - * Use these as opportunities to reiterate the point – to think about how we think in ways that produce truth reliably.

Do

- * Think carefully about what your students:
 - * Already know and have right
 - * Don't know
 - * Think they know but don't have right
- * Dr. Nosich on the first day alluded to a video about the Harvard commencement experiment that I highly recommend: *A Private Universe* (Annenburg Foundation)
- * To do SD well, you need to be able to anticipate what your students are likely to say so you can respond.
- * You must confront head on their misunderstandings: you can not fill a cup which is already full.

Don't

- * Allow discussion to get too far off track
 - * One common way for this to happen is to let things get bogged down in unnecessary details.
 - * You have to constantly be following the discussion and make sure it stays relevant without choking it off.
 - * For example: Suppose you are discussing whether Enron's actions were ethical. A student asks whether what Enron did violated a particular kind of law.
 - * You can either:
 - * Explore the complex law, likely in ways you are not qualified to do.
- OR
- * Ask the student how this is relevant to the question about whether the company's actions were ethical.

Do

- * Act to prevent premature consensus.
- * A thoughtful consensus is one thing, but often students will reach a consensus because they happen to share the same assumptions, etc.
- * You have to always be ready to play devil's advocate by asking questions which will force them to think more deeply.
 - * This takes practice
 - * It's much easier if you have a good sense of what premature conclusions they are likely to reach and can plan accordingly.

Don't

- * Try to use Socratic Dialog about situations which are pretty clear (no slam dunks).
- * Remember, it's more about the reasoning process than the answer, so if they all get the same answer quickly, then

Do

- * Ask *Why?* a lot
 - * Just vary it up enough that you don't sound like a 3 year old (not that this is a bad thing)

Disadvantages

- * It's annoying to everyone at first and to some always
 - * You need to explain why you are doing what you are doing, get them to buy into the critical process.
 - * You have to make it clear that complex problems are not easily solved
- * Front end loaded effort – you can't “wing” Socratic Dialog (at least not the first 3 times you do it on a given topic).
 - * You need to have thought about what your students will say and how you can critically respond.

A Variation on SD

- * Often you use SD when you have a specific question to address, but you have no particular agenda in terms of the conclusion you wish students to reach.
- * However, you can sometimes use it to have students think their way to a particular conclusion as well.
- * The basic technique:
 - * Introduce the question, have them discuss without direction for a bit
 - * Then introduce “thought experiments” designed to elicit specific intuitions
 - * Use these intuitions they reached to reinforce a point.

For example

Q: Is there such a thing as “truth” in ethics?

Discuss

Note

- * There are lots of interesting issues here you could explore on their own
 - * What does truth mean in this context?
 - * What's the difference between saying there is a truth and saying we have good grounds to believe a particular claim is true?
 - * What are the consequences of answering this question one way or the other?

When in Newgarth

In Newgarth people eat with their hands rather than utensils such as a fork or spoon. They even eat rice with their hands.

A friend of yours calls from Newgarth. She reports that Newgarthians get upset when she pulls a fork and spoon out of her purse to eat. When she eats in the home of a Newgarthian family, their displeasure is quite apparent – they seem to be insulted by her refusal to eat with her hands. She tells you that she eats with a fork or spoon because her mother taught her that it is wrong to eat with your hands.

Q: What *should* you tell her?

Q: Why?

When in Newgarth?

Suppose that, desperate for hard currency the government of Newgarth, developed a novel way to attract foreign tourists. In an effort to outdo the Bangkok sex trade, Newgarth developed a federal sex service. Boys and girls age 8-15 are required to register for a sex draft. Draftees are selected by means of a lottery; those selected are required by law to provide one year of national service in the sex trade. These sex workers are regularly screened for sexually transmitted diseases and provided with effective treatment when necessary. Newgarth is thus in a position to provide a wide array of sexual services at a very competitive price. This system has been in place for many years.

A friend of yours moved to Newgarth several years ago. Her oldest daughter has just turned eight. She has just received notice from the government that her daughter must register for the draft. She calls to ask for your advice.

Consider

Q: What *should* you tell her?

Q: Why?

Q: How can you justify a different answer here than you had before?

Q: How can you justify your answer here to what you said previously about a truth in ethics?

Maybe

- * The two situations are different in kind – the first is normative, but not ethical while the second is both normative and ethical.
- * You really do believe in ethical truth, at least in the sense that you uphold values you believe others should follow regardless of their personal beliefs.

Questions?