

The Idiot's Guide to Socratic Dialog

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What we really, really want

- * We want them to be thoughtful about their thinking:
 - * 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 typically does not happen just because you want it to – you have to be explicit about it.
- * Even when it does happen in a particular discipline, it does not automatically transfer well to other contexts.
- * It is very difficult (though not impossible) to get students to do this if your assessment is mostly objective.

A 2,500 Year Old Solution

- * Socratic Dialog
 - * NOTE: Many people think they are doing this when they are really just chatting.
- * To qualify, a discussion must:
 - * Address a particular question.
 - * Have an *uncomfortably strong* critical component.
 - * Aim to identify 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 piety?)
2. Identify a supposed expert (Euthyphro, a.k.a. self righteous father-prosecutor)
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).

★ You should all read a Socratic Dialog (*Euthyphro*)

DO

- * Explicitly and continuously talk about reasoning: what it is, why it matters, how to do it properly. All your students should know they are being trained as critical thinkers.
- * Involve them in the process whenever possible:
 - * Have them formulate the rules of acceptable reasoning to structure class discussions.
 - * Let them help enforce 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?**

A Good Beginning: Plato on Knowledge

One is said to know if and only if:

1) One has the correct answer

AND

2) One can explain **WHY** this is the correct answer.

Do

- * Create a class environment where students feel free to say what they really think, even though they will be critiqued on this.
- * Make it clear they can question you as well – you are all on a shared exploration.
- * Keep the critique light hearted, but firm.
- * Smile a lot... 😊

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).
- * Get your students to do this as well, both inside class and in other contexts.
 - * Encourage them to be annoying this way to their professors, parents, friends.
 - * Get them to share their newly found skills with the class.
- * Now you are truly corrupting the youth...☺

Do

- * Think carefully about what your students “know” (consciously or not) but are wrong about.
- * You must confront their misunderstandings head on: you can not fill a cup which is already full.
- * To do SD well, you need to be able to anticipate what your students are likely to think at each step so you can challenge their views.
- * Prof. Nosich on the first day alluded to a video about questioning Harvard graduates at commencement that I highly recommend: *A Private Universe*.

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 or they find the discussion uncomfortable, 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

- * 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 often not even then).
 - * Don't allow students to assert things in ways that tends to terminate discussion:
 - * EX: "Well, that's just my religious view."
 - * Use these as opportunities to reiterate the metacognitive enterprise: Is this a good rule to allow if we wish to reliably uncover the truth?

Don't

- * Allow discussion to get off track, but allow it to explore any relevant side streets that open up. This requires you to be very familiar with the terrain and really pay very close attention to what is being said.
 - * One problem is for things get bogged down in unnecessary details.
 - * 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.

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 it's not worthwhile.

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 know the intellectual terrain well and where your students are on this terrain.
 - * You need to have carefully designed examples and cases to use as necessary.

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 use it to good effect with very “cut and dry” material
 - * Try talking your students out the right answer by looking skeptical and offering a plausible sounding alternative explanation.
- * You can also use it when there is a complex question and you need to defuse a particular misconception that will get in the way.
- * The basic technique:
 - * Begin with a question that will reliably produce the misconception in question.
 - * Then introduce “thought experiments” designed to elicit other intuitions at odds with this first one.
 - * Guide discussion to the desired conclusion and then reinforce the lesson explicitly.

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 practical and even metaphysical implications of answering this question one way or the other?

- * For our purposes, the question is whether there is anything more to ethical claims than personal opinion or social mores.

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 just turned eight and has received notice from the government that she must register for the draft. Your friend calls again for your advice.

Consider

Q: What *should* you tell her?

Q: Why?

But also

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

Q: How does your reaction here inform your earlier answer 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.

You know you have been successful when

- * Students are far more cautious about saying things without thinking them through first.
- * Students irritate you by making you rethink what you say and believe.
- * You can not confuse them about basic concepts by being tricky.
- * They tell you that this class has changed the way they think about all sorts of things.

Questions?