Socrates and the Madness of Method

Article *in* Phi Delta Kappan · September 2012

DOI: 10.2307/41763567

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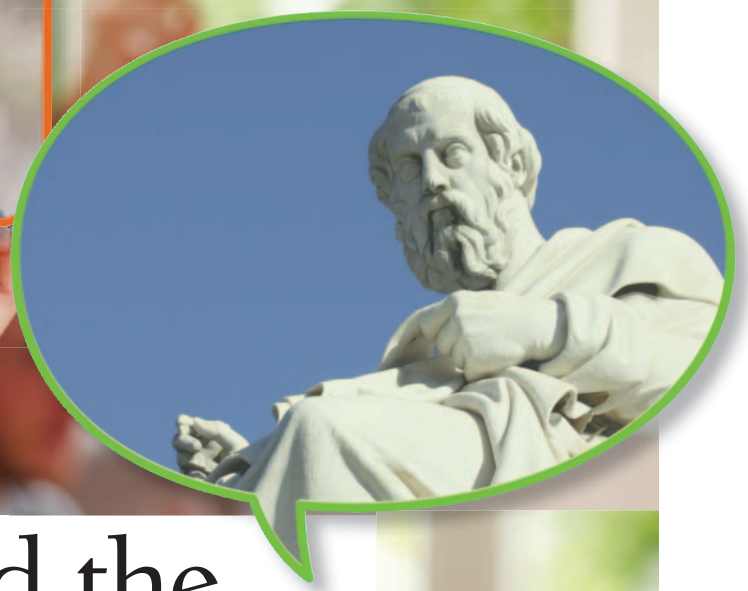


Socrates and the madness of method

From Socratic to sarcastic, a diversity of teaching methods claim a relationship to the ancient Greek scholar. But is there really a connection?

By Jack Schneider

So, what's your teaching method?

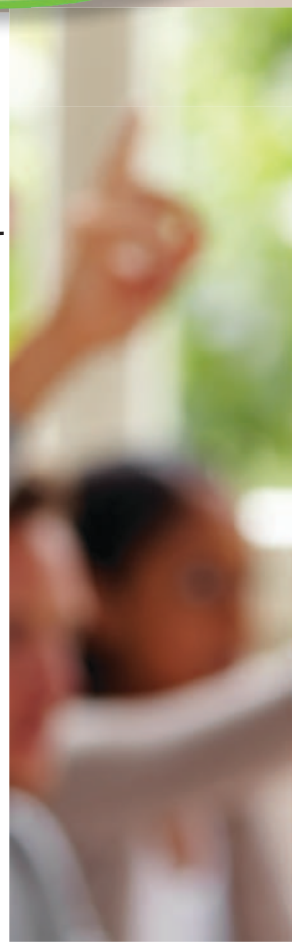
Perhaps you're inclined to say something about Socrates.

If so, you're not alone. From primary school to higher education, many educators claim to teach in the manner of the old philosopher.

But what do we know about Socrates and the method he used to interrogate Athenians in the agora? And what are we talking about when we call it the "Socratic method"?

As it turns out, we may be mistaking common phrasing for common practice. After all, classrooms in which the Socratic method is ostensibly employed are hardly all the same. Teachers are at the center of some and at the periphery of others. Talk is common in all, but it includes chaotic zigzagging in one class and linear directionality in another. Socratic classrooms can be relaxed or tense, loud or quiet, large or small. They can, in other words, seem as different from each other as they seem from classes in which other methods are the basis of instruction.

Differing interpretations of the Socratic method, it turns out, are the product of a fractured history in which K-12 educators, pedagogues, law



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professors, and leaders of undergraduate seminars put Socrates to work for their own purposes. Each claimed classical antiquity as their own, justifying shifts in practice by leaning on the legitimacy of the ancient past.

However, by the mid-20th century, those separate storylines had disappeared from collective memory. The motives and maneuverings of individuals faded, leaving only the residue of their high-minded discourse. Stripped of context, the separate worlds of 19th-century teacher education, say, or the 20th-century Great Books movement were mistaken for something singular with a universally understood meaning. Yet, how could that be, when even modern scholars of ancient Greece continue to struggle with the question of what Socrates may have employed as a teaching method?

References to the so-called Socratic method first began cropping up in Europe during the Enlightenment — as Socrates became an academically fashionable reference point. By way of migrating intellectuals and the printed word, the Socratic method made its way to America's eastern shore where its primary function was as a counter to the traditional methods of lecture and rote memorization. "Repetition, drilling, line upon line, and precept upon precept, with here and there a little of the birch — constituted the entire system," recalled Samuel Goodrich (1873). The Socratic method, by contrast, seemed to offer educators a way to engage children in learning and to do so as compulsory education laws were bringing more students to school and more novices into teaching. Moreover, the figure of Socrates gave teachers an ancient imprimatur for challenging traditional practice.

Professionalizing teaching

At work, too, was a professionalization motive, as teachers, pedagogues, and system builders like Horace Mann and Henry Barnard made the case that teaching was a calling and a career — not merely a way to earn a living before marriage. An 1859 article in the *Massachusetts Teacher and Journal of Home and School Education* made the case that "teaching, like preaching, is more than a business, though, too often, it is made not even so much as that; — more than a profession, though too few elevate it even to the rank of a profession." But, in order to professionalize the occupation, educators needed to establish and control a core of expert knowledge. In that light, a method with an ostensibly ancient pedigree seemed like a good place to start. In 1877, Joseph Baldwin, principal of the State Normal School in Kirksville, Mo., observed that "mere school *keepers*, rote teachers, quacks, shams, and fossils will never adopt this plan of teaching; but as teachers become familiar with the science of education and skillful in the art of teaching, they will necessarily use the Socratic method of giving instruction." By 1901, Yale pedagogy instructor Edward Franklin Buchner had made the claim that the Socratic method was "the chief type of modern methods."

> When we refer to "Socratic method," we may be mistaking common phrasing for common practice.

Some, of course, recognized that the teaching techniques of Socrates were not being accurately captured. How could they be, given the sparse historical record of the ancient past and the passage of two millennia? Yet, as R.M. Wenley observed in an 1891 article, "In the personality of Socrates, there is so much that attracts," particularly for teachers afraid that they were "toiling aimlessly." Thus, rather than suggesting that educators sever ties with Socrates, Wenley said K-12 educators "must therefore be prepared . . . to put a liberal interpretation upon the phrase." So long as they remembered they were doing so, he added, "no fault can be found." Adherents of the method described it variously as discussion, debate, individualized questioning, group recitation, the "drawing out" of in-born knowledge, and more. Consequently, with an unclear picture of what Socrates may have done, as well as various motives for assuming a Socratic posture, a manifold liberal interpretation emerged.

'Deep and well-rounded'

Professed adherence to the teaching methods of Socrates gradually extended across the United States, from kindergarten to higher education. In fact, perhaps the most consistent self-identification of Socratic instruction over the past hundred years has been in the university and, in particular, in law schools.

The history of the Harvard Law case method,

developed in the 1870s by Christopher Columbus Langdell, is well documented, and the magnitude of its influence in legal education has been immense. Believing that law was a science, replete with "certain principles or doctrines," Langdell developed a method in which students would make intense study of particular cases. As he contended, students would acquire knowledge of each individual principle best "by studying the cases in which it is embodied." Coupled with what he pitched as "the Socratic dialogue," Langdell argued that students would gain deep and well-rounded understandings of fundamental aspects of so-called legal science.

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Students who were accustomed to more traditional legal instruction initially rejected the case method, notwithstanding its alleged connection to antiquity. But Langdell had the support of Harvard president Charles Eliot, who in his 1880 annual report advised "a large admixture of the Socratic method." Consequently, Langdell remained securely in his post as dean of the Harvard Law School until 1895, by which time the case method had gained significant traction. By the turn of the century, the case method — including its ostensibly Socratic component — was well-established at several law schools, and took root at other prestigious schools like Chicago, Columbia, and Yale.

The Socratic method as employed in American law schools was no more authentically "Socratic" than in K-12 classrooms. But that was of little concern to legal educators. Whatever happened in ancient Athens was far less important than signaling to students — through the figure of Socrates — the importance of critical inquiry. Consequently, as a 1917 centennial history of Harvard Law School indicated, interpretations of the Socratic method varied significantly and included activities like pitting "one good student against another" and the use of "severe criticism."

The Great Books movement

In the wake of World War I, as the use of Socrates was becoming the mark of a legitimate legal education, the old Athenian was once again being trotted out — this time in the service of the so-called Great Books movement. Part of a broader move to counter the perceived inequities of the elective system and the rising tide of vocationalism in higher education, the Great Books movement portrayed Socrates as the founding father of the liberal arts ideal. As a symbol, he represented the pursuit of knowledge not for its use in the marketplace, but for its own sake.

The first modern class to focus explicitly on studying classic texts was John Erskine's General Honors course at Columbia University. An English professor, Erskine was particularly concerned with teaching undergraduates and proposed a two-year program in which students would read roughly 50 "great books." He employed a method focused on discussion rather than lecture — an approach to pedagogy that he called "the most natural of all methods."

Picking up the idea and running with it, Erskine's student, Mortimer Adler, became a devotee of both the Great Books concept and the "Socratic seminar" focused on the interrogation of text. When Adler joined the University of Chicago faculty, he brought his passion for a kind of Socratic method with him. In his *Manual for Discussion Leaders* (University of Chicago Bookstore, 1946), Adler called the method "the very core of liberal education."

The Socratic-style undergraduate seminar fit the interwar context perfectly. It addressed concerns about general education and reaffirmed a core of essential knowledge. At the same time, however, the Socratic style fit a new reality in which simply drilling students on that knowledge was no longer seen as suitable for college-level instruction. Thus, as Harvard President James Conant wrote in 1945, one of the most fundamental problems in education was "how to reconcile [the] necessity for common belief with the equally obvious necessity for new and independent insights leading to change."

Nowhere was this ideal more purely realized than at St. John's College in Annapolis, Md., and later at a second campus in Santa Fe, N.M. Teetering on the brink of collapse, the college was a virtually blank slate on which Adler's intellectual compatriots Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr could carry out their particular educational vision. They designed a curriculum focused exclusively on the Great Books and promoted a pedagogy that once again drew on Socrates — though perhaps a partially imagined

Socrates — as a model. As one college publication put it, "The argument will drift and it should be followed wherever it leads, but all opinions should be advanced with reasons; this is what makes the seminar somewhat Socratic." This interpretation of the Socratic method, as the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, reflected the influence of scholars like John Erskine, Alexander Meiklejohn, Robert Hutchins, and Mortimer Adler as much as, if not more than, any influence of ancient Greece. Yet regardless of the source, the undergraduate seminar at St. John's, certainly, and across the world of higher education would never be the same.

A unified concept

By the mid-20th century, various "Socratic" methods had emerged, all distinct from each other as well as from what classicists believe Socrates did with his students. But despite great variability and though shaped by distinct contexts, the language was the same. Thus, as discourse about the Socratic method became institutionalized, the Socratic method began to appear as a unified concept.

Different understandings of the Socratic method began to bleed into each other. Rising generations came of age being exposed to discussion-based methods of instruction at the K-12 level, at the undergraduate level, and beyond — all of which were called "Socratic." Consequently, a new sort of cross-pollination began in which interpretations of the method began to influence other interpretations.

Socratic work, eventually, meant conversation, debate, back-and-forth between teacher and student, a focus on student talk rather than teacher talk, and more. In short, a bit of everything — the sort of skeleton key that, as a resource produced by the University of North Carolina School of Education put it, "can be used at any grade level and with all subject areas."

Defined as almost everything, then, it became nearly nothing.

And yet it is a highly legitimate nothing. Generations of use have endowed the Socratic method with such reputability that it is simply accepted — a quite un-Socratic state of affairs. Its value has become so self-evident, in fact, that its use no longer depends even on its namesake. Thus, where proponents of the Socratic method once struggled to explain the particular teaching technique, many modern references to the method are in the form of a common, rather than a proper noun: "socratic" rather than "Socratic."

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So, do those who claim to employ the Socratic method need to stop, or at least overhaul their teaching to bring it in line with what the historical Socrates may have done? Hardly. Nor should they strive for uniformity. Evolution and pedagogical diversity are both good things.

What does need overhaul, however, is our language. Shorthand reference to the Socratic method brings conversation about teaching to a quick end, inhibiting our opportunities to share our experiences and to learn from each other. Resting on the assumption that something has been communicated, it closes dialogue rather than opens it. One can only hope that the ghost of Socrates appreciates irony.

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