



Teaching Tips

The Socratic Method: Fostering Critical Thinking

"Do not take what I say as if I were merely playing, for you see the subject of our discussion—and on what subject should even a man of slight intelligence be more serious? —namely, what kind of life should one live . . ."

Socrates

By Peter Conor

This teaching tip explores how the Socratic Method can be used to promote critical thinking in classroom discussions. It is based on the article, *The Socratic Method: What it is and How to Use it in the Classroom*, published in the newsletter, *Speaking of Teaching*, a publication of the Stanford Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL).

The article summarizes a talk given by Political Science professor Rob Reich, on May 22, 2003, as part of the center's Award Winning Teachers on Teaching lecture series. Reich, the recipient of the 2001 Walter J. Gores Award for Teaching Excellence, describes four essential components of the Socratic method and urges his audience to "creatively reclaim [the method] as a relevant framework" to be used in the classroom.

What is the Socratic Method?

Developed by the Greek philosopher, Socrates, the Socratic Method is a dialogue between teacher and students, instigated by the continual probing questions of the teacher, in a concerted effort to explore the underlying beliefs that shape the students views and opinions. Though often misunderstood, most Western pedagogical tradition, from Plato on, is based on this dialectical method of questioning.

An extreme version of this technique is employed by the infamous professor, Dr. Kingsfield, portrayed by John Houseman in the 1973 movie, “The Paper Chase.” In order to get at the heart of ethical dilemmas and the principles of moral character, Dr. Kingsfield terrorizes and humiliates his law students by painfully grilling them on the details and implications of legal cases.

In his lecture, Reich describes a kinder, gentler Socratic Method, pointing out the following:

- Socratic inquiry is not “teaching” per se. It does not include PowerPoint driven lectures, detailed lesson plans or rote memorization. The teacher is neither “the sage on the stage” nor “the guide on the side.” The students are not passive recipients of knowledge.
- The Socratic Method involves a shared dialogue between teacher and students. The teacher leads by posing thought-provoking questions. Students actively engage by asking questions of their own. The discussion goes back and forth.
- The Socratic Method says Reich, “is better used to demonstrate complexity, difficulty, and uncertainty than to elicit facts about the world.” The aim of the questioning is to probe the underlying beliefs upon which each participant’s statements, arguments and assumptions are built.
- The classroom environment is characterized by “productive discomfort,” not intimidation. The Socratic professor does not have all the answers and is not merely “testing” the students. The questioning proceeds open-ended with no pre-determined goal.
- The focus is not on the participants’ statements but on the value system that underpins their beliefs, actions, and decisions. For this reason, any successful challenge to this system comes with high stakes—one might have to examine and change one’s life, but, Socrates is famous for saying, “the unexamined life is not worth living.”
- “The Socratic professor,” Reich states, “is not the opponent in an argument, nor someone who always plays devil’s advocate, saying essentially: ‘If you affirm it, I deny it. If you deny it, I affirm it.’ This happens sometimes, but not as a matter of pedagogical principle.”

Professor Reich also provides ten tips for fostering critical thinking in the classroom. While no longer available on Stanford’s website, the full article can be found on the web archive: [The Socratic Method: What it is and How to Use it in the classroom](https://tilt.colostate.edu/the-socratic-method/#:~:text=What is the Socratic Method%3F Developed by the,beliefs that shape the students views and opi...)



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