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Articles and Statements

UDC 1

Socratic Method as an Approach to Teaching

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Abstract

In this article we presented the theoretical view of Socrates' life and his method in teaching. After the biographical facts of Socrates and his life, we explained the method he used in teaching and the two main types of his method, Classic and Modern Socratic Method. Since the core of Socrates' approach is the dialogue as a form of teaching we explained how exactly the Socratic dialogue goes. Besides that, we presented two examples of dialogues that Socrates led, Meno and Gorgias. Socratic circle is also one of the aspects that we presented in this paper. It is the form of seminars that is crucial for group discussions of a given theme. At the end, some disadvantages of the Method are explained.

With this paper, the reader can get the conception of this approach of teaching and can use Socrates as an example of how successful teacher leads his students towards the goal.

Keywords: Socratic method, Dialogue, Seminar, Teaching, Life-long learning

1. Introduction

History provides us with many heroes after whom we can model our actions. According to the great Greek philosopher, Socrates, it is in us where all the answers to human questions inhabit. All the answers are easily achieved if we participate in disciplined and thoughtful dialogue, seeking to discover the ultimate truth (Knox, 1998). The Socratic method of questioning is named after the Greek philosopher Socrates (469 BC-399 BC) who lived in Athens during the Golden age of Greece (Knezic, et al, 2010). Socrates was well known in Athens due to his habit of engaging in philosophy conversations in public and at private gatherings. Very often, the subject of such gatherings was defining some basic concepts like justice, beauty, courage, temperance, virtue and friendship, all in the form of disciplined dialogues led by Socrates himself. These disciplined dialogues are the pedagogical approach to teaching that encourage participants to seek deeper understanding of questioned concepts. As the supporting technique, the teacher doesn't provide students with necessary information. Instead, by analyzing and exploring given text they look for information.

When appropriately applied and supported by other pedagogical techniques, teaching with the Socratic method can increase the quality of learning, the effectiveness of students' self-improvement, techniques of critical thinking, and providing active learning techniques.

Within this article we explained and provided the example of all the principles related to the Socratic method, that may be very useful and effective during the teaching process.

2. Discussion

Socratic method

The Socratic Method originates with Socrates, Athenian philosopher who lived around 470 B.C. Socrates was born the son of a sculptor and was trained as a sculptor himself. However, he realized that his true calling was actually the sculpting of young minds (Knezic, et al, 2010). In those who learned from him he inspired love, devotion and a sense of appreciation. Describing him, Xenophon, one of his students, wrote: "...Socrates made himself an example to those who associated with him as a man of honorable and excellent character" (Knezic, et al, 2010). Socrates reached the fame for engaging others in conversations whose goal was to define broad ideas such as virtue, beauty, justice, courage, and friendship by discussing their ambiguities and complexities. All this was featured in dialogues written later by his student Plato. Thus, Plato's *Dialogues* are the best source available for Socrates' method and philosophy (Knox, 1998). His position in those dialogues was that of a student, forcing his respondents to act in the role of teacher.

An interesting definition of the Socratic method gives Nicholas Schiller (Schiller, 2008), stating Copleston's *History of philosophy* in his paper. There the method is described as follows:

"...Accordingly he asked questions, letting the other man do most of the talking, but keeping the course of the conversation under his control, and so would expose the inadequacy of the proposed definition of courage. The other would fall back on a fresh or modified definition, and so the process would go on, with or without final success" (Schiller, 2008, p. 3).

„The guide on the side“ vs „The sage on the stage“

The elaboration of the Socratic Method is found in Chang, Lin, Chan's work (1998). In their work the authors explained that "there are several key points in the Socratic method when it is applied for learning. Firstly, its learning objective is "inquiry". Its purpose is not to completely oppose students' original arguments, but to partially modify their original arguments. Secondly, its method is a dialogue between student and teacher. The role of a teacher is to ask the questions and a students' role is to organize their past experiences and their knowledge in answering the questions. Thirdly, its method not only involves an interactive dialogue between teacher and students, it is also inductive. The teacher continuously leads the students to reason incorrectly then uses the counterexample to clarify the problem.

The main characteristic of the Socratic method is that it is not „teaching“ in the conventional sense of the word. Teacher is an observer, a helper, guide but not the purveyor of knowledge. Lectures with „undeniable“ facts and truths and rote memorization or, in other words, „guiding the students“ is replaced with shared dialogues between students and teachers where both are responsible for pushing the dialogue forward through questioning.

The Socratic method has five stages:

1. Wonder (posing questions such as: what is courage, what is virtue, etc.);
2. Hypothesis (an answer to the wonder, one gives his opinion or claim about the question which becomes a hypothesis of the dialogue);
3. Elenchus, refutation and cross-examination (the core of Socratic practice; the hypothesis is called into question and the counterexample is given to prove or disapprove the hypothesis);
4. Acceptance/rejection of the hypothesis (participants accept or reject the counterexample);
5. Action (acting on the findings of the inquiry) (Boghossian, 2012).

Socrates intended to create each person being a master of his own mind and being state. We can learn from him that only the knower and true understanding along with self-developed reasoning can survive the attacks of persuasion, eloquence and any other authority. This may influence the development of critical thinking as Socrates' students, through appropriate and repeated questioning, developed self-regulating knowledge and the ability to regulate their own

thoughts (Douglas, 2014). Using Socratic method in teaching, giving students questions and not answers, we simply force students' reasoning and the logical relationships of their existing knowledge and experience. Since the critical thinking skills cannot be directly taught, by the Socratic method it can be engaged and cultivated and students are fostered to improve this skill. (Lam, 2011)

Classic and Modern Socratic method

Classic Socratic method

The Socratic method can be divided into two main categories. Maxwell (2013) divides it into classic and modern version of the Method. In his paper *Introduction to Socratic method and its effect on critical thinking* he explains that the term classic refers to the early Socrates' dialogues and some other dialogues of Plato. „In these dialogues, Socrates claims to have no knowledge of even the most fundamental principles such as justice, holiness, friendship or virtue“ (Maxwell, 2013). Thus, the purpose of these dialogues is getting only short answers that address very specific points. The aim is to achieve an adequate understanding of basic principles instead of moving to more advanced and complicated topics.

Drawback of classic method is a failure to find a satisfactory answer to the question in a conversation. This style helps primarily in defining the terms and topics to be discussed. There is no sense in asking about the justice if one doesn't know what is the justice.

The purpose of the first style of the Socratic method is that prepares people to think and to improve themselves through increased understanding. This phase deconstructs people's previous understanding, leaves them being less sure of what they previously knew, or helps them be conscious of their ignorance of a certain topic at all, helping them know what they do not know.

Modern Socratic method

This kind of Socratic method is not named modern because it has been invented recently but because it is commonly used in modern times. It originates in Plato dialogues and is different from the classic Socratic method in that it leads a person step by step and knowledge is gained by more and more questions. If the classic style is just naming or identifying different topics, the Modern method is one that goes deeper, producing the specific knowledge of those topics. People are questioning their own ideas and thus developing their critical thinking.

The Modern Socratic method makes a situation in which the students are not ignorant and in which they know the answer. One of the benefits of the Socratic method is that it draws the student and the teacher into an intimacy which cannot be achieved by lecturing as they both become active participants in the teaching and learning process (Knox, 1998). The emphasis is on asking well-formed questions and continuing the investigation, not on finding absolute answers.

Socratic dialogue

The main feature through which Socrates teachings are conveyed to us are the dialogues conducted in the writings of his first students such as Plato. As mentioned above, Plato's *Dialogues* are the best source available for Socrates' method and philosophy. Socrates' main concept of leading the conversations and dialogues with ordinary people of Athens was, as he used to describe, doing a *midwifery* job. „Socrates claimed that just like his mother he was practicing midwifery. Only his mother helped pregnant women deliver babies, whereas he helped his followers deliver knowledge. He did so mostly by questioning: first driving his collocutors into self-contradiction (elenchus) and thus freeing them of their false preconceptions and then helping them deliver the true knowledge“ (Knezic, et.al. 2010).

So, the purpose of his questioning is to apply certain types of questions to a discussion. One of the ways is in the form of *elenchus*, a cross-examination in which questions are asked about beliefs in such a way as to reveal contradictions.

According to Knezic et al. (2010) the group in the dialogue may be consisted of six to twelve participants. The role of facilitator is not important in order to ensure the participants' deployment

of their own capacities and judgments. He/she may just keep the focus on the current question. It is important for him/her to assist participants to reach insights and to make sure important issues are dealt with. To keep the “togetherness” of the group is also extremely important.

Observing participants while in the dialogue is also worth being capable of. Some principles and techniques for this could be to raise different questions, to present counterexample when they make contradictions with their statements, to ask them to make predictions about the final goal, etc. (Chang et al. 1998.)

The critical task in the Socratic dialogue is „how to ask“. Questions should be more difficult, raising students' reasoning and evaluating their concepts (Chan et al. 1998).

With his dialogues Socrates made a transition to a human-centered education model from an authority-centered one and he made a strong emphasis on the importance of a huge learning capacity and creativity of humankind. Socrates himself did not write. His ideas are recorded by his contemporaries Plato, Xenophon and Aristophanes. Plato's Socratic dialogs are a body of literature that record a series of conversations between Socrates and people who professed to have knowledge on a certain subject (Schiller, 2008).

The purpose (of having a debate/argument) is not to "win" and to make others feel embarrassed. The way we see it, the purpose of having a debate/dialogue is to find out the truth, or at the very least, to broaden your mind. When done correctly by a great professor, the Socratic Method can actually produce a lively, engaging, and intellectual classroom atmosphere.

Socratic Seminars

Socratic Seminars (also known as a Socratic Circle) are exploratory intellectual conversations centered on a text and designed in such a way to resemble Socrates instruction-through-questioning method (Chorzempa and Lapidus, 2009). The activity is named Socratic for its embodiment of Socrates' belief in the power of asking questions, prize inquiry over information and discussion over debate. It is a pedagogical approach based on seeking to understand information in a text. Its systematic procedure is used to examine a text through questions and answers. The goal of a Socratic seminar is for students to help one another understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in a specific text.

How it goes

The seminar typically involves the following components: a passage of text that students must read beforehand and two concentric circles of students: an outer circle and an inner circle. So, the planning for the activity is important. Teachers, supposing that students came prepared to the class, facilitate the process by first introducing the text to the students and then engaging them in their preparation for the Socratic seminar (Chorzempa and Lapidus, 2009). After they read through the text again (it can be more than once), they are asked to present their questions. The inner circle focuses on exploring and analyzing the text through the act of questioning and answering. During this phase, the outer circle remains silent. Students in the outer circle are much like scientific observers watching and listening to the conversation of the inner circle. When the text has been fully discussed and the inner circle is finished talking, the outer circle provides feedback on the dialogue that took place, only during consultation. This process alternates with the inner circle students going to the outer circle for the next meeting and vice versa.

The length of this process varies depending on the text used for the discussion. The teacher may decide to alternate groups within one meeting, or they may alternate at each separate meeting.

The most significant difference between this activity and most typical classroom activities involves the role of the teacher. In Socratic Circles the students lead the discussion and questioning. The teacher's role is to ensure the discussion advances regardless of the particular direction the discussion takes.

Socratic seminar often begins with the discussion leader, a student or the teacher, asking an open-ended question. A typical Socratic seminar opening prompt is: What do you think this text means? Students may take a few minutes to warm-up. Sometimes teachers organize a Socratic seminar like a fishbowl, (a technique that helps students practice being contributors and listeners

in a discussion), with some students participating in the discussion and the rest of the class having specific jobs as observers.

It is by this that the Circle offers an atmosphere of intellectual engagement, cooperation, and conversation where students learn the difference between dialogue and debate

A Socratic Circle is not a debate. The goal of this activity is to have participants work together to construct meaning and arrive at an answer, not for one student or one group to “win the argument”. The main goal, however, is the full participation of each student. If a student is not actively included into the discussion, he/she is busy with summarizing and taking notes of his partner’s ideas. Also, they need to come prepared for the lesson. Otherwise, the rest of a class will not be able to function.

We can conclude that the Socratic seminars make the balance between two traditional purposes of education: the cultivation of common values and the worth of free enquiry. Providing the process of active learning and cooperation, Socratic seminars also help build self-esteem and develop critical thinking. The benefit of it is that feelings of self-worth lead to feelings of competence—the ability to independently construct meaning and arrive to thoughtful ideas. When students make decisions, solve problems, give their own opinions they acquire the sense of significance.

One of the recent applications of the Socrates’ circle approach to a classroom environment was done at the University of Zenica by Alma Pirić. In her paper *Motivating students to participate in classroom discussion through the Socratic circle approach* she explained how the application of the approach affected and motivated students. She took it upon to try to motivate and include as many students as possible to be an active participant in the classroom discussion. According to her, students were very satisfied with the new method and were eager to continue participating actively in the lessons (Pirić, 2014).

Challenges

In this part we want to elaborate on a common disadvantage that can raise from the Socratic method misunderstandings. The concepts usually related to this are perplexity, humiliation and shame as a bad effects of the Socratic method user. Thus, Boghossian (2012) in his paper *Socratic Pedagogy: Perplexity, humiliation, shame and a broken egg* brings a list of authors that supported the claim already mentioned. Their claim is that shame and not logic are the usual tools or weapon of the method and that Socrates sought to cause the perplexity.

Those who are against the Socratic method claim that the teachers who use it wait students to make mistakes to criticize their imperfect answers, exposing them to public degradation, humiliation and ridicule. To disapprove these claims, it is important to simply state that the cause of humiliation, shame and all other negative feelings are not due to the Method but due to the lack of knowledge. The purpose of the Method is to teach, to make known anything that was unknown before and to reorganize and rebuild mistakenly incompletely learned facts and beliefs. The questions of the Socratic method can be provocative but it is not to cause the perplexity but to help people realize the deficiencies in their knowledge (Boghossian, 2012). The Method works best if the participants think about the counterexamples given by “provokers”.

The manners that teachers use are like “I don’t think it is true” or “Are you sure you are right” and those like “You just think you are so smart, don’t you”, which will then cause the negative feelings for sure.

The feelings of embarrassment and shame are the psychological factors brought to the discourse by the student. It is by this that he/she can feel stupid or perplexed because of the teacher who tried to correct their misconceptions.

Socrates showed that even a slave boy can be dealing with complex mathematical problems and that no man can be sure he is completely right in his claims unless he examines it with someone more experienced than he himself. Sometimes the incompetent doesn’t know he/she is incompetent (Schiller, 2008)

Socrates and life-long learning

Regarding the story of Socrates, if anything can be labeled as Socrates philosophy that should be, by no means, his force for the continuing learning and education. Socrates claimed that the human are the only imperfect beings in the universe and that they have a tendency as well as an ability to develop into perfection (Demirci, 2012). Lifelong learning helps humans to reach a level of completeness and self-fulfillment. In their paper *The Determinants of Lifelong Learning* (2016) Sinanovic and Becirovic, based on Delors' four pillars of education for the future, define lifelong learning as "learning that is flexible, diverse and available at different times and at different places". The definition completely fits in the Socratic method as it is; flexible learning situation, diverse students and topics, and at any place or time.

Explaining of the essence of Socrates' method, we already mentioned the core aims of learning and knowledge. The life-long learning, the pure knowledge seeking tends to achieve the truth, and the aim of all intellectual questioning is not just to win the opponent but to come to the truth. Than, after this aim, all other aims will be fulfilled. If we want to be a political expert and if we answer correctly to all those questions of what the virtue, justice and wise is, then we will win the opponent too. Spending his adult years at the street, debating and answering the life-basic questions such as „What is virtue “, Socrates made a pattern of a basic knowledge a person should have. Answering correctly to these questions, one will prepare him/herself for further life learning. Socrates answer to the question of what the virtue is was that the virtue is knowledge itself, that a person acts according to his knowledge. So, if he/she knows what is right and what is wrong, he/she will perform the right actions and be virtuous because nobody does wrong voluntarily, wrong actions come from the ignorance. When acquired appropriately, lifelong learning is not just beneficial for an individual but for institutions or a society. It is a way to reform and cohesion and it becomes a tool of necessity at this time of rapid changes in different skills and knowledge.

What we found more interesting here is that the life-long learning enables a person to be a master of his own life and to avoid any kind of subordination. In today's life, we are in the situation of unconsciously acquiring the phrases such as „yes boss“, „ok sir“, „ja scheff“, even though we have all possibilities for self-improvement and imposing our own rules (Tule, 2013). Thus, the principle „Know yourself“ is the core principle of Socrates' philosophy (Demirci, 2012).

Socrates' concern was a soul. For him education was not the teaching but the learning. He tried to persuade his audience that the learning is incomplete and that unexamined life is not worth living. Therefore, the process of human development goes on and on until death.

It is by this that some authors named Socrates „the prophet of life-long learning“. By his insisting on learning throughout the whole life and by helping in that process he deserves this label.

Practical implications of a Method for the present education

Never in the history of humanity has it been more important to raise whole generations of excellent thinkers than it is today. Even though it dates back to the ancient times the beauty of the Socratic method is that you can incorporate it into existing curriculum without necessarily taking any more class time. While in a need of a revised and improved educational methods and procedures we can benefit from the Socratic method in a way it cultivates higher order thinking skills and transforms the mental and learning habits of students. The benefit is also vivid from the learning orientation induced by the Method. For learners who are learning oriented, their chief concern is improving their ability (Lam, 2011). Therefore, they are more likely to engage in Socratic learning than performance oriented students who believe that individual ability determines success and they are concerned with how their performance will be judged.

The Method helps students to self-monitor and engage in metacognitive activities, to “step outside” of their ongoing thinking process from time to time and to see the progress from different perspectives. This gives students a better sense of where they are in the learning process.

3. Conclusion

The Socratic Method is an approach that can help encourage student learning effectively. Socrates trained his students to investigate and question logical principles and beliefs and to be critical thinkers. The Method is a pedagogy that uses guided questions, dialog, and refutation to help students critically reflect on their understanding of a particular issue. As students reflect, the

instructor's questions stimulate them to reject misconceptions and gain an understanding of what they know and also what they don't know.

The usage and the application of the Socratic Learning Method can improve students' curiosity and passion for learning. The Method can help students become independent learners who seek to examine their beliefs in the face of new information; the Method can be cultivated within the students as a vigorous intellectual habit that they will constantly apply throughout their lives.

With this paper we explained the approach to teaching of the Socratic Method and we showed how the application of this method goes in the classroom. The Method can be new approach for the organization of different classroom activities, promoting critical thinking skills and students' self-improvements.

As we saw from the elaboration on the possible disadvantages of the Method, it is extremely important for teachers who will use the Method to know its principles, the application instruments and techniques in order to avoid causing mentioned disadvantages. It is important to bear in mind that, even though the students are free to be teachers and counselors in the classroom, the real teacher is still the experienced one and it is he who will prevent all misinterpretations and misconceptions with the Method usage.

Today's teachers need to change their perspective of teaching, to move from „ivory towers“, and to endeavor to put their knowledge and expertise to the society. In a search for the effective approach that will help students learn more effectively and productively we think this method will be sufficient for teachers who want their students to learn in this manner.

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