

Socratic Questioning

Named for Socrates (ca. 470-399 B.C.), the early Greek philosopher/teacher, a Socratic approach to teaching is based on the practice of disciplined, rigorously thoughtful dialogue. The instructor professes ignorance of the topic under discussion in order to elicit engaged dialogue with students. Socrates was convinced that disciplined practice of thoughtful questioning enables the scholar/student to examine ideas logically and to be able to determine the validity of those ideas. Also known as the dialectical approach, this type of questioning can correct misconceptions and lead to reliable knowledge construction. Although "Socratic questioning" appears simple, it is in fact quite rigorous. The teacher attempts to draw out the student's fullest possible knowledge of the topic. Individuals have the capacity to recognize contradictions, so Socrates assumed that incomplete or inaccurate ideas would be corrected during the process of disciplined questioning, and hence would lead to progressively greater truth and accuracy.

As a tutor, you need to become very familiar with this method of questioning. Notice that the tutor should be asking many questions, not telling all the information. The tutor should guide the session, but the student should do most of the talking and writing. The student should hold the pencil or be the one at the board working problems. Sometimes it is difficult for a tutor to accept the idea that they are doing a good job tutoring if they don't spend the entire hour explaining and demonstrating problems. The fact is that students learn much more when they are the ones doing the explaining and working out problems. The tutor should ask guiding questions that prompt the student. "What do you do next?" "Why?" "What happens after that?" "Show me on the board."

Ask open-ended questions that require elaboration. If you ask questions that require only a yes or no answer, you won't be able to determine a student's real understanding of the material. Ask the student to do the explaining.

Below, you will find some guidelines for your sessions and suggestions of appropriate Socratic style questions.

Guidelines

Monitor – Get students to tell you what they know, taking the topic or problem in small pieces or steps. Have the student teach you the problem or concept up to the point where he or she becomes confused.

Say-back – Tell the student what you hear him saying, either as a way to show him he is not communicating what he wants to (as in a writing tutorial) or as a way to let him hear his own confusion or mistakes. This is not a judgmental activity, only a report of what you hear him saying.

Verify understanding so far – Acknowledge that the student has mastered the steps or elements of the problem or topic up to a point. This builds confidence.

Application of knowledge – Apply what has been learned so far to similar problems or situations. This builds confidence in the student and shows the tutor that the student truly understands what has been learned.

Model an incorrect answer – Allow the student to correct the tutor and confirm her/his own knowledge. Sometimes this can be done through an analogy or by pushing the piece of knowledge or process to an extreme.

Strengthen – Prompt the student to give more support or more examples. In the negative form this would be prompting the student to see where support falls short or examples don't represent the concept.

Suggestions for Socratic Questions*

Clarification Questions:

- What do you mean by _____?
- What is your main point?
- How does _____ relate to _____?
- Could you put that another way?
- What do you think is the main issue here?
- Let me see if I understand you; do you mean _____ or _____?
- Jane, would you summarize in your own words what Richard has said? . . .
Richard, is that what you meant?
- Could you give me an example?
- Would this be an example: _____?
- Could you explain that further?
- Could you expand upon that?

Questions About the Initial Question or Issue:

- How can we find out?
- What does this question assume?
- Would _____ put the question differently?
- How could someone settle this question?
- Can we break this question down at all?
- Is the question clear? Do we understand it?
- Is this question easy or hard to answer? Why?
- Does this question ask us to evaluate something?
- Do we all agree that this is the question?
- To answer this question, what questions would we have to answer first?
- I'm not sure I understand how you are interpreting the main question at issue.
- Is this the same issue as _____?
- How would _____ put this issue?
- Why is this question important?

- Does this question lead to other questions or issues?

Assumption Probes:

- What are you assuming?
- What is Karen assuming?
- What could we assume instead?
- You seem to be assuming _____. Do I understand you correctly?
- All of your reasoning depends on the idea that _____. Why have you based your reasoning on _____ rather than _____?
- You seem to be assuming _____. How would you justify taking this for granted?
- Is it always the case? Why do you think the assumption holds here?
- Why would someone make this assumption?

Reason and Evidence Probes:

- What would be an example?
- How do you know?
- Why do you think that is true?
- Do you have any evidence for that?
- What difference does that make?
- What are your reasons for saying that?
- What other information do we need?
- Could you explain your reasons to us?
- Are these reasons adequate?
- Can you explain how you logically got from _____ to _____?
- Do you see any difficulties with their reasoning here?
- Why did you say that?
- What led you to that belief?
- How does that apply to this case?
- What would change your mind?
- But is there good evidence to believe that?
- Is there reason to doubt that evidence?
- Who is in a position to know if that is so?
- What would you say to someone who said _____?
- Can someone else give evidence to support that response?
- By what reasoning did you come to that conclusion?
- How could we find out whether that is true?

Origin or Source Questions:

- Where did you get this idea?
- Do your friends or family feel the same way?
- Have you been influenced by media?
- Have you always felt this way?
- What caused you to feel this way?
- Did you originate this idea or get it from someone else?

Implication and Consequence Probes:

- What are you implying by that?
- When you say _____ are you implying _____?

- But if that happened, what else would happen as a result? Why?
- What effect would that have?
- Would that necessarily happen or only probably happen?
- What is the probability of this result?
- What is an alternative?
- If this and this are the case, then what else must also be true?
- If we say that this is unethical, how about that?

Viewpoint Questions:

- You seem to be approaching this issue from _____ perspective. Why have you chosen this rather than that perspective?
- How would other groups/types of people respond? Why? What would influence them?
- How could you answer the objection that _____ would make?
- What might someone who believed _____ think?
- Can/did anyone see this another way?
- What would someone who disagrees say?
- What is an alternative?
- How are Ken's and Roxanne's ideas alike? Different?

* Excerpted from material by Ronald Wilcomb and Margaret Wilcox.