The Socratic Dialogue: Step-By-Step

As anyone who has taken an introductory philosophy course can attest, the method of questioning used by Socrates is an effective way to explore ambiguous or obscure concepts. However, the method is not without difficulties; it ultimately cost Socrates his life. When it works, it offers a way to engage students with the material and to encourage them to work through concepts on their own.

The method becomes more manageable once it is thought of as six simple steps. These can be practiced whether the course is religion or business management.

1. Choose a concept to discuss where students have a superficial understanding. As a way to show the development of the idea, always write what the students say on the board.

2. Rephrase the question in order to draw out the other responses and expand the initial definition. This step serves two purposes. First, it allows you to get more information so that the first definition can be enhanced. Second, it provides a way to stimulate the conversation if no one ventures a first definition.

3. Ask how these new ideas fit in with the initial definition. Prompt them with questions about the ideas they generate, forcing them to relate what they say to the main concept.

4. Get students to combine their work into a cohesive definition. By this step students are usually involved in the discussion. Ask them to use a sentence to express the concepts they have agreed on thus far.

5. Ask for or offer test cases to determine if the definition is viable. This is the essence of the Socratic method and yet students sometimes see it as a personal challenge. Reiterate that we are trying to come up with the best overall definition. Presenting the limiting or test case as hypothetical makes them less likely to feel personally threatened.

6. Refer to the definition during the course. It is very important, especially after all the work students put into the definition, to keep referring to it throughout the semester.

Although rightfully associated with philosophy, this streamlined version of Socratic dialogue can be used successfully in many courses. I have used it in sociology where students defined values and culture, in logic where they defined truth, psychology defining consciousness, and even English composition where students worked on cause and effect. I can imagine it being used in economics to define fair distribution, biology and life, history and progress, and business management and contract. I’m certain that Socrates would not mind in the least if you appropriated his method of dialogue to enhance discussion in your discipline.

By Craig A. Munns in *The Teaching Professor*, October 2001.