



Teaching Tips

A Forum for discussion and tips for
advancing teaching and learning at Mona

The Socratic Method

The Socratic Method is often referred to as the foundation of the Western pedagogical tradition. It can be an effective means of engaging students in our classrooms, pushing them to look at issues from multiple viewpoints. In the process, critical thinking might be achieved. The UWI is concerned about developing critical thinking skills in our graduates and the Socratic Method might be utilised as we strive to produce critical thinkers at UWI.

Special points of interest:

- The **Teaching Tips Newsletter** is a publication of the Instructional Development Unit (IDU) at the UWI, Mona.
- The Newsletter is published once per month and provides tips for improving teaching and learning in higher education. It is available online (<http://myspot.mona.uwi.edu/idu/>) as well as in the office of the IDU.
- If you have an area that you would like to explore using this medium, do not hesitate to contact us at the IDU.

What is the Socratic Method?

In Socratic inquiry, the facilitator of learning and the students have responsibilities of creating and sustaining a dialogue. The art of questioning is the major pedagogical act that is utilised. The teacher, the leader of the dialogue is expected to ask probing questions. These questions should expose the values, principles and beliefs which underlie, frame, and support the thought and perspectives of those making contributions in the dialogue. Opportunities are always created and given for students to ask questions as well. The teacher is both participant and guide. Much interaction results from the faithful use of the Socratic Method. Since the discussion is always open-ended, there is no predetermined conclusion that must be achieved. The teacher is not duty bound to guide the student to move in a certain direction in order to achieve certain outcomes for the conversation.

Major components of the Socratic Method

Questioning- used to expose the values, principles and beliefs of students. They give insights into the motivations and assumptions that guide the participants/students.

Moral education is a major focus, in other words much of the probing will focus on how one ought to live. Questions are usually directed at specific participants since the important consideration is what the participant thinks and says about the world. This is in keeping with the goal of probing the underlying beliefs and assumptions of each participant in the dialogue. Socrates has been widely quoted for the following: "the unexamined life is not worth living."

Creative tension/productive discomfort is often a characteristic feature of the Socratic Method. When using this method in your classroom, there will be some element of productive discomfort in the learning environment. As questions are asked and persons are challenged to defend their stance, discomfort will set in.

Demonstrates complexity- this method of teaching might be effectively used to illustrate the complexity, difficulty and uncertainty that are associated with earthy existence, rather than to elicit facts about the world.

On Using the Socratic Method...

- Provide guidelines for class conversations
- Know students names and encourage students to learn each other's names
- Participation will require deep listening and active engagement
- Comments should focus on concepts, principles and not on the individual life story
- Appreciate silence
- Give students a chance to think through questions
- Use follow-up questions
- Intervene as the teacher in the discussion from time to time.
- Encourage students to engage issues and not to assume the posture of deferring to avowed authority
- Push students to examine their own premises
- Don't allow the size of the class to overwhelm you, use groups
- Good for moral dilemma...navigating and negotiating those knotty ethical issues



Whither the textbook?

Are traditional textbooks experiencing serious decline? Will they go the way of the abacus? Will they experience steady decline just like the blackboard and even pens and pencils? There are now electronic readers such as **Kindle** and **The Nook**. These are small and portable devices that students can carry around and down load material to them in seconds from millions of books. Will these replace textbooks?

Using Technology to support Socratic Teaching

The preponderance of new and emerging synchronous and asynchronous communication and collaboration tools make implementing the Socratic Method in the higher education class easy. Perhaps one of the easiest ways to facilitate Socratic teaching in the technology-enhanced classroom is through using the discussion forum. Discussions are ideal for engaging the students' minds as they present multiple perspectives on an issue.

Online discussions are usually an effective way to engage students in classroom activities as they:

- are usually very interactive
- encourage active participatory learning
- promote alternative ways of thinking
- allow learners to explore their own experiences
- enhance critical thinking
- facilitate multiple perspectives on an issue
- give audience to the students' voice
- facilitate self expression

The key to effective discussions online is writing good questions. Good discussion questions should:

- Not require a "yes/no" answer
- Be open ended
- Solicit an opinion about something
- Promote thinking rather than finding information
- Create some amount of cognitive dissonance

While other electronic communication tools can be used to support Socratic teaching, online discussions can be used to create and sustain dialogue among facilitator and students.

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