

Socratic Teaching – Stimulating Discussion in Class

Socratic teaching is revered as the oldest, most powerful model for development critical thinking. This teaching model, established by Socrates more than 2,500 years ago, emphasizes the importance of seeking evidence, closely examining reasoning and assumptions, and analyzing basic concepts. With Socratic teaching, the focus is on providing students with questions, not answers, by modeling inquiry and probing. As a result, students develop the ability to reason in a disciplined, self-assessing manner. Students also benefit by communicating with their peers in the classroom setting.

This teaching model is valuable in the University 101 classroom, where the goal is to create a student-centered environment, where students take responsibility for their own learning. The goal of Socratic teaching is for students to internalize a mode of questioning that suits their learning style and enables them to achieve higher levels of realization and understanding. These modes of questioning are:

- Clarity. For example, the student might ask, “Could you elaborate further?” or “Could you give me an example?”
- Accuracy. “How can we verify your statements?”
- Precision. “Could you be more specific?”
- Relevance. “How does this relate to the issue?”
- Depth. “What other factors need to be considered?”
- Breadth. “Do we need to consider another point of view?”
- Logic. “Does what you say follow from the evidence?”
- Significance. “Is this the most important issue to consider?”

In order to achieve the goal of the Socratic teaching model, instructors should:

1. Make an environment conducive to discussion. Develop a base relationship among the class members before expecting extensive participation in discussion. Students are more likely to participate if they feel they are among friends. Facilitating activities that help students learn each other’s names and interest can do this. The instructor should also learn all the students’ names and take some time to chat with them individually and informally. If possible, arrange the seating in the room into a semicircle so that all class members can see one another.
2. Keep the discussion focused by providing questions that advance the discussion. These questions should not only stimulate student thinking, but also hold students accountable for their thinking. Plan ahead for the many different directions that the dialogue might take, and be prepared to think on your feet. However, limit your own comments. The discussion should be about the students developing their own answers and solutions.
3. Keep the discussion intellectually responsible by dealing carefully and fairly with contributions from every member of the class. Show respect for each student’s thoughts and opinions. By modeling this behavior as the instructor, students will also show respect for their peers’ thoughts and opinions.

4. Stimulate the discussion with probing questions (“what,” “how,” and “why” questions are open-ended and further discussion; “can,” “are,” and “do” questions are closed.) When modeled by the instructors, stimulating questions become internalized by students, who in turn ask themselves the same things.
5. Periodically summarize what has and what has not been dealt with or resolved in regards to the topic of discussion. This provides participants in the discussion with a road map to guide the rest of the dialogue.
6. Incorporate as many students as possible into the discussion. If everyone feels that his or her contributions to the discussion are valued and respected, participation will come more naturally.
7. Take a nonjudgmental attitude, listen, share something of yourself, and be honest. All of these things will contribute to critical rapport-building with your students, and affect future discussions.

Adapted from California PASS Program. *Socratic Teaching*. Retrieved from <http://www.cyberhigh.fcoe.k12.ca.us>

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