The Art and Heart of the Socratic Method: Connecting through Questioning, Listening, and Silence

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My father was an elementary school teacher for 35 years. He answered a question with a question so often that it was second nature to expect a question from him. I learned two key things about the Socratic method from him.

1) Questions can help us organize what we don’t know; and

2) At the heart of the Socratic method is relationships. It is about dialogue and meeting others openly and authentically.
This is a picture of my youngest child, Nathan. We’re talking about a fallen tree at the water line and wondering about how the turtles get up on the slippery trunk to sun themselves. In the end, I think the Socratic method sharpens our use of Questioning, Listening, and Silence.
The art and heart of the Socratic method is embedded in dialogue.
Sherry Turkle’s work exemplifies a reality so many of our students experience...
...the Monologue pattern of communication.
→ the Socratic method can offer an alternative experience.
Know thyself—
Socrates

...which means “think for yourself”
Michel Meyer

It can also seek exactly what Socrates endeavored to help others achieve—
⇒ Know thyself; and
⇒ Think for yourself.
The Socratic method is the Art of: Asking Questions, Learning to Listen, and Finding Comfort in Silence.

The Heart of the method is based on two principles, the Maieutic and Elenchus, With the goal of helping others think for themselves.
Socrates’ mother was a midwife.
It occurred to him that like his mother, he too was a midwife of a sort—
He helped others give birth to knowledge.
On the first day of class I try to share how theory and practice are related. In this case, regarding the Maieutic, or how the process of learning new insights actually goes. I tell them how I wish it’d be like the car on the left—a flashy new car we could simply jump into and race off, but instead, how the task of learning will involve a lot of challenge and lots of hard work (like the situation on the right).
Elenchus
I think of this in a variety of ways.
In part, a classic style—the lawyerly cross-examination style of Perry Mason, or the “Just one more question style of Columbo digging for the facts.
A third style is Levinas’ Other and “reflecting back”.
As a clinical psychologist and teacher I use all three styles, but the preponderence is as the Other and reflecting back by asking, “If I understand you correctly, this is what I heard you saying?”
The Maieutic role, using a questioning style frames a dialectic, or challenging discussion within the context of a relationship. If done correctly this is based on trust and leads to a certain kind of prescriptive, “failure expectation” or aporia. The task is to set a puzzle up and allow the students to experience some perplexity, and then help them unravel it.
On the first day of class I describe the purpose of aporia as a challenge to obtain a sense of the whole from a puzzling set of varied perspectives. Like this piece of art. The task is to connect the dots, to see a pattern, or making meaning.
On way of working with the cognitive dissonance is using Vygotsky’s ZPD. Helping the students stretch where they can—with my efforts, or, more meaningfully, with the efforts of the other students in the class. True learning is based on discovery...rather than the transmission of knowledge.

“True learning is based on discovery . . . rather than the transmission of knowledge.”  
John Dewey
I format the opportunity for dialogue by starting slowly and using a gradient approach with heavy scaffolding to help the students prepare for authentic discussion. This facilitates a safe learning environment and encourages an educated series of conversations.
Course material must be meaningful. It must also be important and personally relevant on some level. I use ‘big picture’ questions such as “Is lying a social necessity, etc.” All with the purpose of prompting student questions.

Questions

Important and offer personal relevance.

Course topics / questions:
• Is lying a social necessity?
• Can normal be amazing?
• Loss & grief—do we ever ‘get over it’?

→ Prompting student questions.
Questions

Topics such as parenting, love, careers, and happiness are examined through the lens of psychology, but also anthropology, sociology, medicine, and many others. These form the basis of the course.
Questions

“When we can successfully stimulate our students to ask their own questions, we are laying the foundation for learning.”

—Bain

“When we can successfully stimulate our students to ask their own questions, we are laying the foundation for learning.”
A beautiful question is an ambitious yet actionable question that can begin to shift the way we perceive or think about something—and that might serve as a catalyst to bring about change. - Warren Berger

A beautiful question....
These are the questions that keep you up at night, get people talking to others, and these aren’t “Google-able” for answers!
Every week I collate all the questions prepared by the students on each of our readings and then I write them on the board. Then we discuss them. An important part of this classroom experience is listening.
Listening is learning.
Listening is an important skill. One that is highly utilized, but unlike reading, writing, or speaking, we offer very limited training in how to improve.
In the course, another thing I discuss on the first day is how we all need to do our best to leave our egos at the door so we can be as open-minded as possible.
In some sense listening resembles a pitcher and a catcher playing catch. They work in tandem.
More specifically, active listening is differentiated from passive listening when the person listening waits, processes the message, and then responds.
Silence is part of listening; but is often unfamiliar and unpredictable and thus can be unsettling.
Silence is meant to be shared between people.
It reflects a certain degree of balance and it is interdependent.
⇒ You can have silence without speaking, but you can’t have *speaking* without silence.
Silence is a certain kind of balancing act between essential elements of conversation.
As Cicero said, “Silence is one of the great arts of conversation.”
One of the most powerful movies of my childhood—The Red Balloon, used silence particularly masterfully.
The same is true for a more contemporary use of a similar technique in Tom Hank’
Potok speaks eloquently of the paradoxical way in which silence can shape our lives, “I’ve begun to realize that you can listen to silence and learn from it. It has a quality and a dimension all its own.” -Chaim Potok.
I’ve been thinking about silence for months. It’s gotten so bad I’ve been stopping randomly on my walks to see if I can “hear” silence—the other day it came to me that silence is like frosting on a cake. If we get too much it ruins the cake, but too little and we see the same outcome.

The classroom benefits from the presence of silence to accentuate the conversation.
And, finally, connecting the dots, literally.
This happens on at least two levels in the course.
1) Summing up 4 years (or more) of education and the material of the psychology major is hard work, all aimed at learning to apply the psychological sciences at real-life challenges; and
2) But also, and again, this includes the relational or dialectical aspects which are intended to help students extend past their comfort zones and connect, to some degree, with others in real time. Which they do. Many establish friendships which they maintain long after the course ends.
...transformative learning is defined as that which creates a shift in a learner’s paradigm or collective frames of reference, resulting in an introspective process of reframing one’s worldview (Mezirow, 1981; Taylor, 2007)

Transformative learning is...
→ There are other methods of teaching but for me the Socratic method, and its use of questioning, listening, and silence is one effective way to invite students into considering new ideas and perspectives.
“Nothing shapes our lives so much as the questions we ask—or refuse to ask.”
Now, I’d like to share some perspectives shared by alumni of the course...
Cue Capstone video here.
Many thanks for your attention!

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Childbirth in ancient Rome: the birthing chair and midwife. From Tomb of Scribonia Attice, Ostia, Italy. Terracotta. 2nd c CE. Photo courtesy ostia.org

Nicolle Lusiani Elliott, Teacher, San Lorenzo High School
March 3, 2012 Using Socratic Seminar as An Assessment for student Learning
http://www.slideshare.net/nicollelussani/using-socratic-seminar-as-an-assessment?from_action=save

Protective Belt Image

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