

7-22-2015

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

Lawrence Burns
Grand Valley State University, burns1@gvsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/psy_conference



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

ScholarWorks Citation

Burns, Lawrence, "The Art and Heart of the Socratic Method: Connecting through Questioning, Listening, and Silence" (2015). *Conference Materials*. 1.
https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/psy_conference/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology Department at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Conference Materials by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.



The Art and Heart of the Socratic Method—

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.

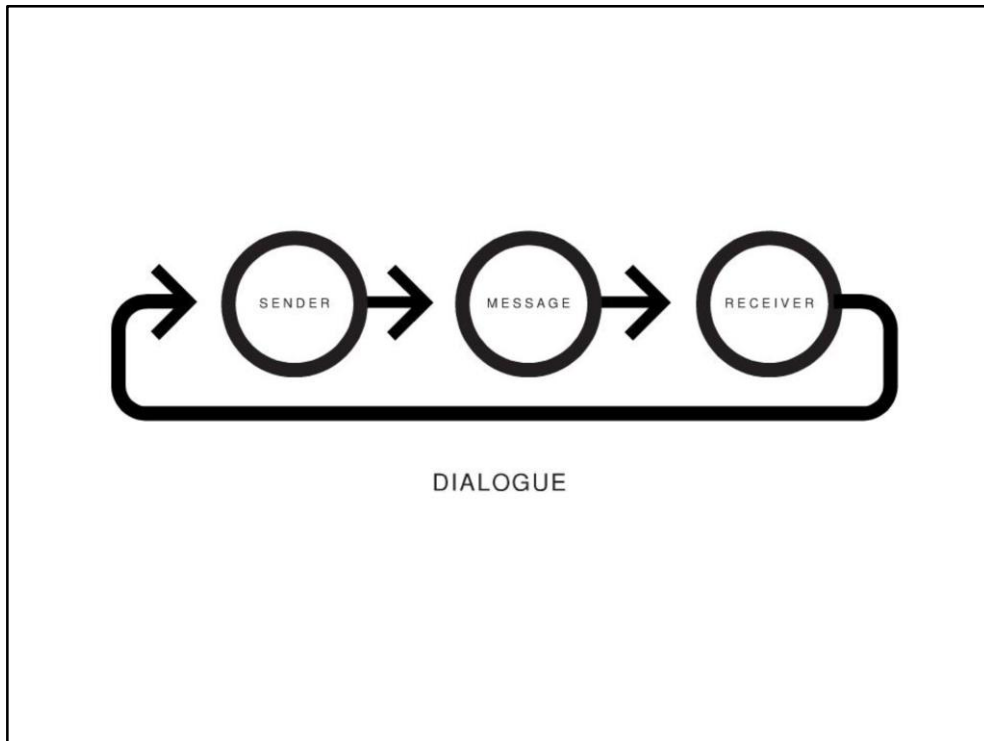
- 1) Questions can help us organize what we don't know; and
- 2) At the heart of the Socratic method is relationships. It is about dialogue and meeting others openly and authentically.



Questioning, Listening, and Silence—

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.

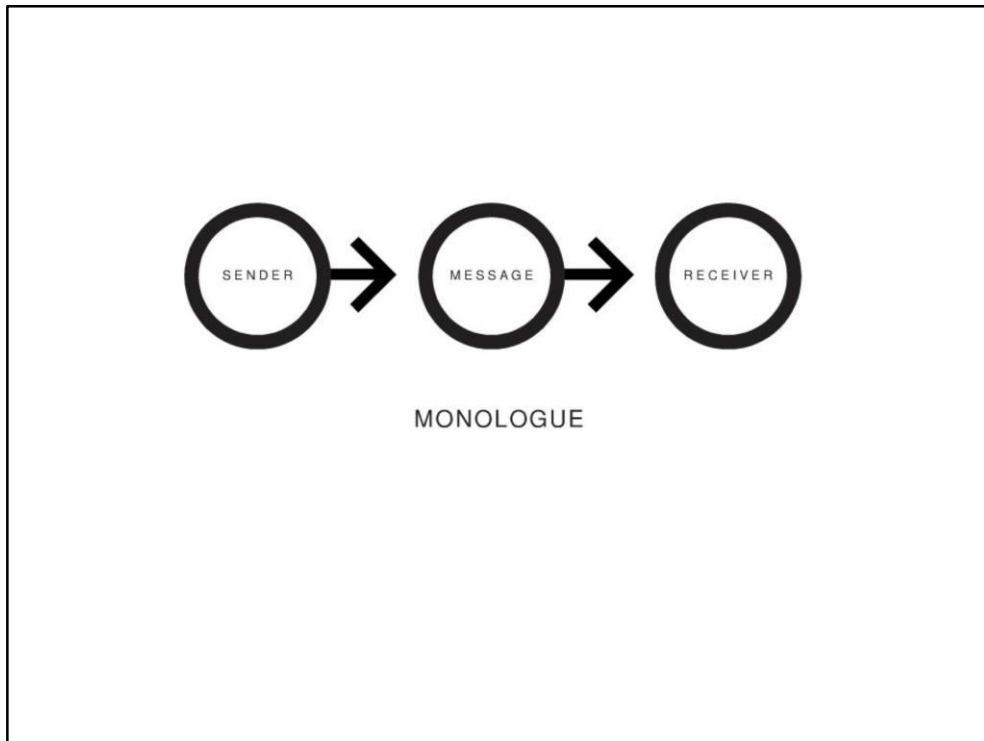
TED

Sherry Turkle:

Connected, but alone?



Sherry Turkle's work exemplifies a reality so many of our students experience...



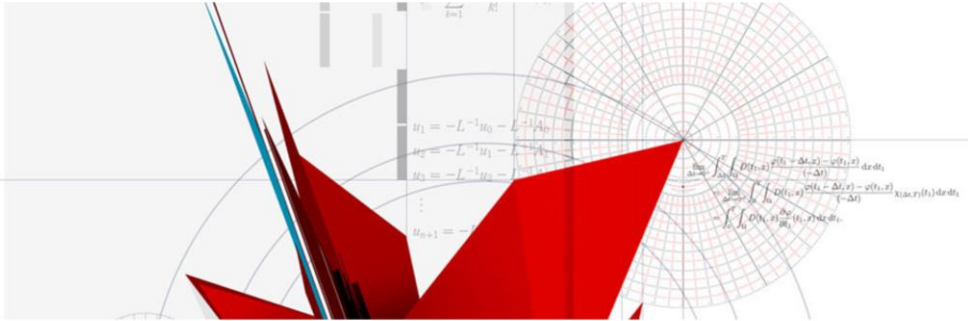
...the Monologue pattern of communication.

→the Socratic method can offer an alternative experience.

Know thyself—
Socrates

...which means “think for yourself”

Michel Meyer

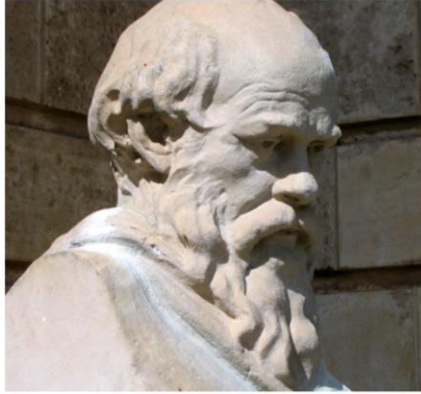


It can also seek exactly what Socrates endeavored to help others achieve—

→ Know thyself; and

→ Think for yourself.

The Socratic Method



Questions

Listening

Silence

Maieutic

Elenchus

...helping others think for themselves

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.

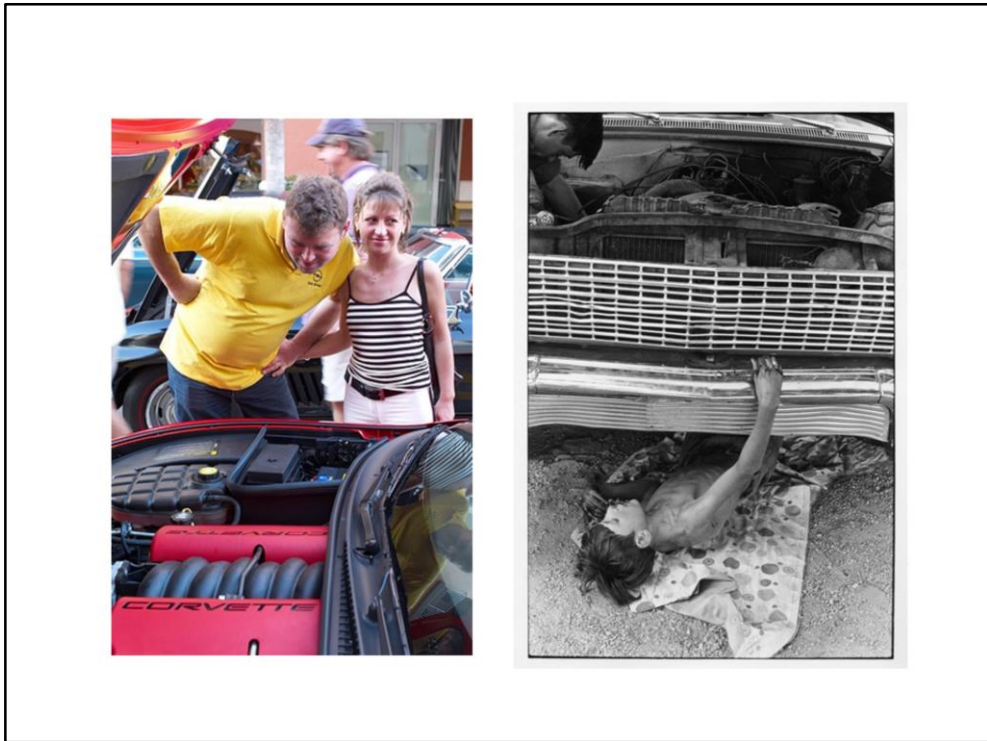
Maieutic

n.1.from the Greek, *maia* midwife.



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

Interrogative style

Lawyer

Detective

Philosopher

Psychologist



Raymond Burr
"Perry Mason"

Peter Falk
"Columbo"

Emmanuel Levinas

Lawrence Burns

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 preponderance is as the Other and reflecting back by asking, “If I understand you correctly, this is what I heard you saying?”

Elenchus

*Dialectic—
"a challenging
conversation"*

→ *Aporia or Perplexity*



The Maieutic role, using a questioning style frames a dialectic, or challenging discussion within the context of a relationship.

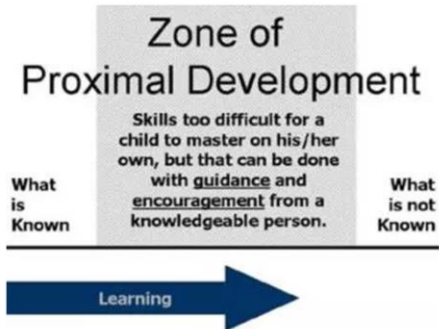
If done correctly this is based on trust and leads to a certain kind of prescriptive, "failure expectation" or aporia.

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.

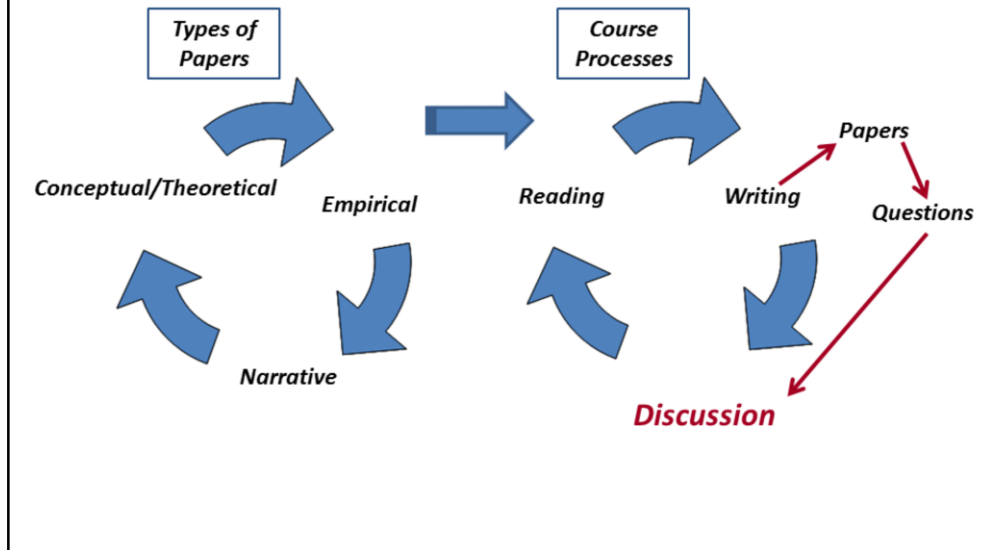
Elenchus



“True learning is based on discovery . . . rather than the transmission of knowledge.” John Dewey

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.

A Capstone model



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.

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.

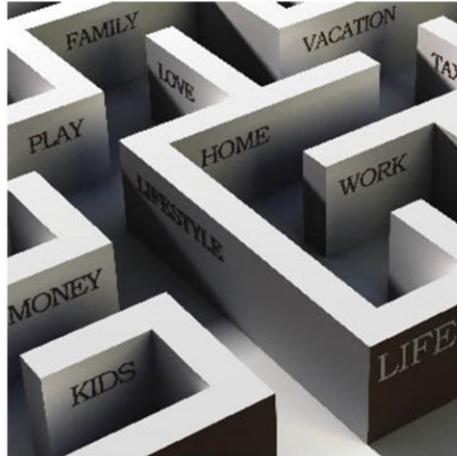
Course material must be meaningful.

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



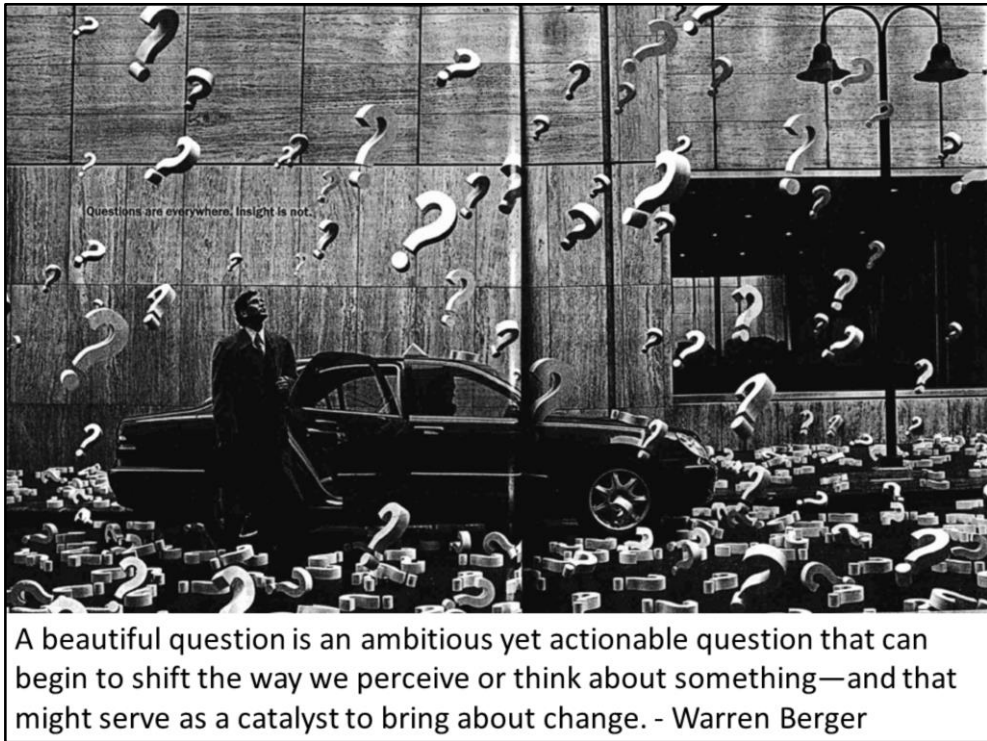
Topics such as parenting, love, careers, and happiness are examined through the lens of psychology, but also anthropology, sociology, medicine, and many others. These form the basis of the course.

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!

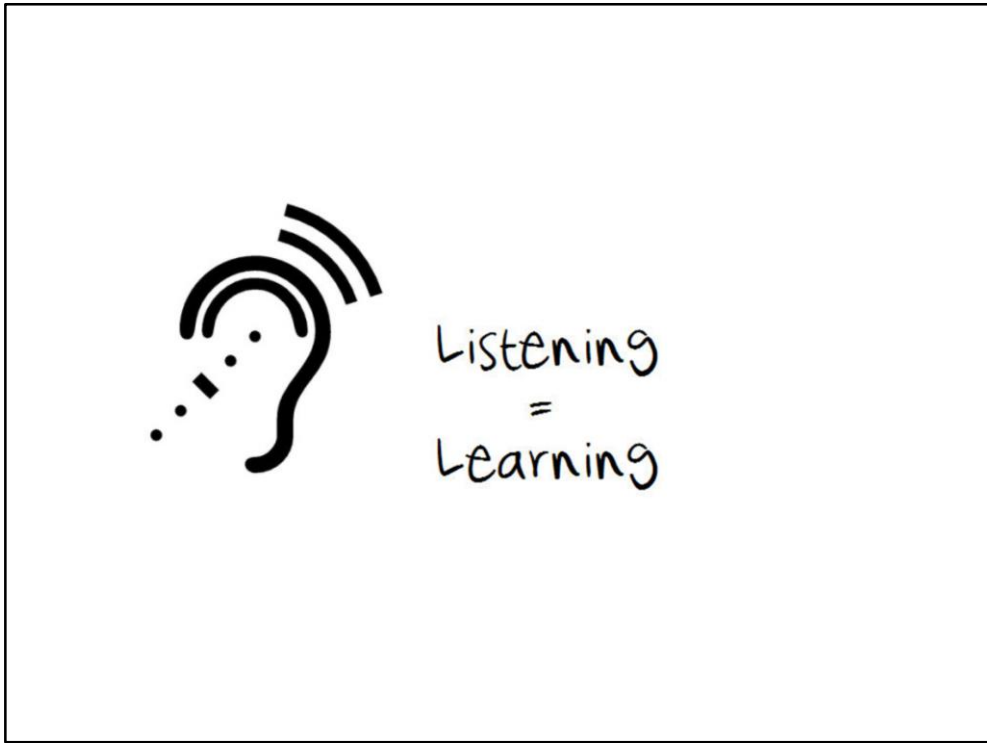
Questions



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

Percentage of Communication

Mode of Communication	Formal Years of Training	Percentage of Time Used
Writing	12 years	9%
Reading	6-8 years	16 %
Speaking	1-2 years	30%
Listening	0-few hours	45%

www.humanikaconsulting.com at Humanika Edukasi Indonesia

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.

Listening



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.

Listening



In some sense listening resembles a pitcher and a catcher playing catch. They work in tandem.

Traditional Communications vs. Active Listening

Message is sent with a focus that is predetermined

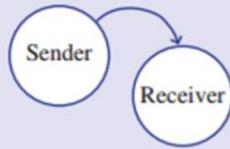


diagram 1

Message is sent only *after* input is received

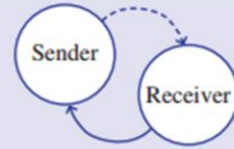


diagram 2

MONOLOGUE

DIALOGUE

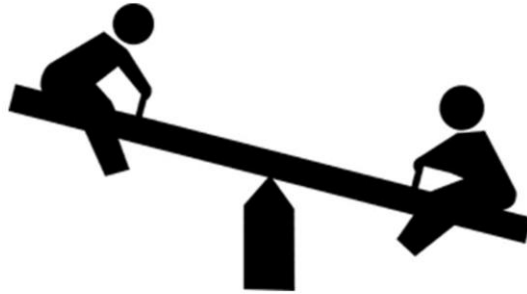
More specifically, active listening is differentiated from passive listening when the person listening waits, processes the message, and then responds.



silence.

Silence is part of listening; but is often unfamiliar and unpredictable and thus can be unsettling.

Silence



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



Silence is a certain kind of balancing act between essential elements of conversation.



**SILENCE IS ONE
OF THE GREAT
ARTS OF
CONVERSATION.**

As Cicero said, "Silence is one of the great arts of conversation."



The Red Balloon, 1956

One of the most powerful movies of my childhood—The Red Balloon, used silence particularly masterfully.



Castaway, 2000

The same is true for a more contemporary use of a similar technique in Tom Hank'



"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.

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."

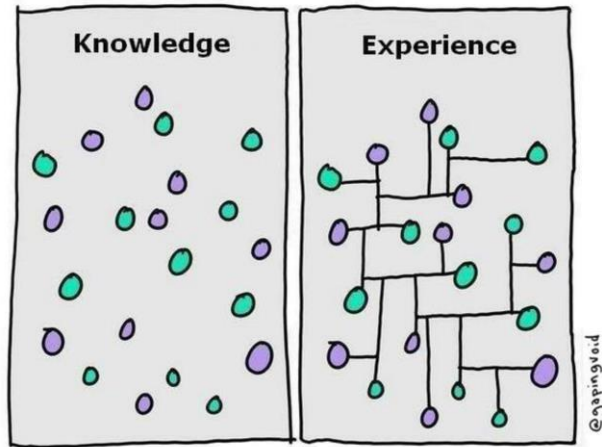
Silence



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.

Connecting

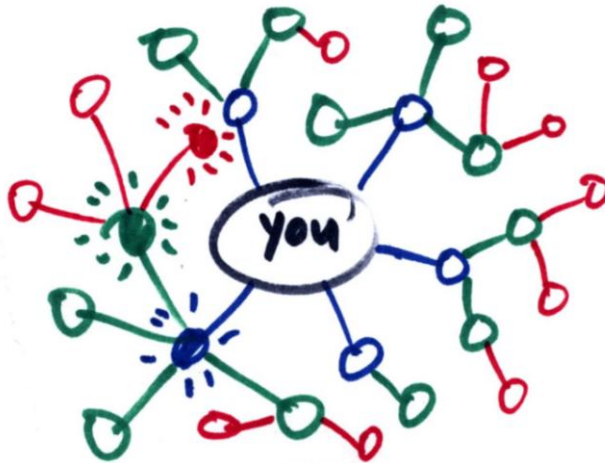


And, finally, connecting the dots, literally.

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

Connecting



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.



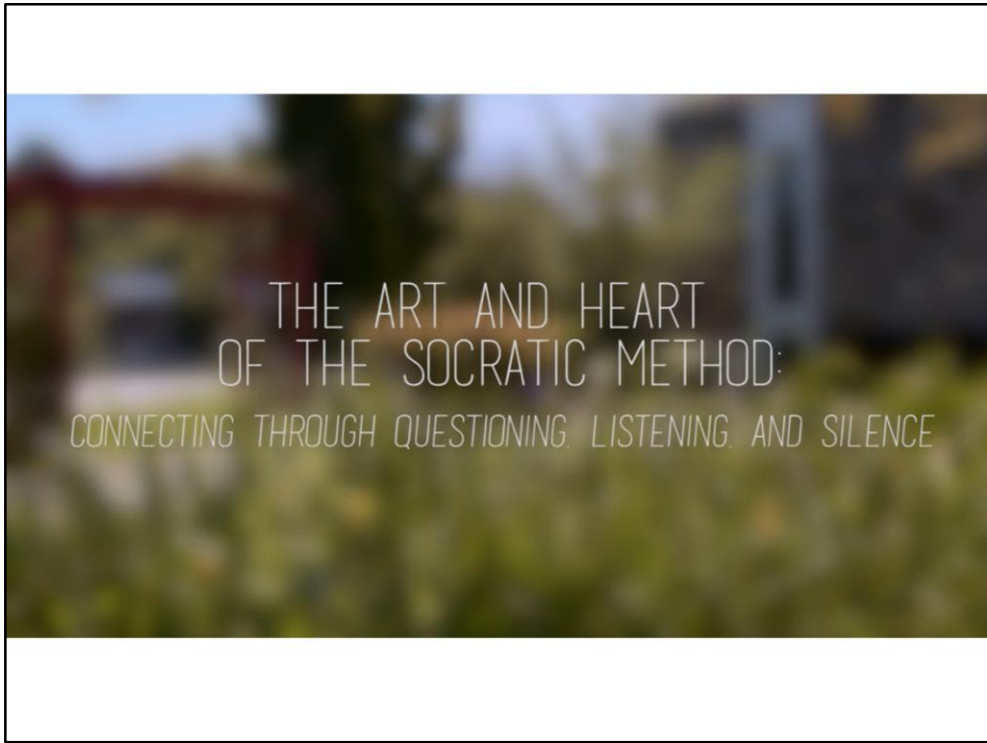
Nothing shapes our lives so much as the questions we ask—or refuse to ask. —Sam Keen

“Nothing shapes our lives so much as the questions we ask—or refuse to ask.”



*"It is not the answer that enlightens,
but the question"
—Decouvertes*

Now, I'd like to share some perspectives shared by alumni of the course...



Cue Capstone video here.



Many thanks for your attention!

burnsl@gvsu.edu

"Twitter 2010 logo - from Commons" by Source. Licensed under Fair use via Wikipedia -
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Twitter_2010_logo_-_from_Commons.svg#/media/File:Twitter_2010_logo_-_from_Commons.svg

Snail Shell Photo by: [Marco Hofmann](#)

DESCRIPTION

Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, is the former villa and estate of businessman James Deering, of the Deering McCormick-International Harvester fortune, on Biscayne Bay in the present day Coconut Grove neighborhood of Miami, Florida.

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

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

Protective Belt image
<http://zackymuzakkil.blogspot.com/2014/09/integrasi-keilmuan-amin-abdullah.html>

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/maieutic>

Photo Credits

<http://img.picturequotes.com/1/690/silence-is-one-of-the-great-arts-of-conversation-quote-1.jpg>

<https://tracywatland.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/enjoy-the-silence.jpg>

<http://blog.dressforsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/What-success-looks-like.jpg>

<http://blog.onbeing.org/post/22798561161/you-can-listen-to-silence-reuven-ive-begun-to>

<http://designismymuse.tumblr.com/post/742856717/via-purpledeseign>

http://www.reddit.com/r/mildlyinteresting/comments/1ckt71/after_filling_a_cup_with_water_i_found_an_air/

<http://hitahomeruninfo.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Trajectory.png>

<https://twitter.com/hughcartoons/status/423952995240648704>

<https://survivingleadership.wordpress.com/>

Credit : Marilyn Barbone / Dreamstime Stock Photos