

Socratic Teaching

The oldest, and still the most powerful, teaching tactic for fostering critical thinking is Socratic teaching. In Socratic teaching we focus on giving students questions, not answers. We model an inquiring, probing mind by continually probing into the subject with questions. Fortunately, the abilities we gain by focusing on the elements of reasoning in a disciplined and self-assessing way, and the logical relationships that result from such disciplined thought, prepare us for Socratic questioning.

Thankfully, there is a predictable set of relationships that hold for all subjects and disciplines. This is given in the general logic of reasoning, since every subject has been developed by those who had:

- shared goals and objectives (which defined the subject focus)
- shared questions and problems (whose solution they pursued)
- shared information and data (which they used as an empirical basis)
- shared modes of interpreting or judging that information
- shared specialized concepts and ideas (which they used to help them organize their data)
- shared key assumptions (that gave them a basis from which to collectively begin)
- a shared point of view (which enabled them to pursue common goals from a common framework)

Each of the elements represents a dimension into which one can delve in questioning a person. We can question goals and purposes. We can probe into the nature of the question, problem, or issue that is on the floor. We can inquire into whether or not we have relevant data and information. We can consider alternative interpretations of the data and information. We can analyze key concepts and ideas. We can question assumptions being made. We can ask students to trace out the implications and consequences of what they are saying. We can consider alternative points of view. All of these, and more, are the proper focus of the Socratic questioner.

As a tactic and approach, Socratic questioning is a highly disciplined process. The Socratic questioner acts as the logical equivalent of the inner critical voice which the mind develops when it develops critical thinking abilities. The contributions from the members of the class are like so many thoughts in the mind. All of the thoughts must be dealt with and they must be dealt with carefully and fairly. By following up all answers with further questions, and by selecting questions which advance the discussion, the Socratic questioner forces the class to think in a disciplined, intellectually responsible manner, while yet continually aiding the students by posing facilitating questions.

A Socratic questioner should:

- a)** keep the discussion focused

- b)** keep the discussion intellectually responsible
- c)** stimulate the discussion with probing questions
- d)** periodically summarize what has and what has not been dealt with and/or resolved
- e)** draw as many students as possible into the discussion.

Paul, R. and Elder, L. (April 1997). Foundation for Critical Thinking,
Online at website: www.criticalthinking.org)