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Learning through Concepts: Situating Socratic Style

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Abstract: Meno, the Shepherd, who never attended a school, could successfully exhibit sufficient skills in Euclidean Geometry after meticulous interrogation by Socrates. This latter on formed the basis of Platonic dialogue Meno. This reflects the conviction of Socrates that knowledge is through concepts and can be known by dialectical method which was named as *elenchus*. Today, when the world is bombard with all sorts of information; the world which is blazed with inductive logic and its corollary scientific method; the world which is mad after so called skill development; situating Socratic Style of pedagogy seems preliminary for learners' cognitive development. Though Socrates directed his dialectics towards moral conceptual knowledge, this paper proposes the hypothesis that learning through concepts can also be proved good enough in other areas of knowledge especially critical thinking.

Key Words: Socratic Style of Pedagogy, Dialectic, Elenchus, Critical Thinking

There lived a tiny, chirpy squirrel in a jungle. One fine morning, the squirrel heard a crashing sound behind her tree. The squirrel jumped with fear as if the world crashed behind her. She ran with utter fear and frustration. She was met by a crow asking her the reason of running. 'The earth is crashing behind,' the bubbly animal replied continuing the run. The crow was afraid; flew with terrible noise. The crow and squirrel were met by a jackal. 'The earth is crashing behind!' Soon a pig, a horse, an elephant followed the herd. The herd turned into a crowd. The crowd of all animals in the jungle rushed forward, crackling, bowing, barking, and howling until the lion, the king of the forest, stopped their path. 'What's the matter,' the lion roared. 'The earth is crashing behind,' replied the frightened elephant. 'How did you know?' the lion raised his voice. 'The horse reported' was the reply. How did the horse know?' 'It is the jackal.' 'the crow,' 'the squirrel.' The lion fetched the squirrel. 'I was

playing in the morning when it happened,' replied the poor squirrel. 'Let's investigate. The lion leaped. Lo! It was a *bel* fruit fell on the bush. Are we squirrels, jackals or the lion? What ought we want to be? The little chirpy squirrel formed a belief but without investigating it properly the jackal, the horse, the elephant simply followed it. The lion investigated simply asking for evidence. As the story goes, many of us form beliefs or follow them without asking for evidence. Evidence may be of any kind. However, asking for evidence, or more generally asking a question is the first step of learning.

There lived six blind men in a village. One day, an elephant came to their village. The six old men wanted to know what that was. The first one declared it to be a trunk of a tree by touching the elephant's trunk. 'It is a country fan,' the second one roared touching its ear. No, it's a wall', the third man claimed. He touched its belly. Another one declared it to be pillars; a rope the other one resembling its tail. Its only an able-eyed man can know, the elephant is not a trunk, not a pillar, not a wall, nor a rope. So if asking for evidence is important, the right kind of evidence is much more important for learning. At this point Socratic Method is significant.

Learning is all about forming beliefs. How are beliefs formed? 'By reason through the process of deductive reasoning,' holds the rationalist school of philosophy. Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz help us recognizing the detailed steps of deductive method of belief formation. Learning is nothing but deducing conclusions from axioms. 'But mind is an empty chamber, a *tabula rasa*, containing nothing in it,' warns the empiricists. Whatever is formed, formed by sense data; collected from outside in form of information. Mind is mere a mirror only to reflect the information. Or at best a passive processing machine only to collect, organize and produce information. This empiricist stance formed the foundation of modern philosophy, science as well as the contemporary approach to learning. That makes learning a monotonous reproduction of information.

As the modern man is bombard with various kinds of information, wading through them to form right beliefs is preliminary. Therefore, philosophers and educationists debate about the necessity of critical thinking. More important than this is the 'urgent need to teach thinking skills at all levels of teaching (Carr, 1990).' Socratic Method popularly known as *elenchus* systematically addresses this issue in individual as well as in community level. Two desirable outcomes of critical thinking programmes are that they ought to teach students how to engage claims and that they ought to teach them how to do so in a rigorous or systematic way. Boghosian points out:

By seeing and experiencing the Socratic process, students not only experience an example of what it means to think critically, but they can also come to an understanding of how to employ a mechanism that can be applied in inquiries outside of academia. The *elenchus* standardizes, and to an extent codifies, this practice. It is a system that clarifies expectations for what constitutes valid justification of a belief, while also giving students an intellectual road map for making clear and coherent arguments and arriving at justified conclusions (Boghosian, 2001).

Socrates, a sculpture never attended a school. However, as he claimed, the voice of *Delphi* declared him as the wisest man. The main business of Socrates was to seek moral knowledge about concepts like justice, freedom, etc. For, he believed that knowledge is by concepts and knowledge is virtue. For this he employed a dialectical method which is known as *elenchus*. Though *elenchus* was used to teach moral concepts, Socrates is of opinion that *elenchus* is also beneficial in other areas. In the dialogue *Meno*, Plato deciphered about a shepherd, Meno, who never attended a formal school, but could exhibit sufficient amount of knowledge in Euclidean Geometry. For, Socrates believed that knowledge as concept is already there in man. *Elenchus* as a method simply drags it out.

As a matter of fact, Socrates used his method in the market place, or in a group against the sophists, the paid academicians of Greece. ‘In a formal schooling condition, as Rudd employs, while Socratic pedagogy has a number of beneficial aspects, it is primarily used to teach students how to think critically through a thoughtful examination of ideas and issues in any discipline (Rudd, 1997).’ As Socrates, himself claimed, Socratic style of pedagogy is not only limited to a specific area of inquiry, like law or Philosophy but as Boghossian believes, ‘teachers can employ Socratic style in any domain of thought, including the ‘hard sciences’ like Mathematics, Physics and Astronomy (Boghossian, 2003).’

Socratic style helps students clarify, justify, and clearly articulate their own ideas by substantively systematic engagement of claims. As substantial amount of philosophical and educational research crop in, Socratic style is being proved to be highly effective in teaching critical thinking among students. Not only it has been found to be, ‘an innovative and powerful instructional device,’ (Golden, 1984) but as a pedagogical approach it shows students how to “think successfully about material in order to be able to understand it, not just passively learn to repeat it under school conditions” (Garlicov, 2001). But how does it happen?

Political Science professor Rob Reich, recipient of the 2001 Walter J. Goves award for Teaching Excellence outlines the following features of the Socratic style of pedagogy.

1. *The Socratic Method uses questions to examine the values, principles, and beliefs of students.*

‘An unexamined life is not worth living,’ said Socrates in respect to his strives for moral education. His style includes:

- Systematic Questioning
- Systematic engagement
- Formation of beliefs

Socratic style employs systematic questions on a matter so that students might feel discomfort. Normally, these questions are related to conceptual understanding and analysis. The questions are not merely informative. Rather these questions are of potential to shake students’ common beliefs about certain matter and drag them to be engaged in a debate.

Once the attention of the students is dragged towards an issue, the process of systematic engagement begins. This process might include several other processes namely providing counter examples, finding analogy, weighing claims, showing inconsistencies etc. In his endeavor, Socrates asked sophists about ‘justice.’ ‘Justice is returning one’s debt,’ was the answer. All of sudden Socrates brings in a counter example. ‘What if someone who has become mad asks for a knife he once lent you?’ Returning one’s debt does not bring justice here but injustice. Bringing in counter examples, Socrates compels his opponents to change their beliefs, or search for new evidences for their claim. Socrates then systematically compares all the claims and shows an inconsistency. That is how Socrates engages his opponents as well as himself into a matter passionately. This engagement is fruitful and effective because students actively participate in the matter as if the matter is their own.

2. *The Socratic Method demands a classroom environment characterized by “productive discomfort.*

One of the reasons Socratic Method became famous and Socrates infamous is that it produces lots of academic discomfort among interlocutors. It is painful, engaging, and at times undesirable. Therefore, students cling into it. They actively participate. What else is needed?

3. *The Socratic method is better used to demonstrate complexity, difficulty, and uncertainty than at eliciting facts about the world*

The method is aimed at simplifying complex things as well as making complex of simple ones. The method systematically wade the students from mere collection of information to form complex ideas, from complex ideas to structure of beliefs, from structure to concepts. Since conceptual knowledge form the foundation of our belief system Socratic Method is of great help to enhance students’ critical thinking.

Dos and Don’ts

Do’s

Set down the stage for conversation:

- ✓ Learn students’ names and have the students learn each other's names.
 - ✓ Ensure that participates learns the skill of listening other’s arguments.
 - ✓ Encourage students to actively participate in the process wherever it proceeds.
 - ✓ Emphasize that students should focus their comments on concepts or principles, not first-person narratives.
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- Interfere between the debates with moderating questions. Wait for students’ response. Silence is OK. Use the “ten-second wait” rule before you attempt to re-phrase your questions.

Das // Learning through Concepts: Situating Socratic Style

- Find ways to produce “productive discomfort.” Cold-calling works, but temper it with small group work so students can talk to their neighbor.
- Using follow-up questions is of great benefit. Get students to account for themselves.
- Socrates was the wisest man because he knew that he did not know. Be open to say that you do not the answer for that question.
- Welcome the “crazy idea” that offers a new perspective on the topic, but discourage those ideas which are not serious.
- Find a classroom space that encourages interaction. Seats bolted to the floor put one at an immediate-ate disadvantage.
- Do make it clear. At the beginning clarify the basic terms and definitions.
- Do encourage all students to participate. More voice, more effective is the debate.
- Do make examples accessible. Take example from daily life avoiding stereotyping.
- Be delighted and genuinely happy if you are shown refuted.
- Do know when to stop.

Don'ts

- Don't afraid to say 'I don't know.'
- Don't lose track of your subject
- Don't accept conclusions that do not follow from premises.
- Don't force it. Don't compel students to make claims if that does not happen naturally.
- Don't get discouraged if students initially do not participate.
- Finally, don't be scared of size! All of this is possible even in large classes. The Socratic Method is possible in a class as large as 70. Just use more small groups.

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Das // Learning through Concepts: Situating Socratic Style

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