



## The Socratic Method: What it is and How to Use it in the Classroom

Political Science professor Rob Reich, recipient of the 2001 Walter J. Gores Award for Teaching Excellence, delivered a talk on May 22, 2003 as part of the Center for Teaching and Learning's Award Winning Teachers on Teaching lecture series. In his talk, Professor Reich discussed the Socratic method of teaching—a method which has encountered some criticism in recent decades but is also acknowledged as the foundation of Western pedagogical tradition. Professor Reich encouraged the audience to creatively reclaim the Socratic method as a relevant framework for actively engaging students with the critical thinking process.

This issue of *Speaking of Teaching* is devoted to the Socratic method, and reproduces the substance of Professor Reich's talk on the subject. After a brief introduction in which Reich defines what the Socratic method is (and what it is often mistaken for), he helpfully breaks down the method into specific components, and then offers tips for how to use it in the classroom. He also offers an excellent model of the Socratic method in practice.

As with most of the other talks in the Award Winning Teachers on Teaching series, a videotape of Professor Reich's talk is available for viewing in the video library at the Center for Teaching and Learning, on the fourth floor of Sweet Hall.

### What is the Socratic Method?

Socratic inquiry is emphatically not "teaching" in the conventional sense of the word. The leader of Socratic inquiry is not the purveyor of knowledge, filling the empty minds of largely passive students with facts and truths acquired through years of study. As the people in the School of Education would say, the Socratic teacher is not "the sage on the stage." In the Socratic method, there are no lectures and no need of rote memorization. But neither, as you might

expect, is the Socratic teacher "the guide on the side."

In the Socratic method, the classroom experience is a shared dialogue between teacher and students in which both are responsible for pushing the dialogue forward through questioning. The "teacher," or leader of the dialogue, asks probing questions in an effort to expose the values and beliefs which frame and support the thoughts and statements of the participants in the inquiry. The students ask questions as well, both of the teacher and each other.

The inquiry progresses interactively, and the teacher is as much a participant as a guide of the discussion. Furthermore, the inquiry is open-ended. There is no pre-determined argument or terminus to which the teacher attempts to lead the students. Those who practice the Socratic method do not use PowerPoint slides. Without a lesson plan, the group follows the dialogue where it goes.

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**TA Orientation**  
**Winter Quarter 2004**  
**Thursday, January 8**  
**1:15-4:05 pm**

**Landau Economics Building**  
**Conference Room A**

**No registration necessary!**  
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# The Socratic Method

## Essential components of the Socratic method

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

Through questioning, the participants strive first to identify and then to defend their moral intuitions about the world which undergird their ways of life. Socratic inquiry deals not with producing a recitation of facts, or a questioning of the logic of various and sundry abstractions which are held up for comparison, but demands rather that the participants account for themselves, their thoughts, actions, and beliefs. Socratic inquiry aims to reveal the motivations and assumptions upon which students lead their lives. Thus, practitioners of the Socratic method may want students to know facts, but they want to focus more on what the student thinks about these facts, not what others think! It's no use citing authorities.

2. *The Socratic method focuses on moral education, on how one ought to live.*

Socratic inquiry necessarily proceeds in an *ad hominem* style. That is, rather than making arguments or asking questions designed to convince any or all people, all comments in a Socratic inquiry are directed at specific participants in the discussion. The subject of inquiry is not what is thought or said about the world in general, but what each participant thinks or says about the world. The goal is not to consider depersonalized propositions and abstractions, but to probe the underlying values and beliefs of each inquirer.

Since the substance of Socratic inquiry is the belief and value system of the participants, when those beliefs or values are challenged, or refuted, it is nothing less than the coherence of the lives of the people that is at stake. As Socrates says often in Plato's dialogues, he is primarily concerned with how one ought to live. In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates says, "Do not take what I say as if I were merely playing, for you see the subject of our discussion—and on what subject should even a man of slight intelligence be more serious?—namely, what kind of life should one live . . ."

Refutation of one's beliefs about how best to live delivers an implicit verdict that, to paraphrase Rilke's poem, "The Archaic Torso of Apollo" (1908), you must change your life. Socrates is famous for saying "the unexamined life is not worth living." Equally true, though less appreciated, is the fact that the un-lived life is not worth examining.

3. *The Socratic method demands a classroom environment characterized by "productive discomfort."*

In the best of Socratic dialogues, there is real tension among the interlocutors. The stakes are high. Will one be called on, be called to account?

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

Bertrand Russell once wrote, "As usual in philosophy, the first difficulty is to see that the problem is difficult. If you say to a person untrained in philosophy, 'How do you know I have two eyes?' he or she will reply, 'What a silly question! I can see you have.' It is not to be supposed that, when our inquiry is finished, we shall have arrived at anything radically different from this un-philosophical position. What will have happened will be that we shall have come to see a complicated structure where we thought everything was simple, that we shall have become aware of the penumbra of uncertainty surrounding the situations which inspire no doubt, that we shall find doubt more frequently justified than we supposed, and that even the most plausible premises will have shown themselves capable of yielding implausible conclusions. The net result is to substitute articulate hesitation for inarticulate certainty."

## The Socratic Professor

In the Socratic method, the Socratic professor is not the opponent in an argument, nor is he or

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she someone who always plays devil's advocate, saying essentially: "If you affirm it, I deny it. If you deny it, I affirm it." This happens sometimes, but not as a matter of pedagogical principle.

Neither does the Socratic professor possess all the knowledge or the answers, nor is he or she "just testing" the students. The professor is a participant in dialogue, and must always be open to learning something him- or herself. It follows from this, that the Socratic professor does not seek deference to his or her authority. Nor does he or she create a cult of personality by seeming aloof, cold, and distant. Instead, the Socratic professor knows his or her students' names, and the students know each other's names.

The Socratic professor aims for "productive discomfort," not panic and intimidation. The aim is not to strike fear in the hearts of students so that they come prepared to class; but to strike fear in the hearts of students that they either cannot articulate clearly the values that guide their lives, or that their values and beliefs do not withstand scrutiny.

## Tips for Using the Socratic Method

1. Set down conversational guidelines:
  - Learn student names and have the students learn each other's names.
  - Explain that participation requires listening and active engagement and that it is not enough to just insert a single comment in class and then be silent for the rest of the day.
  - Emphasize that students should focus their comments on concepts or principles, not first-person narratives.
2. Ask questions and be comfortable with silence. Silence is productive. Be willing to wait for students to respond. There is no need to fill a conversational void; silence creates a kind of helpful tension. Use the "ten-second wait" rule before you attempt to re-phrase your questions!
3. Find ways to produce "productive discomfort." Cold-calling works, but temper it with small group work so students can talk to their neighbor.

4. Above all else, use follow-up questions! Get students to account for themselves, not just to regurgitate readings and lectures.

5. Always be open to learning something new. Don't be a sage on the stage, or a guide on the side. Be willing to say, "I don't know the answer to that question."

6. Welcome the "crazy idea" that offers a new perspective on the topic, but discourage those ideas which are not serious.

7. Brevity and short interventions from the professor are most welcome. No speeches or long lectures.

8. Discourage obsequious deference to authority and status. Break this down if at all possible. Stanford students are too practiced at "doing school" and discovering what they need to know to get by.

9. Find a classroom space that encourages interaction. Seats bolted to the floor put one at an immediate disadvantage.

10. 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. *(continued on page 4)*

## Award Winning Teachers on Teaching Series Winter Quarter 2004

January 24, Professor Robert Gray  
Electrical Engineering

February 12, Professor John Rick  
Anthropological Sciences

Talks will be from noon-1pm  
Mitchell Earth Sciences Building  
Hartley Conference Center

# The Socratic Method

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At the end of his talk, Professor Reich gave an example of an exercise in Socratic method in which he posed a moral dilemma to his audience (you are the conductor of a train that has lost its brakes and you have to make the choice to either kill five workers on the tracks of an alternate route, or risk killing all 300 passengers on the train) and asked them to make arguments for what should be done. He then followed up each suggestion provocatively, pushing each speaker to defend and articulate the reasons and values underlying their decision (is it better to save the many at the expense of the few?), and then applied their reasoning to other moral dilemmas in which their conclusions might not be as defensible.

In each round of questioning, Professor Reich tried to focus on breaking down the assumptions of the respondents in an effort to “build truth back up”—which is exactly the task of the Socratic professor in the classroom. When asked if he ever asserts his own views in the classroom, Professor Reich responded that he usually waits until the discussion has run its course and even then he might engage in a bit of “pedagogical deception” (taking a position he might not necessarily hold) in order to push students to examine their own premises.

While Reich’s model of the Socratic method is not based entirely on Socrates’s methods in Plato’s dialogues, it is a long way from the confrontational humiliation that has become mistakenly associated with the Socratic approach. Instead, as practiced by Reich and others, the Socratic method is a dynamic format for helping our students to take genuine intellectual risks in the classroom and to learn about critical thinking. ♦

More information about Professor Rob Reich can be found at his web site: [www.stanford.edu/~reich](http://www.stanford.edu/~reich)

*Speaking of Teaching* is compiled and edited by CTL Associate Director Valerie Ross. Please feel free to contact Dr. Ross at [varlet@stanford.edu](mailto:varlet@stanford.edu) with any questions, suggestions, or comments; thank you!

## Selected Bibliography

Gregory Vlastos, ed., *The Philosophy of Socrates*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971.

Gregory Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

David Hansen, “Was Socrates a ‘Socratic Teacher?’” *Educational Theory*, Vol 38, No. 2, 1988.

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After January 1,  
check the CTL web site for dates and  
locations: <http://ctl.stanford.edu>