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# Golden Research Thoughts

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DEMYSTIFYING THE SOCRATIC TEACHING METHOD



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## ABSTRACT:

The paper is an attempt to understand the roots of Socratic teaching method. It throws light on the life and teachings of Socrates and his philosophy. It provides conceptual clarity about this teaching method and how it can be used to ignite minds in a classroom. Most of the arguments of this paper is based on Plato's works especially The Republic and Apology. The section which explains how the method works in a classroom is based on authors experience of using this method successfully in classrooms.

**KEYWORDS :** Socrates , Socratic Teaching method, Plato, Learning, Teaching, Questioning, thinking, Teacher , Student, Classroom

#### INTRODUCTION:

Teaching some times becomes one sided. While a teacher goes on with the subject, the student is left far behind, either not wanting to concentrate or unable to concentrate. There could be many reasons for poor learning by students like lack of nutrition, lack of sleep, lack of interest, short concentration levels etc. But few reasons that cannot be dismissed are the personality of a teacher, the knowledge possessed by the teacher and teaching methodology practiced by the teacher. Imagine a set up of class room with students and teacher, it is the teacher who is channelizing the thoughts of a student. Undoubtedly a powerful process, in true sense didactic in nature. The teaching methods primarily followed in schools and colleges around the world, is a method of transmission of knowledge perfectly doing justice to the definition of teaching; of something being taught ( like ideas or beliefs). Though the method has worked for ages whether learning is happening deeply or not is still not clear. A very common thing observed in all types of teaching is that teachers feel that they must have answers to all questions and this is the major stumble block to learning.

Learning is always experiential. A human being experiences a concept, feels it , questions it, reasons it , plays with it and finally absorbs the concept in his memory in the form of experience. Therefore such a experience must be created for students to fully grasp the concept. One example found in the Mahabharata is where Guru Dronacharya teaches the students the meaning of concentration. Instead of teaching them the meaning of concentration directly he organizes a competition. The Guru sets up a small wooden bird in a tree across a stream. Upon returning to all the five Pandavas , he says he wants to see who among them can strike the eye of the wooden bird across the river. Yudhisthira, the oldest among the Pandavas, was called upon first. The Guru asks Yudhishtira to list whatever he sees. Yudhisthira began to list off everything that met his eyes. He says he sees the wooden bird, the branch, the tree, the leaves moving the stream, the sky etc. . When he finished, he waited for his master's final command to shoot. Guru asked Yudhishtira to return and said that he will not hit the eye of the bird. The next Pandava was called forward and asked the same question by Guru. He gave a similar answer, naming everything he could see. Once again, the Pandava was told to put away his bow. This same pattern continued with every Pandava that followed, until finally Guru reached Arjuna. When Arjuna was asked the question he said , that he can see only the eye of the bird. The Guru allowed Arjuna to shoot the bird and later explained to his students the meaning of concentration. This mythological example illustrates how the teachers in the Gurukul system taught their students. Not just in Indian History everywhere around the world examples of great teachers can be found. Some great teachers were great philosophers too. Be it Socrates, Plato or Aristotle. They are worshipped all around the world for their wisdom. But amongst the three, Socrates stands tall, popularized by none other than his own student Plato. Plato has attempted to provide a glimpse of the methods and techniques used by his teacher while teaching. It is amazing to understand that Socrates had never written one literary piece or one thought. It's only through his discussions with his students that students wrote about him later. What we read today about Socrates was written by many of his students and as various versions. This is famously known as the 'Socrates truth'.

#### SOCRATES AND THE SOCRATIC TEACHING METHOD

Socrates , a philosopher who lived in Athens was famously proclaimed as the wisest man in Greece by the Oracle of Delphi. He roamed in the streets of Athens and used to engage people in discussions on various subjects. His audience was made up of rich and the poor, men , women and children. But most of the times he was seen with the young boys of Athens . The most important philosophy of his which is reflected in all his discourses with students is to ask men to examine their own

life. He says "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being," (Plato, *Apology 38a*). He made many friends and many enemies. His way of teaching people was by questioning them. He kept questioning people whether they liked it or not. He maintained till the end of his life that he knew nothing. He wanted others to speak and he to listen and ask questions. But even though he did this he maintained the reins of the conversation with him. He mostly made people think about virtue, courage, justice, temperance, love, piety and the state of their souls generally. According to him virtues lead people to happiness. And virtue is made up of "Piety", "justice", "courage", "temperance". He says even animals are lovers are learning. The following spoken by Socrates demonstrates this "*Why, a dog, whenever he sees a stranger, is angry; when an acquaintance, he welcomes him, although the one has never done him any harm, nor the other any good. Did this never strike you as curious? The matter never struck me before; but I quite recognise the truth of your re-mark. And surely this instinct of the dog is very charming;—your dog is a true philosopher. Why? Why, because he distinguishes the face of a friend and of an enemy only by the criterion of knowing and not knowing. And must not an animal be a lover of learning who determines what he likes and dislikes by the test of knowledge and ignorance.*" ( *The Republic by Plato*)

It so happened that once a man went to the Oracle of Delphi to ask who was the wisest man in Greece. The Oracle said that it was Socrates. Socrates could not believe this statement as he felt he was not the wisest man who lived in Greece. He decided to go to some of the wiser men in Greece who he felt were more wiser than him. He met many and asked them many questions. He felt that while they answered an air of arrogance about the fact that they possessed knowledge was seen. Soon he understood why the Oracle of Delphi had called him the wisest man in Greece. That was because Socrates knew his limits, he always claimed that he knew nothing. This made him the wisest man in Greece. Socrates was sentenced to death as the officials of the state felt that he behaved impiously – by not respecting the gods of the city; by inventing new divinities; and by corrupting the young.

#### ESSENCE OF THE SOCRATIC METHOD

While Socrates never admitted that he has taught as he believed he only questioned, the process of giving discourses or making the audience learn had three underlying points that one must consider

- a) Socrates suggests that true wisdom is the property of the gods, and that what he has this human wisdom, this knowledge of his own limitations—is worth hardly anything.
- b) Socrates puts an enormous amount of weight, some might call it faith, on the power of the dialogue, that back-and-forth linguistic motion between speakers, to uncover the truth. When Socrates discusses ideas with those with a reputation for wisdom, a truth always emerges from the dialogue. The dialogue allows the truth to emerge
- c) Socrates generously praises the answers. It is argued that Socrates never thanked after he has learnt, to this Socrates says "That I learn of others, I replied, is quite true; but that I am ungrateful I wholly deny. Money I have none, and therefore I pay in praise, which is all I have. I am ready to praise any one who appears to me to speak well you will very soon find out when you answer; for I expect that you will answer well"

The Socratic method consisted of three steps. It can be best explained from an example given by Socrates himself quoted by Plato in his *The Republic*.

- i. A question is posed to the student "What is justice"?
- ii. The student says "Justice is paying your debt"
- iii. Now the claim made by the student is undermined and the Master asks "For eg. If you had borrowed

a knife from a man and when you give his knife back it is justice but if you come to now that he wants to kill a dog with the knife will you still give it back to him . What do you do then ? . If you don't give the knife back ,does it mean you were unjust"

iv. Master says " Therefore Justice cannot be as simple as paying your debt. What is justice then?"

The above four steps are iterative. As Dr. Peter Boghossian rightly puts the Socratic method in a nutshell The Process is a) Define the concept b) Find exceptions to the definition c) Create a new definition.

#### INTERPRETATION AND USAGE OF THE SOCRATIC METHOD OF TEACHING IN A CLASSROOM

To interpret the Socratic method of teaching, let us first discern what Socrates believed and practiced. He often said "I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think". According to him "education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel." Delving deeper one may comprehend two remarkable insights – 1) learning must help a student to develop himself to think instead of just helping him to learn a concept 2) the process of learning should be such that the student feels he is getting answers to his curiosity. True learning happens in this process of finding answers and not during learning the concepts.

So what exactly is a Socratic method of teaching ? In this method the teacher does not teach any concept directly. Instead, lots of peripheral questions are asked to the students. Answers to the questions come out of their discussions. The questions asked by the teacher must be deep probing questions and the answers expected are also deep probing answers or sometimes questions again. The process continues till they themselves come somewhere close to the real concept they are set to learn.

During such a classroom session, there are many instances where a teacher is posed with questions for which cut and dried answers can be given but can refrain from doing so. The reason is if answers are directly given students, students stop thinking. Any direct answers will restrict their ability to define and redefine the concepts according to any new set of assumptions or beliefs.

Most of the topics that a teacher teaches can be philosophized. Letting the students think deeply, logically making them understand why they are learning the concept, what if the concept never existed, how can the concept be replaced , is the concept irreplaceable, letting them appreciate the concept and criticize the concept. The teacher may also explain the practical usage of concepts in the form of examples from the real world.

Using a Socratic teaching method in the class room requires one prerequisite. It is the student's trust in the teacher that the teacher is well read and knows not just the subject but also many other subjects. Therefore a teacher who teaches multiple yet related subjects has an advantage. To get beautiful questions and answers from each corner of the class especially the back benchers can be the teacher's best approach for making this method successful. The simplest yet humorous and most creative questions come from the most unexpected quadrants of the class. After a thorough screening of the whole class and after having identified all the quadrants (the quadrants which give ready made answers, the quadrants which are a bit apprehensive, the quadrants which are over enthusiastic thinkers and the quadrants that are indifferent to any discussion) the challenge is in bringing all the quadrants into the main stream discussion. Once this goal is achieved there is no looking back. Interesting discussions among themselves bringing out their creativity and personality gives immense gratification. Can discussions go haywire? Sometimes they may. Especially when it is about justifying their judgments and perceptions. But throughout the session the students very well know that the teacher has an upper hand and that he or she may rebuke if the discussion goes haywire or takes a

different tangent. Certain propositions which still need answers are-

a) Is it a challenge to use this method in a class with close to 100 students?

The answer can be a "no" On the contrary in a small classroom they may focus on each other whereas in a big classroom they lose focus on their friends and the focus gets diverted to the topic of discussion and to the large audience.

b) The answer can be a "yes" also. May be the class becomes noisy? May be there are disputes amongst students. One argument can be that ,it depends how the session is moderated. If the teacher sets some rules: like no cross talk, no two people talking at the same time, using the dais when needed, notes time, hold the questions time etc. Even then the rules may break. But the teacher should be prepared to quickly take charge. After all hundred ignited minds are thinking.

### CONCLUSION

The Socratic method is a very useful tool in making the learning effective. It incites students to learn and makes learning meaningful. But there are few more research questions which needs to be addressed like , will this work for all topics and will our education system support such a pedagogy and will teachers be comfortable in moderating such sessions.

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