

## **The Five Roles of the Socratic Practice Leader**

In order to cultivate a culture of learning, the Socratic Practice leader plays five roles:

- Justifier of the activity
- Socratic questioner
- Provider of summary, synthesis, and clarification
- Process coach
- Genuine participant

The first role may only rarely be explicit, but it is crucial. Effective leadership requires believing in the project that one is leading. If Socratic Practice is adopted as a “method” by teachers who obtain no value themselves, student confidence will be undermined from the start.

While at any point in development the leader may play all the other roles, the emphasis is roughly sequential: initially one primarily questions, then one questions while also synthesizing, then one turns increasing attention to coaching group process. Gradually, after the group has developed an independent ability to work together to consider texts and ideas critically, one becomes more of a genuine participant in the discussion.

### **Justifier of the Activity**

By taking the conversation seriously, by taking the project of understanding ideas and other people seriously, the leader is implicitly justifying the activity. This seriousness of intellectual purpose may be made apparent even in the manner in which interruptions are handled. When students are having side conversations while I am trying to listen to a student talking, I say, “Excuse me, but I am trying to understand a complex idea and the noise that

you are making distracts me. Please be quiet.” Then I return immediately to the intellectual conversation. At all times, it is important to discuss issues with students in the same interested, serious, and respectful manner that you might use in discussing important professional issues with your colleagues or important personal issues with your family. This does not imply that humor is inappropriate; but your behavior must demonstrate to the student that the conversation is valuable.

Justifying the activity becomes an explicit, rather than implicit, aspect of leadership in situations in which students ask, in one way or another, “Why are we doing this?” It is important, at such junctures, that the leader provide clear, convincing justification. I provide three rationales: enlightenment, brain growth, and job skills.

By enlightenment, I merely mean the ability to think and understand for oneself. I ask students, “Do you want to be dependent on the understandings of others? Do you want me to tell you what to think? What this text means? Or do you want to develop your own ability to use your own judgment?” If the students show an interest, I will explain the numerous ways in which developing the ability to understand things on my own is endlessly valuable to me.

Renate and Geoffrey Caine present evidence from studies of the brain showing that complex, contextual thinking results in greater brain development than does the thinking required by traditional educational activities.<sup>11</sup> This is a simple, easily understood rationale with broad appeal. Sometimes students will say at the end of the class, “My brain hurts from thinking so hard.” Great.

Job skills is often the simplest, most convincing rationale in the early stages. A broad literature on labor markets of the future all point to the necessity for employees to be capable of learning on their own, of working constructively on teams, of using their own judgment on the job, of taking more initiative and responsi-

bility, etc. Indeed, I see Socratic Practice as providing the key workplace skills for the jobs of the twenty-first century. Because of worldwide economic forces, people with high-level basic social and intellectual skills will be well paid in the next century. People lacking such skills face a frightening future. This rationale provides for me an unambiguous moral obligation to help as many students as possible move from the low-wage scale track to the high-wage track.

The job-skills rationale is helpful in articulating the value of Socratic Practice to parents, administrators, fellow teachers, etc. The Socratic Practice/Ready For Work Class Participation Assessment Rubric, included as an appendix, offers a description of the work skills developed.

### **Socratic Questioning**

Socratic questioning is a matter of trying to understand exactly why beliefs are held. At its foundation, it is a matter of respectfully asking, of oneself or of others, “Why are these beliefs held and not others?” With regard to textual analysis, the core of Socratic Practice, this question becomes “Why do you understand the text in the way that you do?” Socratic questioning is the foundation of rational inquiry because it involves an obligation to make sense of the disparate phenomena which make up experience. For example, “If you say that happiness is leading the good life, then why is it that many people believe that happiness consists in pleasure?” Or textually, “If you say that ‘liberty’ is a matter of doing whatever one wants, then does ‘a right to liberty’ imply a right to murder? Is that what this text is saying?”

Some view Socratic questioning to be a matter of being obstinate, or of playing the devil’s advocate. I view it as matter of always being open to the possibility that other opinions are well-founded, combined with a recognition that it can be very difficult

to form an adequate, coherent understanding of another person's experience. Some students seem to believe that when teachers ask traditional humanistic questions in literature or philosophy that the teachers are simply playing psychologist. The premise they bring to class is that either there exists a scientific truth, discovered by psychologists, in which case we should learn the truth, or that it is merely a matter of opinion, and it is of no value to discuss opinions.

From my perspective, the rationale for Socratic inquiry is precisely because there are no adequate, coherent general understandings of the important issues—only the obligation to improve one's own understanding. Even in situations in which there exists an objective reality, every student, every human being, is ultimately her own judge of truth, of happiness, of beauty. Even when we do not have the information with which to make our own judgments, we must choose whether to believe teachers or parents, the political Left or the political Right, science or religion, our stockbroker or our gut instinct. There is no escape from making our own judgments, and the sooner that students begin to learn how to improve judgment, the better. Socratic questioning constantly acknowledges this responsibility, along with the belief that each of us can improve our own judgment with respect to these matters. (Readers unfamiliar with Plato's dialogues should read several; *The Meno* is a good place to start.)

The Socratic questioning may be directed primarily "in the text" or "out of the text." Roughly speaking, "out of the text" questions such as "Do you use your own understanding?" may be used as a gas pedal, inciting passion. With classes that are alienated from texts, adults, or school, it may be appropriate to spend a significant amount of time in the first several weeks "out of the text."

"In the text" questions such as "What does Kant mean by 'self-imposed nonage'?" may be used as a brake, slowing the

conversation down to increase thoughtfulness. Classes that break out into arguments regularly may need to be brought back to the task of deciphering text relatively often. The eventual ideal is to combine “in” and “out” through passionate, personalized conversation on issues directly in the text. The eventual tone may be at once intellectually lively and intellectually intimate.

Socratic questioning is an endlessly sophisticated art. It is the engine that drives Western thought forward. Socratic questioning is not a technique, it is an approach to conceptual understanding which contains within it an intrinsic craving for conceptual refinement at every level of understanding. Experience in Socratic dialogue is the best means of improving one’s understanding of Socratic questioning.

### **Provider of Summary, Synthesis, and Clarification**

In addition to asking questions, the leader provides summary, synthesis, and clarification. Questioning alone can be very confusing. Indeed, within the Socratic tradition, confusion is a prerequisite to learning. But it is possible for questioning alone to be simply confusing and counterproductive. An additional role of the leader, then, is to pull together the threads of classroom dialogue.

Although this process necessarily involves the leader’s perspective with respect to which threads are important, the threads should nonetheless authentically be the students’ own ideas. The act of synthesis is the attempt on the leader’s part to understand, to make sense out of the often chaotic student dialogue. To insure that one’s synthesis has a basis in the students’ ideas, it may be helpful to ask them: “It sounds to me as though some of you believe that some words have two meanings, a public, ‘dictionary’ meaning and a purely personal, ‘what it means to me’ kind of meaning. Is that an accurate description of your belief?”

Generally I find that teachers tend to summarize what they believe the text actually means rather than what the students may be claiming that it means. There are two problems with this approach. First, if students hear your version instead of their version, they cannot trust that their thoughts are leading the discussion. Why try to figure it out on their own when you will tell them what it really means anyway?

Second, summarizing what the text “really means” eliminates opportunities for learning and self-correction on their part. I will often let them continue with interpretations based on false notions of what a vocabulary word means, or totally erroneous notions of what a paragraph means, if I believe that there exists a chance that they will discover on their own that their interpretation is incoherent. It often makes teachers very uncomfortable to watch a class spend half an hour discussing an interpretation that is way off base. But when such classes discover, on their own, that their interpretation was incorrect, they often learn the most profound lessons regarding how to understand.

For instance, often students are careless with respect to the exact meaning of words (one teacher suggested that this activity be called “close-reading seminars.”). If they discover on their own that accurate understandings of particular terms are necessary in order to make sense out of a passage as a whole, they realize the necessity of understanding key terms well before assuming that they understand a passage. From having made a mistake and corrected themselves, they are developing an experiential understanding of how to learn. The ability to determine whether or not one’s own understanding is accurate based on the overall coherence of one’s interpretation is a very high-level, valuable intellectual skill.

An advantage of working through texts in Socratic Practice, rather than the idea discussions of Socratic Seminars, is that textual

discussions offer far more opportunities for closure and consensus than do discussions of ideas. The paradigm of public debate on ideas in our society is one in which two intractable opponents argue angrily at one another with no possibility of progress in the discussion. This teaches students that learning by means of dialogue is futile and unproductive. It is thus important for them to have numerous experiences in which: (a) a textual passage is perceived as incoherent nonsense; (b) a variety of ideas on the meaning are discussed; and (c) as a consequence, the class as a whole comes to a coherent, basic interpretation of the text. While such situations should not be created by artifice, the leader as provider of summary and synthesis can often help students to become aware of the productive possibilities of dialogue by summarizing progress.

For instance, in the Kant example, it was clear to the class that the two sentences made no sense at all to them on the first day. After several days of discussion, many students will have some understanding. At such points, it is worth saying, "Two days ago this sentence was nonsense to us. We talked and argued for two days. How many of you now have some understanding of the text?" After some time, students will make progress far more quickly; in half an hour a paragraph may change from incoherent nonsense to intelligible prose strictly as a result of their conversation. The same summary and question gives them an appreciation of their developing powers: "Half an hour ago no one had any understanding of this paragraph at all. Now it sounds like most of you have some understanding of what's going on. Is that correct? What happened? How did that work?"

### **Process Coach**

Both the Socratic questioning and the summary/synthesis roles are largely focused on the intellectual content of the conversation. In addition, it is important to develop an awareness of the process

or group dynamic. There are four ways in which one acts as a process coach:

- Processing comments during the course of the conversation
- Debriefing
- Individual process-coaching outside the conversation
- Structuring related activities

In general, one's role as process coach is most important from the third week through the twentieth week. For the first few weeks, the class is busy learning how to work through texts. The leader asks most of the questions and implicitly drives the conversation. Gradually, it becomes appropriate to begin cultivating the students' ability to work on their own. A common homework assignment is "Bring to class five discussible questions on the next paragraph (or section)." Class then proceeds by following the students' own questions. By the end of a semester, many groups have a fairly well-developed group dynamic, and then the leader can concentrate more on pushing for more intellectual depth in the conversations.

In addition to serving as a conversational leader, one may act as a process coach in the selection of texts. For instance, in a group in which discussion is inhibited because no one is being straightforward or honest, it may be helpful to work on a text in which honesty in human relationships is discussed, such as Adrienne Rich's "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying."<sup>12</sup> Or a group dominated by aggressive boys may benefit from discussing John Heider's *The Tao of Leadership*, which gives them a different conception of being a leader.<sup>13</sup> Or a group with a gender-equity problem could discuss a text on gender equity, such as a passage from Catherine Van Nostrand's *Gender-Responsible Leadership*.<sup>14</sup>

In each case, the leader should be careful not to push an agenda by means of aggressive questioning: the conversational task is



always to understand the author as deeply as possible and reflect on the implications of the author's perspective. In order to maintain the authenticity of the process, always allow for the possibility that some students may sincerely conclude that, for instance, men should dominate conversations. If a majority come to a conclusion that is counterproductive to the group process, neither try to manipulate their opinion nor pretend that they believe what you wish they would believe.

Instead, respectfully acknowledge their opinion and exert your authority: "I understand that you do not believe a gender-equity problem exists here, and I respect your belief. As teacher, however, in this instance I will assert my authority and insist that the harmful behaviors I have described stop or I will remove you from the group." You do have authority over behavior, though you have no authority over belief. The trust necessary for successful conversation is undermined by telling students what to believe. Often students feel that they are being told what to believe (e.g., "racism is wrong," "evolution is true," "you will need algebra when you are an adult"). If a student has firm convictions in the opposite direction, and feels that the teacher is insisting that her belief is the exclusive truth, distrust and resentment may result.

Obtaining trust is crucial to developing a group, and trust is founded on mutual respect. It is necessary to respect their sincerely held opinions, no matter how false or abhorrent they seem to be.<sup>15</sup> The leader is guiding their understanding, not imposing an understanding from the outside.

### *Processing Comments During the Course of the Conversation*

Initially, virtually all conversation may be between the leader and the students. At this point, the primary process comment may be to remind students that "one person speaks at a time, if you speak at all, speak to everyone" on occasions when side conversations

occur. But a situation will arise in which one student is replying to another student comment. Often, despite the fact that the student's mind is replying to what the other student had said, attention will still be directed towards the teacher. This is a deeply ingrained habit. On such occasions, I simply make students aware of what they are doing: "You were replying to Maya while addressing me; does it make more sense to address her?"

Eventually, as students take on more of the content of the conversation, it may be possible to back out entirely from the intellectual content and simply observe and remark on process. Without interfering too much with the content of the conversation, occasionally it is helpful to point out when the group has worked together especially well or especially poorly, when they are being repetitive, when they are being aggressive, when they are ignoring quiet people who are trying to get in, when they are having a hard time staying focused, etc. Ideally these process comments would all come from students—thus the debriefing to be explained next. For that reason, I take a cautious approach in processing comments during the course of conversation. Nevertheless, sometimes it may be extremely helpful to point out to students what they are doing to each other while an interaction is actually occurring.

### *Debriefing*

Debriefing is potentially a powerful means of cultivating a culture of learning. Structurally, one spends the last five minutes of class time discussing the quality of the group dynamic. In the first ten to twenty weeks, most classes may need a more structured form of debriefing. I may go around the circle asking each student to say what was best about class and what was worst. Or I may ask them to rate the day's discussion on a scale of one to ten and explain their rating. Or I may ask that they suggest one way that the group

could have worked together more successfully, or how they could have improved the discussion.

Sometimes debriefing is not terribly productive for the first few weeks; it takes time for the students to develop a sense of what makes some conversations more successful than others. Often the first great debriefing will occur after a conversation in which someone becomes angry because his feelings were hurt, or she was frustrated by some event in the course of the conversation. These situations tend to bring out authentic dialogue on the frustrations which may have been stewing for weeks beneath the surface. Because of the power of these debriefing sessions, I tend to give groups considerable leeway with respect to how they treat each other; beyond "one person at a time," I rarely impose initial rules. Because the educational principle with respect to the text is self-discovery, try to create the circumstances through which lessons in group process are learned by means of self-discovery.

Insults are not allowed. I also do not allow students to complain about the text. I say, "It is our obligation to learn to work well together to understand this text. I will accept input on how to select subsequent texts after class, but complaining about this text will not help us now." With all other criticisms of the group dynamic, I ask the student to share responsibility for improving the situation. For example:

"Some people interrupt too much."

*"Okay, is there any way that you could politely point out to people when you believe that they are interrupting?"*

Or:

"The same few people are always talking."

*"Okay, is there any way that you could help bring into the discussion people who don't usually talk?"*

In this way, students, by means of their complaints, effectively assign themselves roles in the group process. Whatever

weakness they perceive, they are assigned to help remedy. This debriefing technique simultaneously creates an awareness of the behaviors necessary for successful group process, while also providing students with individual process roles, while also holding them accountable for any weaknesses in the group as a learning team.

Holding the students responsible for the success of the discussion becomes far more effective once they have had the experience of a successful discussion, and they observe that an unsuccessful one has been caused by student behaviors. There is no way to insure that these experiences occur, but once they do occur, it is important that students realize what has happened.

One of the most common means by which this happens is when a successful conversation occurs in which everyone is contributing, but the next time the class is silent. Often in debriefing the complaint occurs: "It was boring because no one was talking." An appropriate response would be, "Could you have helped by talking more?" Sometimes that is enough to make the point.

On other occasions, their impulse is to blame the text. Although it may be that the text is not ideal (rarely will I dump a text because of lack of student interest), the standard should be that it is their responsibility to bring thought to the text. It is not the text's responsibility to entertain them. Thus:

"There was nothing to talk about. This reading is so boring."

*"Last time we managed to find plenty to talk about. Why is that?"*

"I don't know. We were talking about fun stuff."

*"You are always free to take off in any direction that is related to the text. This text includes the word 'trust.' Is there anything interesting about trust?"*

"No."

*“Do you trust your best friend?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Would you care if your best friend betrayed you?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“How many of you have ever been betrayed?”*

Sometimes I will create an interesting conversation based on a concept like this. In order to do this, it is obviously necessary to have texts based around fundamental human interests; “trust” should not be incidental to the text, but central to its theme. This is an example of why math and science are more difficult to start out with. In addition, in order for this to be effective, students must feel comfortable admitting that they have been betrayed (or that they have felt anger, or that they have been lied to, etc.) In almost every group of fifteen adolescents, betrayal is a relevant issue. If at least a few are willing to admit that this (or something you can find in the text) is an important issue to them, you have the foundation for successful Socratic Practice.

Then, rather than continue the conversation, I will return to the student who complained:

*“So was it interesting to talk about ‘trust’?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Was ‘trust’ in the text?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“So we could have had an interesting conversation today if one of you had thought up a question on trust. Am I correct?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Often texts seem boring. But in this class it is your responsibility to think about what you read. That means that you should have lots of questions in your mind. If you don’t, you should prepare for class by writing out questions. The more questions, and the more interesting questions that you bring to class, the better class will be. Does that make sense?”*

“Yes.”

“*So can you take responsibility for making tomorrow’s conversation more interesting?*”

“Okay.”

Mastering this type of debriefing situation allows you to place authentic responsibility on the students for making class more interesting. You have provided them with a technique for using thinking to make class fun. Sometimes a peer dynamic develops in which they put pressure on each other to think more in order to make class more interesting. If you can get the peer dynamic directed in the right direction, you have won the war.

Once students begin to take responsibility for the group dynamic, groups that previously seemed hopeless can develop rapidly into learning cultures. Among many groups of students, there are so many social obstacles to learning together that the day-to-day experience can become tiresome and frustrating for student and leader alike. Rather than bail out, it is important to help the students learn how to recognize and solve their own problems. It is not the leader’s fault that the experience is tiresome and frustrating. The students are responsible for the quality of the discussion. Debriefing sessions in which students are assigned responsibility for specific aspects of the group’s problems are the foundation of a self-correcting, continually improving, learning team.

### *Individual Process-Coaching*

Some remarks to individuals may improve the group dynamic but are inappropriate to say publicly. This includes both special praise and special criticisms of individuals. It is important that each student in the class recognize the value of her particular contribution, while also being aware of ways in which she can improve her contribution. In addition to casual conversations outside of class with

students on these issues, it is helpful to schedule a ten- to fifteen-minute private conference each quarter or each semester to discuss the student's role in the group and directions for growth.

### *Related Activities*

Learning how to work together to deepen understanding requires mastering a variety of intangible skills. Every reinforcement helps. In addition to assigning written work based on the intellectual content of the discussions, the Socratic Practice/Ready For Work assessment rubric (see Appendix A) may be used for students to evaluate themselves in each of the ten dimensions. In order to provoke serious, thoughtful self-evaluation, students may be asked to write a paragraph evaluating themselves or others and justifying that evaluation one or two dimensions at a time. Thus, one week they may write a paragraph rating their ability to learn, explaining why they give themselves the rating they give; the next week they may rate themselves on listening, etc. Often they initially give themselves high ratings, then they gradually become more critical of themselves.

For the last two years, I have held pre- and post-Ready For Work evaluations by adults from outside the classroom. Parents and business people observe students using the Socratic Practice/Ready For Work assessment rubric while students work alone, without a leader, to decipher a difficult business document. This is done after the first week and then again at the end of the year in order to provide an estimate of student growth in the ten rubric dimensions. This cultivates interest in and support for the activity among the parents and business people while validating student growth in the rubric dimensions. It also stresses to the students that from the beginning the expectation is for them to develop the ability to work together without direct guidance from an adult.

## **Genuine Participant**

Once students are capable of working alone together, the leader simply becomes a participant. Although developed groups can work on their own, it is important for young people to hear the perspective of an adult. An implicit goal of the activity is the development of maturity, and a voice of maturity will help progress considerably. Because the adult is traditionally dominant in the classroom, and an ongoing goal is to support student independence, the adult should always be a parsimonious participant.

When asked direct questions, the adult should be a genuine participant from the beginning. The point of asking questions rather than offering comments is always in order to provoke student thoughtfulness. It is never to be coy or secretive. If the students want to know what I think, I tell them. If they repeatedly ask me to decipher textual passages for them, I may remind them that the project is to develop their judgment and ability. If, after checking their commitment to the project, they convince me that I should help in particular contexts, I will do so. With respect to personal questions of value, offering one's own opinion may be an important trust-builder from the start. It is helpful to hold oneself to the same standards of respectfulness with students that one would use with adults: no manipulation, playing games, or condescension.<sup>16</sup>

It may be helpful for teachers learning how to lead Socratic Practice to be participating in successful adult Socratic Seminars; one needs a model, a clear instance of the goal towards which one is striving. Ongoing contact with successful intellectual dialogue in a similar context assists one in maintaining a sense of direction in the otherwise chaotic world of adolescent dialogue. One develops the ability to help student groups flourish by means of having a finely tuned ear with respect to successful intellectual conversation.