

Socratic Instruction

Beginning in the Logic/Dialectic stage (6th -8th grades) and continuing in the Rhetoric stage (9th-12th grades), classical educators often employ Socratic instruction. Socratic Instruction is the dialectical process of examining an idea by "deconstructing" it to find weaknesses and inconsistencies in one's understanding, and then "reconstructing" it to clarify or purify one's understanding.

These two stages are accomplished by engaging in reflective discussion (dialectics) with the student who holds an idea, not to destroy, but to purge his understanding of error. This reflective discussion is accomplished through the use of penetrating questions by the leader.

The first stage of Socratic instruction is called the "Ironic" stage because it is attempting to gently reveal the errors contained in the participant's understanding of the idea (for example, he might conclude that Achilles was a sissy for crying to his mommy. The teacher would not correct him by telling him the truth about Achilles, but would guide the student to reflect on his assumptions by asking him questions).

The second stage of Socratic instruction is called the "Maieutic" stage because in it the teacher attempts to "midwife" the birth of an idea in the student's mind (*maieutic* means *mid-wife*). This stage can only begin when the student acknowledges his error in the first stage (*metanoia* - repentance). At that point, the teacher can continue to ask questions, guiding the student to see the truth he thought he knew earlier.

The clearest instance of this process in the Platonic corpus is found in the *Meno*, in which Socrates teaches geometry to a slave boy. We highly recommend a close analysis of that short exchange to the teacher who wishes to teach socratically.

Both teacher and student move closer to an accurate understanding of an idea through this process.

Socratic instruction is rooted in the idea that "truth is" and that it is knowable, but that we are careless about how we go about knowing it. We draw conclusions too hastily and then apply them too widely. To mature in our reasoning, we must purify our thinking through a critical Socratic dialectic.

Thanks to Andrew Kern for this article:

http://www.CircleInstitute.org/definitions%202.shtml#Socratic_Instruction

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