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# Teaching Students to Examine Their Lives

Genuine Socratic teaching does more than question students about their understanding of books; it challenges them to think critically about their behavior and beliefs.

*Photograph by Lloyd Wolf*



*Young people may believe they are critical thinkers because they are critical of adults, not because they are thoughtfully examining their own lives.*

The importance of teaching Socratically has been a topic of much discussion in recent years. Mortimer Adler, perhaps the most famous advocate of this method, defines it as "questioning students about something they have read so as to help them improve their understanding of basic ideas and values" (1984, pp. 15–16). Over and over again, Adler makes the point that it is *books* that are being examined, not actual lives, although he admits that this is not exactly what Socrates did. He makes no mention of the fact that what was important to Socrates is the self-examination of an individual's life.

Reading Adler, I do not get a sense of the flesh-and-blood adolescents I teach who squirm and curse their way to truth and who think they are critical thinkers just because they disagree with their parents. If we are to help young people deal constructively with the actual problems of their lives, we must, without sacrificing intellectual vigor for "relevance," make their problems a vital part of the curriculum. It is Socrates himself, I think, who can best show us how to do that.

Genuine Socratic questioning, the kind of questioning Socrates did, has to do with getting actual people, who have specific and often strong opinions, to examine carefully what they think they know. To Socrates this was important so that humans did not confuse their wisdom with the wisdom of the gods (an error that seems to have been made by the participants in "Irangate" and various other "gates" we've witnessed in recent years). Or, to say it another way, Socrates wanted people to recognize and revere the limits of human knowing. Such reverence, he said, will assist people in making the wisest possible choices about the conduct of their lives.

How, then, can we teach in such a way that students will think critically about their lives? There are two steps in doing this. The first has to do with a type of prereading exercise that taps into students' actual lives, the second with learning how to let the text itself function Socratically.

## Beginning Socratic Questioning

Before the class discusses a topic from the text, the teacher should ask students to state their points of view about the topic *in writing*. Writing down their opinions gives people a vested interest in the topic; they have committed themselves. Students may change their original opinions, but there can be no denying the points from which they began.

There are direct and indirect ways of eliciting students' opinions. If the text's central issue is "power," either *political* (as perhaps in a social studies class) or *personal* (as in a novel or play dealing with human interactions), an example of a direct way would be to ask students to write their answers to questions such as: What is power? More specifically, who or what has power over you? Why? Do you have power over anyone or anything? If so, give specific examples. A Socratic examination of the examples could follow to discover what, in fact, a power issue is and to discover guidelines for dealing with such issues. (To prepare themselves for this process, teachers should study carefully one or more examples of Socratic dialogue.)

A less direct, less personal way of evoking students' views would be to show excerpts from a movie or television program and ask: Who has the power in this situation? What kind of power? How is it used? With what success? Why? The point is that the focus of the prereading exercise should be on specific "true to life" examples before students proceed to consider an issue theoretically.

**"By his questions and by his example, Socrates showed how difficult self-examination is."**

After one or more of these prereading exercises has been completed and after the teacher has elicited some common insights, it is time to proceed to the next step of the process: classroom discussion of the assigned text material.

## Using a Text Socratically

Preparing to teach a text Socratically is more than a matter of reading the text, underlining key points, and coming up with a set of questions to ask. That, in fact, is the easy part. The difficult but essential part of preparing for Socratic teaching is for each teacher to allow himself or herself to be questioned *by the text*. In confronting the text in this way, teachers submit their own lives and opinions to be questioned. Teachers who have engaged in this process will be better able to guide their students similarly.

To see how this process can be accomplished on the subject of power, study *Crito*, the dialogue in which Socrates tells why he cannot choose exile as punishment. The situation itself is fraught with power issues. The dialogue takes place in a courtroom, where Socrates has been found guilty of corrupting the young and not believing in the gods. The power of the state has tried him; the power of the state has found him guilty; the power of the state will determine punishment.

Does Socrates have any power? Apparently, or he would not be on trial. Although Socrates' own questioning renders the charges against him ridiculous, the state clearly regards him as a threat and wants him silenced. The state does not want to put Socrates to death. His accusers simply want him to go away and not bother them anymore. This he will not do. Socrates says if he is guilty of treason, he should be put to death. He says that the state is like a parent to him: its laws have

governed the conditions of his life since his birth, have guided him in what to do and how to do it. If the state finds him guilty, he, as an individual, is not in a position to act as judge. The law is superior to the will of any and every individual.

The text of *Crito* functions as Socrates by challenging both teacher and students to answer questions such as the following: Has anyone in the class, the teacher included, ever regarded himself or herself as an exception to a rule? Has anyone ever stolen something (but not wished by so doing that everyone should steal)? In answering yes to these questions, are we saying by our actions that the "power" of the individual, by which we mean ourselves, is superior to the "power" that determines what other people should do? Can a government, or even a school for that matter, be run that way? Socrates did not think so. On the other hand, should we always do what our superiors tell us just because their decrees have the weight of tradition and law? Are there cases in which an exception is *right* and not just convenient?

The example of Socrates himself emphasizes individual courage and responsibility. This concept gives rise to such life-examining questions as: Has anyone in the class, the teacher included, failed to speak up on matters of conscience because of fearing the consequences? Has anyone, the teacher included, ever done or said something for the primary purpose of avoiding responsibility? Socrates was willing to die rather than be silent about matters which he regarded important. Thus, the example of his life, as recorded in *Crito*, confronts and questions us.

### Fulfilling the Purpose of Education

"The unexamined life is not worth living," said Socrates. By his questions and by his example, he also showed how difficult self-examination is. Is the difficulty worth it? Yes, if as a result of our teaching, lives can improve and if thereby our students learn to be responsible citizens. After all, isn't that what we say is the purpose of education?□

*Reference*

Adler, Mortimer J. "The Conduct of Seminars." In Chapter I of *The Paideia Program: An Educational Syllabus*. New York: Macmillan, 1984.

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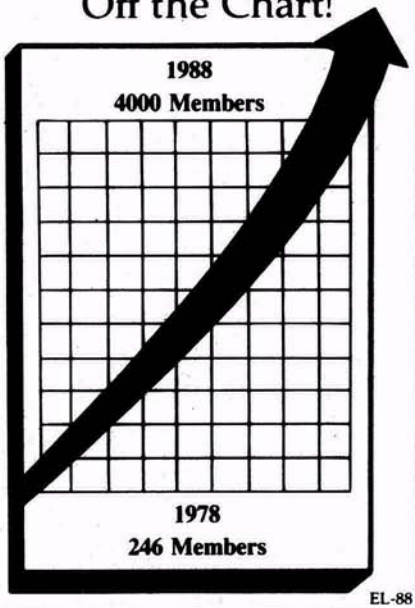
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