# Introducing Students to Socratic Dialogue and Learning

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In dialogue, Socrates invited his friend, Meno, "Since we are of one mind that one should seek to find out what one does not know, *shall we try to find out together what virtue is* (Plato 78)?" Stop for a minute and look at that italicized portion of the sentence again. Socrates asked Meno, "Shall we try to find out together what virtue is?" Why is it so unique for Socrates to say that to Meno? That's worth thinking about.

You might remember from my introductory article on Socratic teaching, "Becoming Artisans of Thought," we discovered that Socrates was regarded as the wisest man of his day. In other words, he was an expert in wisdom. Our contemporary culture is rife with experts. If people need to get in shape, they go to health and exercise experts who tell them how to become fit. If people have money troubles, they go to financial experts who tell them how to get out of debt. If people need to find a job, they travel to career experts who tell them how to land the job of their dreams. So, here we have Socrates the wisdom expert who tells Meno how to be virtuous, right? *No.* Instead, he proposes to Meno that they seek out virtue *together*. We might be tempted to gloss over this sentiment as merely a gentlemanly expression of humility or interesting rhetorical technique. However, I think that it this unique Socratic stance-–the invitation to pursue wisdom together-–that made Socrates such an effective and provocative teacher, and that makes his dialogues such timeless literature. In addition, I think it is crucial for teachers to adopt a similar stance in order to create classrooms that are places in which true, Socratic exploration can take place.

In the first article, we briefly examined some of the benefits of Socratic dialogue, and we witnessed Mrs. Wilson engage Jennifer Peterson's class in a meaningful Socratic dialogue about Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Mrs. Wilson lead the class in some pre-dialogue activities, that she told Jennifer were a crucial part of preparing students for meaningful dialogue. In this article, we will explore how to prepare students for dialogue and discussion, as well as how you can get a dialogue started and off the ground. But first let's examine what it means for teachers to adopt a Socratic stance—one of the key factors necessary for engendering meaningful discussion. We should also acknowledge that our culture is far-removed from fifth century Athens, Greece, the time and place in which Socrates lived. Despite the difference between our culture and that of ancient Greece, we will find Socratic dialogue is still relevant and applicable today. There are, however, some particular challenges posed by our culture that can make the Socratic stance and Socratic dialogue difficult. We will consider these challenges, and some ways of overcoming them. This will bring us to the point in which we are ready to prepare students for and engage them in dialogue.

## Guides for the Mountain Climb

The Sherpas of Nepal live in the Himalayan Mountains all of their lives and have an intimate acquaintance with these mountains (Handwerk 1). Now, you are probably aware that the Himalayan mountain chain boasts some of the highest mountains in the world. This certainly draws all sorts of climbers from all over the world who desire to test their endurance and fortitude on the mountains. Nevertheless, these mountains can be deadly. With their high altitude, thin oxygen, capricious weather, and precipitous inclines, they can be both an exhilarating challenge and a torturous death-trap. The Sherpas, however, can make a climber's life (or, climbers' lives) much easier. They can't do the climbing for the adventurers; however, they keep people on the right path and help them avoid dangerous errors (Handwerk 1). A good Sherpa helps a climber reach ascend dreamed-of high peaks and journeys with him in the process. For the Sherpa, each journey is a new journey, even if he has climbed a mountain many times before. He too experiences new challenges and tests, and discovering new traits of the mountain and weather patterns. The Sherpa can never assume that the mountain will be the same twice or that he has learned all there is to know about the mountain. So in an important sense, the Sherpa is a fellow-climber and explorer, even as he leads others up a mountain.

What a Sherpa does can serve as a helpful analogy for what teachers should do. A Sherpa guides more than he manages, sets an example more than he instructs. His credibility and expertise come primarily from that fact that "has been there before." Teachers too should serve as guides to their students—leading and modeling what it means to be a student, what it means to ascend to higher peaks of knowledge and wisdom. Like a Sherpa, a good teachers knows that the students must want to make the climb, must have a kindled passion for intellectual growth. In other words, unless the student has decided to learn (to climb) for himself, not much ground will be covered. The student must become an inspired explorer. A good Socratic teacher know this and seeks daily to shape such student-explorers.

The Socratic teacher, being like a Sherpa, is not a manager seeking to manufacture students into "products" quickly and efficiently. The Socratic teacher is more of an inspired and inspiring guide than a business manager seeking a product. The Socratic teacher seeks to shape a human being into a truth-seeker and truth-lover, the manager seeks to make a product that contains information, facts and requisite skills for the work place.

The deficiencies of the "teacher as manager" can be highlighted by a study of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" which we discussed in the last article. In our first article we explored the notion that when we are educating students, we cannot force them to learn anything; students must come to love learning themselves. We discussed that one of our main jobs as teachers is to kindle a desire to learn and then aid students in the process. Let's recall a few important elements of this allegory and examine them in light of this Socratic stance. Remember the captive who escaped from the cave? Even though he descended back into the cave and told his fellow captives about the beauties of the world above, the captives neither believed him nor left their captivity to join him in the realm above. In other words, the freed former prisoner could not make the journey out of the cave for his comrades; nevertheless, he still played an important role. Although he could not make his fellow captives see the truth, he was the only link they had to the truth and another way of living.

This allegory reminds us that teachers cannot force learning to occur. No matter how well a teacher works to provide relevant facts, information and resources, and no matter how good of a learning environment she creates, students must still move through a process of learning and discovery themselves. This process works best when students have a teacher-companion to walk along side them and guide them and help them reflect on the process, as well as to provide them with important facts and ideas. This is true for many reasons. Often people do not begin the process of discovery and learning until someone shows them that a worthwhile path exists that can, in fact, be traversed. In addition, two or more people are better than one, because they see more together and refine and sharpen each other. Each of us is limited in our thinking by certain prejudices, biases, lack of experience, and personal distortions in our thinking. (We will discuss more about these thinking limitations in the next article.) These differences among us help us gain a fuller perspective of the truth. Can a student walk the path (i.e. can he learn) alone? Of course he can. But this is not unlike climbing the Himalayas without a Sherpa. It will be a much more difficult and longer climb.

## Making Learning a Habit

If learning is like ascending a mountain (or climbing out of cave) and teachers are like Sherpas, then we can understand why Socrates said to Meno, "Shall we try to find out together what virtue is?" If Socrates truly cared for his students like Meno we can see that the best thing he could do was to invite and accompany them on a journey of discovery. Socrates realized that he too always had more to learn and understand about the world and about truth. Therefore, his discussions with his students were always a journey of personal discovery as well.

Socrates' unique stance not only enabled him to be an excellent teacher; it also carries important implications for teachers today. While teachers certainly need to be in control of their classrooms and maintain effective discipline, we must, ultimately, invite students on a journey of discovery, rather than managing them with a view towards producing a certain product. Though we do we want to give students a practical education, our first goal must always be the care of their souls and helping them to find truth. To use the cliché, we need to help them to be lovers of learning, and ultimately to be masters of their own learning. If we focus on these things, it will still follow that students will acquire important facts, information and knowledge. However, if we focus primarily on managing students to help them to achieve certain learning goals, we often miss a more important aim education: helping students to become clear, creative and critical thinkers, who are capable of seeking and finding the truth. This is a primary characteristic of the Socratic stance.

The second implication of the Socratic stance for teachers today is that teachers must also be continuing, active learners. If students sense that their teachers are no longer engaged in learning and growth (or indeed have stopped learning years ago), this quickly discourages them from learning. For, in essence, a teacher who has stopped learning and growing communicates to her students, "This journey is not that enjoyable or important. It is just something one must get through because one must." Just as we sense the unfitness of doctors who are obviously unhealthy, so we need to recognize the problem with teachers who no longer read, no longer learn new facts and hobbies, and no longer explore new skills and ideas. Of course teachers are extremely busy people. Still a teacher must be a learner—always. Even a lean but regular reading discipline and participation in collegial discussion and learning will pay huge dividends in the classroom and keep a teacher's curiosity alive an so infuse all her teaching. Teachers should remember that a lean diet of good reading and study will cultivate a great deal of wisdom and knowledge over time—the very practice we want to impart to busy students. (For other ideas for becoming a life-long learner, see "Activities for Socratic Apprenticeship" at the end of this article.)

When we review the life of Socrates, we realize that he not only invited and challenged people to seek wisdom, he constantly sought wisdom himself in all places at all times. This continual curiosity infused Socrates' mind and his whole persona with a brilliance that continually attracted students to him even if, as we shall see later, they were not ultimately able to follow him far on their own journey of discovery.

## Cultural Obstacles to Socratic Dialogue

The Socratic stance should probe, question, examine and inquire. There are, however, some modern obstacles that can make it difficult to adopt the Socratic stance and Socratic dialogue.

Virtually every teacher knows that much of contemporary culture is a significant obstacle to deep and profound thinking. Our culture tends to be dominated by things that come fast, that easily entertain, and that often end in loud, massive explosions. We like fast food; we like flashy commercials; we like quickly-fabricated buildings. We like to learn things quickly and painlessly. A culture which the values quick, fast, and painless does not teach complex, arduous mental activity. Sustained thought and reflection requires modeling, training and time, but most students do not receive either modeling, training or sufficient time to think and reflect. Most of the adults in a student's life are also caught up in a frenetic life of work, entertainment and amusement that leaves little for anything like a "Socratic stance."

Given current cultural pressure, does Socratic dialogue have a chance? Yes, but it will take time, patience, and purposeful practice on the part of teachers. Students who have subsisted mainly on a diet flashy video, music and movies will find it difficult to sustain discussion that does deep without accompanying snap and flash. The recent book by Nicholas Carr (*The Shallows: What The Internet is Doing to Our Brains*) suggests that modern media has actually neurologically shaped our brains making it harder for us to "deep dive" in sustained thought. Instead, trained by our surfing of the web, we skim across the water like a jet skier—covering vast amounts of information but always staying "on the surface." Just as it can be a shock to one's system to drop a poor diet and take up a healthy one—and take time to adapt to the new diet—so it will be a challenging change for some students to adjust to a new classroom diet entailing Socratic dialogue. With time and patient teacher modeling, most students will gradually take to the new diet and enjoy it.

If you are interested in reading more in-depth stories about teachers who have helped students (even students from impoverished backgrounds) to develop the habits of Socratic dialogue, see the books about Marva Collins and Mortimer Adler mentioned below in "Activities for Socratic Apprenticeship."

Most modern students are not used to explaining their thoughts in depth or examining the complexities of arguments and theories. Many students will be more comfortable just listening to a lecture or filling out a work sheet, though many of those same students will confess they don't enjoy lectures or worksheets much. However, as students begin to experience the excitement that comes from encountering rich ideas and seeing truth, they will become more and more attracted to Socratic learning. The deeper they go, the more they will face challenges that make them uncomfortable. They will often be tempted to revert back to more comfortable, passive ways of learning. If they persist, however, they will soon learn to love the demand of Socratic learning and the deeper, sustained thinking it requires of them. Teachers who are just starting to use Socratic dialogue may also experience some discomfort. At first it will seem easier to use familiar teaching practices, even if they are not particularly stimulating. However, if teachers move through the initial discomfort of Socratic dialogue, they will eventually become delighted by and fascinated with the results they see in their students.

You may already suspect that the difficult work involved in learning to think in a deeper and more complex manner is not completely foreign to students. Most students already have an inkling of the rewards of difficult work because of their participation in sports, music, and the arts. I once introduced Socratic dialogue to a middle school class by exploring with them "two types of fun." One kind of fun students experience is the fun that comes from activities like riding a roller coaster or watching an exciting movie. This type of fun is obvious, quick, and immediate—-the pleasure come simultaneously with the event. You experience it the same time you do the activity, and you don't have to work for it at all. Of course, this kind of fun, I told them, is an important part of life. However, I further explained, there is another type of fun. This type of fun is a little more complex because you often have to do difficult, non-enjoyable activities to get to this kind of fun. For instance, I explained to them that even though few people enjoy practicing musical scales, doing so faithfully can often result in profound enjoyment and fun when a musician is able to play a beautiful piece of music with ease and facility. In the same way, although few athletes enjoy running endless sprints or lifting weights until their muscles are exhausted. Nevertheless, these activities which are rarely immediately fun often lead to a great deal of enjoyment during a game because they enable athletes to perform incredible athletic feats. My middle school students also grew to see that the Socratic learning would be the same way: they would put forth some challenging effort over time but in the end enjoy some high pleasure (or "fun"). As I explained this to my students, I could see that they are able to make this connection with their own lives. These students were able to acquire sufficient patience to endure our application of Socratic dialogue when it became challenging and, occasionally, discouraging. These students grew to appreciate the benefits and difference of the "two types of fun." Since your students likely not be used to Socratic discussion, they will need your coaching and patience. If you respect them, guide them as a co-learner, they will grow as Socratic learners, perhaps exceeding your expectations.

Since we should gradually introduce students to Socratic learning, let's explore the ways a teacher can do just that. How does a teacher prepare a class for Socratic dialogue? You will remember that in our first article, we witnessed a dialogue that Maureen Wilson conducted with Jennifer Peterson's class on *Pride and Prejudice*. To prepare students for this dialogue, she engaged them in some very specific activities. Let's examine these now.

## Preparing for Dialogue

Because students are not used to engaging in complex, prolonged exploration of a topic, they need activities that prepare their minds for this type of thinking, much like people who are about to exercise need to warm up their muscles so their bodies can engage in strenuous activity. Teachers can help students warm up their brains if they will give them focused questions regarding the matter they are about to discuss, giving them time both to consider the questions and an opportunity to rehearse their answers with one or more people. You will notice that this is the process Mrs. Wilson took her students through when she conducted the Socratic dialogue over *Pride and Prejudice*. One of the most effective strategies for taking students through this process is a technique commonly referred to as pair share/group share. It takes students through each of the stages of discussion preparation we just mentioned. Let's examine each of these stages again and consider why they are helpful in preparing students for discussion.

The first step of pair share/group share is to present students with several questions (usually two to five questions is adequate) that help them think about the issue they are about to discuss. The more specific these questions are, the more they will help the students. For example, you may remember that when Jennifer tried to engage her class in discussion about *Pride and Prejudice*, she asked two rather vague questions: "What do you think about this book so far?" and "What do you think the theme of this book is?" While some students (usually highly verbal students) will do well with open-ended questions like these, most will be at a loss as to where to start. When a teacher asks a question like "What do you think about this book?", students are not sure if teachers want them to say whether they liked the book or not, whether they would recommend it or not, what they think the book is about, or whether they like the cover and print size. For many students, especially those who are worried about the teacher's opinion and meeting his or her expectations, this uncertainty can be paralyzing.

Furthermore, if a teacher asks a question like, "What is the theme of this book?" students must do a great deal of analysis and synthesis to reach an answer to this question. They must analyze the plot, the characters, the setting, and recognize an overarching pattern in all of this in order to state a general theme. While some students may be able to do this on the spot, most students need help recognizing the individual elements that will guide them in recognizing the theme of the book. You will remember that Mrs. Wilson asked much more specific questions such as this:

> *Pride and Prejudice* is a book about love, relationships, and marriage. If you had to communicate the theme in one sentence, what do you think Jane Austen is communicating about love in this book?

You will notice that this question is much more specific. It asks students to focus on a theme related to love, and it asks students to word the theme in one sentence. Consider these questions Mrs. Wilson asked the students:

> You could say this book is about the consequences of choice and character. Name three characters in this book that make bad choices. Why do they make these choices? Consider the character traits that cause them to make the choices they make.
>
> Name two characters that make good choices. Why do they make these good choices? Consider character traits that cause them to make the choices they make.

You will notice that these question provide specific parameters. When teachers write specific questions which guide students' thinking to particular themes or parts of the book, it directs and focuses student thought. The more teachers train students to think in a specific manner like this, the more they will eventually be able to handle broad questions such as "What is the theme of this book?"

After teachers present a list of specific questions, they must give the students time to reflect on those questions. Some students might be able to provide answers on the spot, but the more complex the question and issues, the more time students need. Therefore, once teachers have presented questions to students, they should allow the students time either at home or in class to think and write. I recommend that teachers ask students to write responses to some or all of the questions. If you merely ask students to think about the questions, they may or may not do this. However, if they must respond in writing, their thinking will  be more purposeful and helpful. They should treat this as brainstorming rather than formal essay writing. After all, the purpose of this writing is a preparation for discussion, so the thoughts the students write down need not be polished thoughts. You might also consider giving students a grade if you require them to do this writing at home. This will motivate them to answer the questions and will emphasize that it is an important part of the process. However, when I give a grade for this type of exercise, I give students a completion grade so that they can focus more on thinking, rather than on the form their thinking takes.

Before we move on to the next stage of pair share/group share, I will mention one other strategy that I have found effective for helping students brainstorm. Sometimes when I ask students to write responses to questions, I provide them with a list of more questions than I expect them to answer. This builds in an element of choice into the brainstorming process and helps motivate students. When students have some control, it increases their confidence. This makes sense since in almost every assignment a student undertakes, he will understand some parts of it better than others. Allowing students a focus on a chosen element will likely increase their interest and confidence. Of course, there are some assignments or types of schoolwork in which this is not an effective strategy. For example, usually when students take tests, we mark their grade down if they do not complete all the questions. This is because there are skills and knowledge that we must measure. Socratic dialogue, on the other hand, is often for exploration and enrichment. In these cases it is often more possible for teachers to give students control over the areas on which they will focus. For example, Jennifer Peterson could decide to give a grade on a Socratic discussion over *Pride and Prejudice*, as well as a normal test grade over the book. While the test would measure specific characters, plot developments, and thematic elements, the Socratic dialogue would highlight those elements of the book which students find most provocative. Both types of assessments are a valuable part of the educational process.

After students have thoughtfully answered the teacher's discussion questions, it is tempting to expect them to be ready to jump right into conversation. Indeed, the more you practice dialogue with your students, the more easily and, perhaps spontaneously, they will be able to enter discussion. However, an important part of the process of preparing students for good discussion is for them to share their answers with just a few persons in the class. You will remember that Mrs. Wilson had the students in Jennifer Peterson's class share their answers with several different classmates. When students share their ideas with a classmate and listen to his feedback and ideas as well, it will benefit everyone.

First, as a student shares her opinions with her partner, she will gain confidence in expressing her ideas, and she will learn, through her partner's questions and facial expressions, whether or not there is a part of her answer that is unclear or poorly expressed. This allows her to practice and polish her response. In addition, as the two partners share with one another, they will likely have unique insights into the discussion that will enlighten each other. A student's answer does not need to be brilliant to be enlightening. The fact that the two students view the issue from two different perspectives should often be illuminating. Lastly, in ideal scenarios, two students may find that they disagree with each other's answer to a question, and, in this case, they might have a mini-discussion about why they think the way they do. This disagreement and discussion usually sharpens the partner's thinking. If you notice, when partners share their ideas with one another, they do all the things that we want them to do in a larger group: they listen to each other; they enlarge their perspective through listening; they have a chance to disagree and work through the disagreement. Eventually, the goal is that students will be willing to do these things in a larger group. Indeed, with consistent practice they will be able to. Pair discussion is like "training wheels" for a student as they practice to do these things in front of a larger group.

Before we discuss group share, there are a few more things I would like to mention about pair share. First of all, there are many different ways to conduct pair share. For instance, you may ask students to discuss the answers to their questions with just one other partner. On the other hand, you might ask students to talk with several different partners over the course of fifteen or twenty minutes. When I use pair share in class, I usually assign students a number and then have them meet to discuss questions in a circle around the room. Then, if I want students to discuss the questions, I ask partners with the closest birthday to rotate. Using this organizational technique, students discuss questions with minimal interruption and confusion. In addition, while I often ask students to discuss answers with one other partner, students may also profit from discussing answers in groups of three or four. In this way, a teacher can gradually prepare students for speaking in front of larger groups.

As a parting suggestion regarding pair share, consider that teachers can play an important Socratic role while students discuss answers with their partners or small groups. When Mrs. Wilson's students were discussing the *Pride and Prejudice* questions with their groups, she walked around continually listening to students' answers and, occasionally, making comments. As students are discussing with their partners, teachers enforce the idea that their task is an important task. If a teacher uses this discussion time to take a break or work on things at her desk, this will likely communicate that the purpose of pair share is to get them out of her hair for a while. A teacher who circulates and listens motivates the students to pursue their task seriously because they know the teacher cares about their discussion. Furthermore, as a teacher circulates in the room, the teacher will often hear students make good points or state misguided opinions. Both situations are good opportunities for feedback and mentoring. When a student makes an especially good comment and a teacher says, "What a great insight," this not only motivates that particular student to work hard, but the other students to discuss in such a manner that they will receive praise. In addition, if a student expresses a misinformed opinion, this is a perfect opportunity for a teacher to explore the students' opinion with him, so that he receives one-on-one attention and training in thinking and analysis. In the course of any given discussion, some students will be perfectly able to discuss the issues on their own and some students will need more attention. Pair share enables teachers to more readily spot and coach students who need this attention. Although it is appropriate to skip pair share as students become more adept at critical thinking and discussion, do not underestimate the power of giving students, especially students just learning the art of discussion, the chance to practice articulating their thoughts to a partner.

Once students have discussed their ideas with a partner and listened to their partner's ideas, they will be much more ready to discuss in class. There are two reasons for this. First of all, as we mentioned before, pair share allows student to practice expressing their ideas. This greatly decreases their self-consciousness and increases their confidence. They are more willing to state these ideas again in front of the class as a whole. Not only does sharing their ideas with a partner build confidence, it also allows students to gather ideas from their partners that they can share in class. For example, students may not understand a particular question initially. However, after they listen to their neighbor's ideas, they gain a clearer conception of the issue under discussion and are able to share the ideas they gained from listening to their neighbor. Students are more apt to use their classmates' good ideas in discussion if a teacher makes it clear at the beginning of the discussion that learning from each other and using each other's ideas is okay. Whenever I use pair share/group share, I often say something like this when we are about to start a discussion as a class: "Okay, you have had time to discuss your ideas, so now we are going to start talking about them as a class. Feel free to share your own ideas or the good ideas you heard while discussing things with your neighbor." In saying something to this effect, I make it clear that this discussion is not a competitive activity in which students are vying for the most brilliant answer (this kind of attitude can quickly shut down meaningful discussion). Rather, I make it clear that we are all here to learn and pursue the truth and, naturally, to learn from each other. In this way, students can adopt a Socratic stance towards their partner: "Come, let us explore this together."

After students have thought and written about the question on their own and discussed it with several partners, they are in a great place to have a class discussion. Of course, most teachers realize that classroom discussions often fall dead because students cannot think of answers on the spot, or they are afraid to give answers. Expect that almost all the students who have gone through pair share will have at least some answers to some of the questions, and will benefit from the practice of stating these answers. This initial readiness should allow fruitful discussions to unfold. The students should be ready at this point, but the teacher still has an important role to play. Of course teachers who have adopted a Socratic stance will know more than their students as the classroom journey gets under way. Helping students find their way will often require teachers to ask questions, stop and lecture a bit, present a counter-example, or interject humor into the discussion. You might remember that Mrs. Wilson used many of these techniques in the class discussion we witnessed in the last article. We will discuss some of these strategies and how teachers can use them effectively in later articles. For now, let's look at how teachers can get a discussion started and sustain it.

## Leading the Discussion

When students are ready to move to group share (group discussion) after pair share, there are several strategies teachers can use to begin and sustain discussion. First of all, it is wise for students to provide some motivation and focus for participation in the discussion by informing students that they will be graded for their participation. When I am teaching students how to discuss ideas, I like to give them a participation goal that I think all of them can accomplish. For instance, in my first several discussions with a class, I might say to them, "Today you are receiving a grade for your participation in the discussion. To earn an "A", you need to speak at least once and offer an opinion that is more than a "yes" or "no" opinion." Although this requirement will be easy for most students, it gives them motivation and confidence to speak in the group. After they have met this goal several times, I often increase the requirements. For instance, I might require them to speak twice to earn an A. Or, I might give them a rubric that details what it takes to earn a certain grade for group participation. (I will talk more about these rubrics at a later time.) When students are just learning discussion skills, however, it is best for teachers to give them easy group discussion requirements that most, if not all, student can achieve.

When a teacher starts a discussion, it is another great opportunity to give students a choice. For example, it may be tempting for a teacher to begin with the first question on the list and work her way down to the last question. Instead, it is often wise to let students decide which question the class discusses first. Rather than voting on which questions to start with, a teacher might pose an invitation to begin the discussion, reminding the class that opening the discussion as an opportunity to speak (for a grade). I have discovered that when I issue an invitation like this at the beginning of a discussion, it often motivates the shyer students who rarely talk in class to volunteer to begin the discussion. Once a student takes the initiative to begin the discussion, it often encourages other students to speak.

Once a discussion gets started, there are many different directions it can take, like any other journey in life. A teacher can never completely predict or organize a discussion, nor should he want to. Still, there are several common paths student responses can take (and that should be anticipated), and there are common ways teachers should guide students when they take a particular path. We will be examining several of these paths later. For now, let us examine two basic strategies a teacher can use for any kind of student response-–whether is the response is promising and fruitful or not. The first strategy is that of asking "Why?" When students first learn how to discuss, often they will provide answers without providing support. One of the best ways to help students dig deeper is to say, “Tell me why you think that” or “Why?” after a student answers a question. Asking “Why?” follow up questions pushes students to provide reasons for their ideas, thoughts and beliefs. But even such prompting, students will often miss further important evidence or examples that they could use to support their point. Therefore, a teachers should often following one “Why?” with another, pushing the student deeper and soliciting additional thought and substantiation. Specific questions such as “What other evidence supports your answer?” or “I can think of at least one other piece of evidence that supports this answer. Can anyone else figure it out?” can help prompt student thought. In summary, asking various kinds of “Why” questions will deepen student thought, encourage more thorough expression and reveal weakness regardless of the quality of their initial responses and ideas.

Another way teachers can help students think more deeply is to play devil’s advocate. For instance, let’s say that a student has provided a correct answer to a question and even provides good reasoning for that answer. A teacher can still push the student deeper by adopting a contrary stance to the student’s opinion and asking the student to continue defending her answer. Mrs. Wilson did this when exploring whether or not Mrs. Bennet was an admirable character. Although she agreed with the student, Ben, who said that Mrs. Bennet was, by and large, a non-admirable character, Mrs. Wilson played the devil’s advocate by noting that all of her actions were motivated by love for her daughters and concern for their well-being. She forced Ben and other students to figure out if Mrs. Bennet really was non-admirable or if there was some way she could actually be considered admirable. A teacher can play devil’s advocate by drawing attention to information or examples that appear to contradict a student’s opinion. For instance, a teacher might say, “Let’s say that what you claim is so, how would you respond to this evidence?” In attempting to reconcile the discrepancy, the student may realize her answer is incorrect or incomplete and likely make necessary adjustments to make her opinion more accurate.

It is important for teachers to note that when they are challenging a student to deeper thought they can enlist the help of the class. For example, when Mrs. Wilson asked the class to consider Charlotte Lucas, one of the students said she didn’t think Charlotte was admirable, but she couldn’t exactly say why. Therefore, Mrs. Wilson called on some other students who had reasons for why they believed Lucas was admirable or not. When teachers allow various students to help explore a question, rather than demanding that one student do all of the work, it reinforces the notion that a Socratic dialogue is a process of mutual discovery, rather than a competition or an exhibition of brilliance. While it is appropriate at times to challenge individual students thoroughly in a discussion (this is the tone Socratic questioning often takes in law school), it is better to keep a spirit of camaraderie and joint-discovery in Socratic discussion for beginners. Playing the devil’s advocate challenges your student to think deeply in a different way than just asking “Why” does. Not only does it demand that a student provides support for his opinion, it demands that he substantiate his opinion in the face of seemingly contradictory evidence.

We have covered a lot of ground in this article. In a moment, we want to revisit Jennifer Peterson, the second-year teacher learning the art of Socratic dialogue. Before we do that, let’s summarize briefly what we have learned in this article. We know that student learning is more like climbing a mountain than it is like manufacturing a product on an assembly line. Therefore, teachers will best encourage learning when they adopt a Socratic stance. This means that although a teacher may be an expert in the knowledge she is imparting to students (like Socrates was an expert in wisdom), students must make the journey for themselves, and the teacher must be a guide and co-traveler on this journey. In addition, because our culture presents many obstacles to complex, deep thought, teachers must warm up students’ minds to prepare them for dialogue, much like someone about to engage in strenuous exercise must warm-up her muscles before she begins her actual exercise routine. One of the best ways to warm-up students’ minds for Socratic dialogue is pair share/group share. Teachers will encourage student ownership of material if they allow students freedom in choosing the starting question for the dialogue. Once the discussion starts, teachers can use the strategies of “Why?” and “Devil’s Advocate” to challenge students to think more deeply and support their answers. Now let’s check in on Jennifer Peterson and see how she is doing in her Socratic apprenticeship.

## Discussion in Action

After Jennifer observed Maureen Wilson’s two-day discussion over *Pride and Prejudice*, she felt like she had a better understanding of how to facilitate a meaningful discussion in her classroom. She realized that her initial discussion over *Pride and Prejudice* floundered because she had failed to ask students specific questions, and she had not given them time to prepare for the discussion. She needed to provide a clear, measurable discussion goal for her students (for example, speaking at least once in class), and she needed to grade this participation to provide some motivation. Jennifer felt confident that she could improve in these areas in her next dialogue in class, but she felt less confident about guiding the conversation once it got started. In general, she understood what Maureen meant by asking questions that challenged students to dig deeper or to play devil's advocate. However, she felt like she needed to observe other teachers asking these kinds of questions. She decided to observe Tim Hendricks, the eleventh grade government teacher, who had just finished a short unit on inequalities in the United States, and was holding a discussion on poverty. Tim gave Jennifer a paper with the following thesis statement on it:

> Proposed: If someone is poor, it is his own fault, and he should work harder to escape his poverty.
>
> On a piece of notebook paper, write a response to this statement. State whether you agree or disagree with it and explain why you believe what you do. In addition, you must answer two of the following four questions:
>
> 1. Are there any factors that could cause poverty, which are outside of a person's control? If so, what?
> 2. Are there any factors that prevent people from being able to work hard and get ahead financially if they work longer hours or work more jobs?
> 3. If you answered "no" to two, why do you think people in poverty choose not to work harder? How do you know this?
> 4. If you answered "yes" to one, what are these factors? How do you know these factors are outside of people's control?
> 5. What, if anything, do you think should be done for poor people?

Tim had assigned students these questions for homework, and had asked them to write 1½ to 2 pages in response. He had allowed them to discuss the questions with their friends in class before they left yesterday. Tim told Jennifer, "I want the students to do some independent thinking, which is why I assigned the questions for homework. However, I also wanted them to be able to brainstorm with their classmates at least a little bit. Some of the students process their thoughts better when they can talk about them, so I've learned to give them time to do this as much as I can."

Tim opened discussion with, "First of all, I want to congratulate you because over the course of the year, you have really improved. Keep up your excellent work. I also want to remind you that to earn an A for this dialogue, you need to participate twice, and your comments should have substance. I will be grading you on both of these elements."

"To begin our discussion, I will take a vote. Raise your hand if you think that if people are poor, it is their fault and they need to work harder." A little less than half of the students raised their hand. "How many of you disagree with that statement?" Jennifer noticed that, once again, a little less than half the students raised their hand. Tim said, "I think some of you didn't vote. How many of you are unsure about the question?" A handful of students raised their hands. "Fair enough. Hopefully you'll be more confident about this issue by the time class is over. I want to start with the people who agree with the statement. "Peter," Tim said to a student sitting on the left of the room. "You raised your hand to say that you think it's poor people's fault that they are poor. Why do you think this?"

Peter said, "Because if they would just work harder, they won't be poor anymore."

Tim challenged, "Peter, you're basically answering the question with the question. In other words, you are saying that poor people should just work harder because if they worked harder, they wouldn't be poor. This is circular reasoning. How do you know poor people won't be poor if they work harder."

"Well," said Peter, a little confused, "Isn't it obvious? I mean, if they work harder, they will earn more money, and then they won't be poor anymore."

"That's not necessarily true," Sharon said from the other side of the room.

"I'm glad you're jumping into the conversation, Sharon," Tim said. "Tell me why you think Pete's claim isn't true."

Sharon continued, "Just because someone makes more money doesn't mean he isn't poor. It just means he has a little more money. For instance, if your glass has water in it, and you pour more water in it, that doesn't mean it's full or that you have enough. It just means you have more water."

“That’s a good analogy, Sharon,” Tim encouraged. “I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“I understand what Sharon is saying,” said David, a student near her. “But, to build on her analogy, if you need more water, you keep pouring more water. In the same way, if you need more money to get out of poverty, you keep working.”

As Jennifer listened to the students’ arguments, she could tell that they had built up good reasoning skills by engaging in many dialogues. Also, she noticed that while Tim listened intently to students’ comments, he allowed them to direct the conversation.

Sharon responded to David, “Well your extension of my analogy works as long as people are able to pour water. But what if they are prevented from pouring? For instance, what if they are handicapped in some way, or what if someone is controlling all the water and won’t let others have it? Or what if someone poisons the water? What if the person’s glass is too small, so that even if he fills it all the way up, it’s not enough, and he can’t get another one?”

“But that doesn’t make sense, Sharon,” David responded. “You are comparing the water to work. How can someone poison someone else’s work or hoard all the work so no one gets any?”

Mr. Hendricks interjected, “This is great guys! I really like how you are using the glass and water analogy to explore the idea of work. Really what we are exploring here is whether the availability of work can be decreased, or if work can be limited or influenced in some other way so that even if someone works more hours, he can’t get out of poverty. So really what we are looking at is this: “Are there  causes of poverty outside of people’s control? I want you to focus on this. Let’s get someone who hasn’t spoken. Who would like to answer this question?”

When a girl in the back raised her hand, Mr. Hendricks said, “Great, Susanna.  What do you think?”

“I think there are some causes of poverty people can’t control. For instance, what if someone gets in a really bad accident and their insurance won’t pay for all the hospital bills, and they have to sell their house and go bankrupt paying the bills?”

Tim directed the question to the rest of the class. “What do the rest of you think? Does Susanna’s example illustrate a cause of poverty outside of someone’s control?

A student named Kelly answered, “It seems like he could have prevented the situation if he had bought better insurance in the first place. I mean, he should have purchased a policy that would have covered a possible catastrophe.”

Tim said, “I see. So you are saying that his poverty was result of his poor planning rather than being outside of his control?”

“Yeah, that’s what I mean,” said Kelly.

“Kelly has a point. What do the rest of you think of her argument?”

Sharon piped up, “But what if he couldn’t afford an insurance policy that would cover every possible catastrophe? I mean, comprehensive insurance is really expensive. Maybe he had insurance from his job, but it wasn’t great. And maybe he couldn’t afford better insurance at his current job.”

Peter replied, “Well, he should have gotten a better job. No one was forcing him to stay in a job with crummy insurance.”

The class was silent for a minute, thinking about Peter’s and Sharon’s arguments. After a moment or so, Tim prodded, “Okay, Peter makes a point that no one is forcing a person to stay in a job with crummy insurance. I want to play devil’s advocate for a minute. Peter, it seems that the argument you are making is that people have the responsibility to get a job that gives them insurance that will cover every possible hospital emergency, no matter how expensive it is. Is that correct?”

Peter answered, “Yeah, I think that’s right-–or work in a job that makes enough money to purchase the best insurance.”

Tim challenged, “Would you say that your argument assumes that there are enough jobs available that would allow everyone to have such insurance?”

Peter hesitated and then responded, “Sure, I guess so.”

Tim challenged, “Okay, if that is your assumption, how do you know that there are, indeed, enough jobs like this available for everyone it the U.S.?”

Peter paused, “Well, I don’t know for sure, but I’m pretty certain there is.”

Tim challenged further, “Okay, but let’s suppose that there aren’t enough good jobs for everyone in the U.S., or that there is no health plan that covers every disaster. Then Susanna’s example of the person who becomes poverty-stricken because of a horrendous accident would be an example of poverty outside of someone’s control, right?”

Peter answered reluctantly, “I guess so.”

“Okay,” Todd answered. “I really like how we explored that line of thinking. I like the examples and analogies you all proposed for consideration. I think we should examine if there are other possible causes of poverty outside of people’s control. Can anybody think of another possible cause of poverty besides a major accident?”

As Jennifer listened, different students hypothesized other possible causes of poverty, and the class explored whether or not they were outside of people’s control. Occasionally, when the class was silent, Tim would pose an example that they could explore. Jennifer noticed that Tim always listened intently, but he was comfortable allowing students to carry on the discussion amongst themselves, as long as they stayed on track. When they started to veer off course, he would say something like, “That’s an interesting point, but it’s off topic from our discussion now,” or “Let’s wait and discuss that at the end of class, if we have time.” The class discussed the proposition about poverty the rest of the class period and Tim let them know that they would have a follow-up assignment the next day.

After class, Jennifer thanked Todd for letting her observe. She said, “I really liked the way you challenged their arguments to make them think more deeply, especially when you pointed Peter’s unproven assumptions. How do you learn to recognize those assumptions?” Tim told her that it came from a lot of practice. He said he wasn’t as good at doing it when he first started Socratic dialogues, but over time he was able to recognize errors, limitations and assumptions in students’ arguments. He encouraged Jennifer to start using dialogue and that over time she would develop these skills as well. Jennifer left Tim’s class, ready to get started, knowing she would learn a lot along the way.

We have been discussing the Socratic stance in this article. When teachers adopt the Socratic stance, they invite students to discuss and discover together. Of course, because the teacher is older and more experienced, he or she will certainly direct and lead in this process, much like Sherpas leading mountain-climbers up the Himalayan mountains. The Sherpas are experts who direct the climbers, leading them on a good path and helping them to avoid pitfalls. In the same way, in a Socratic discussion, teachers challenge students to think more deeply, and they play devil’s advocate to help students recognize shortcomings in their thinking. Students today are especially in need of good Socratic guides because our culture does not foster deep, sustained thinking. Therefore, teachers need to familiarize students with this Socratic approach through frequent practice of dialogue, which starts at a level that students can handle and then increases in complexity and length as students are able to proceed. When teachers adopt the Socratic stance, they invite both themselves and their students to embark on a journey that will sharpen their minds to become thoughtful explorers of ideas and truth. Not only will students cultivate their intellects, but they will do so in fellowship with fellow explorers who are so examining life. It was Socrates who famously said, “I tell you that no greater good can happen to a man than to discuss human excellence every day . . . and that the unexamined life is not worth living” (Pojman).

## Activities for Socratic Apprenticeship:

1. **Learning from Socrates**: Read the dialogue Meno with a friend or colleague. I recommend the translation by G.M.A. Grube, which you can find on Amazon. Although you may find these dialogues difficult to work through at first, your patience will eventually pay off as you begin to grasp Socrates’ skilled and insightful questioning techniques.
2. **Practicing dialogue**: Don’t be afraid to try a dialogue, even if you don’t understand the process entirely. You will learn a great deal every dialogue you attempt, and, in fact, there is much about Socratic dialogue that you can’t learn unless you actually engage in dialogue. To help you get started, think about these steps:
    A. What is a controversial topic in your current unit or chapter that you could explore with your class?
    B. What are three or four questions you could ask about this topic that would require students to take a stance and support their stance with arguments and evidence? Remember, the more specific your questions are, the better.

C. What are some common opinions your students will likely have about this topic?

D. What questions can you ask about these common opinions that will cause students to think more deeply about their opinions? Of course, you can always ask students to explain why they believe what they do. Is there a way that you could play devil's advocate? Do any of these common opinions rest upon unproven assumptions? Can you think of any examples that seem to contradict these common assumptions?

3. **Learning from Modern Practitioners**:

A. Do any teachers in your school use Socratic dialogue or questioning in their classes? If so, see if you can arrange a time to observe them.

B. If you would like to read more about teachers, in various settings using the Socratic method, here are some books for your consideration:

*The Paideia Program*, Mortimer Adler

*The Marva Collins' Way*, Marva Collins

*The Teaching Gap*, James W. Stigler and James Hiebert

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## About the Author

Shelly Johnson has been teaching for fifteen years, ten of which she has been a logic teacher. Shelly earned a degree in secondary English education from Malone College, an MEd from Covenant College, and she is currently a graduate student of philosophy at the University of Kentucky. Shelly has written a book on inductive logic called *The Argument Builder* and co-authored one on deductive logic called *Discovery of Deduction*. Currently she is finishing the book *Everyday Debate*. Shelly lives with her husband, John, in beautiful Lexington, Kentucky and enjoys reading, writing, walking, fencing, and gardening.