

Didactic vs. Socratic

Socratic is eliciting information from students through a direct line of reasoning. The tutor endeavors as much as possible to avoid giving information away. The didactic tutoring style has the tutor beginning with an explanation of the material the student should learn followed by questioning that plays more of a role of drawing the student's attention to the information that the tutor has already explained rather than eliciting this information from the student. (Rose)

In *The Euthyphro*, for example, Socrates and a young priest discuss at some length the true nature of piety — yet at the end of their dialogue both men remain stumped as to the correct answer. Although their argument ended in incompleteness, near irresolution, Socrates is unswayed and wishes to pursue the argument again. His true task, after all, is critical inquiry, not simply arriving at a conclusion. Socrates asks his student to begin the discussion again, but to his surprise and disappointment, Euthyphro — who exhibits behaviors and habits of mind quite similar to those of many present-day students — answers, "Some other time, Socrates, for I am in a hurry now, and it is time for me to go."

That hurried and harried demeanor is something we see in many of our students, who often come to the tutoring center in desperation, looking for quick answers and a regurgitation and recitation of several weeks' worth of material. But instead of just giving students the quick answers they seek, we try instead to teach them a process — the process of learning how to learn.

Our tutors are trained to resist passive learning on the part of tutees, and to involve students in the reassembly of the knowledge they have already gained in their classes and readings. Tutors learn to ask lots of questions to force students to recall, use, and process that prior knowledge. Questioning the students also breaks the familiar classroom pattern of passive listening, encourages them to engage in the subject matter, and helps them verbalize what and how they think. When students talk about what they know, what they're learning, and what they don't understand, they become the center of the learning process.

The tutor should be the one to sit back, guiding and coaching the student along, while the tutee works through the problem rather than the tutee sitting back and passively watching the tutor do the work. (Cleveland, 2008)

When applied in a tutoring context, the Socratic Method offers important potential benefits. The primary benefit is that, just as Socrates did with his listeners, the tutor can guide his tutee in several small steps toward an understanding of a larger idea. Leading the tutee in this gradual way can assist her to discover that an idea or algorithm with initially seemed complicated, is not that difficult to master after all. The trick is simply to break the problem down into a series of manageable pieces. A secondary benefit of leading questions is that the repeated queries promote active learning in the sense that each one prompts the tutee to think on her own in order to find an answer. The overall effect of this type of dialogue is to spur the tutee to actively make connections in their mind that they can later reinforce with practice.

Leading questions are questions that are typically asked in a sequence, in order to guide students gradually to an understanding of a new idea or concept. Each question and answer represents small steps along a larger path to understanding a concept or procedure. Students learn to approach seemingly complicated learning tasks by breaking them up into smaller parts. The questions are structured so that the student is forced to think independently for each answer. It is natural for each subsequent question to build on what the student has already understood, evidenced by the preceding correct answer. The use of leading questions enable a tutor to maintain a very accurate sense of what the tutee does and does not yet comprehend. If a tutee has fully grasped an idea, he can check by going back a step or two and asking the tutee to explain her answer(s). Leading questions offer the tutor frequent opportunities to praise the tutee's successes and, in doing so, to increase her motivation and self-confidence. (Refer to page 25 – 30 for examples of dialogue.) (xxx)

“Can it be, Ischomachus, that asking questions is teaching? I am just beginning to see what is behind all your questions. You lead me on by means of things I know, point to things that resemble them, and persuade me that I know things that I thought I had no knowledge of.”

- Socrates (Quoted in Xenophon's "Economics")

You were expecting some answers! Instead, the tutor starts asking you questions. What notes do you have on the class lectures? How does your instructor introduce this section of the material? What chapters have you been assigned to read? What are the main topics of these chapters? What keywords do you recall from the reading? Yes, you come to a tutor to get help, and no, the tutor's job is not to give you the answers.

The Socratic Method is named for an ancient Greek philosopher named Socrates, who lived around 470-399 B.C., and he was famous for his particular way of teaching students. Socrates believed that the dialectic (defined as a dialogue or conversation between two or more people with differing opinions about something) was the best way to arrive at knowledge. Knowledge is best attained when each participant is allowed to think for herself, rather than telling the participant what to think. The dialectic encourages every student to actively think about and evaluate the ideas being studied.

What this means is that rather than you sitting and listening passively to the tutor or SI Leader, you talk about the topic. What this means is that you must try to take on the material, at least once, on your own. Make notes, look up words you don't understand, and that way, when you meet with the tutor, you will already have questions that will help the tutor identify and focus on the material you need help with. What it means for the tutor is listening actively to your ideas, guiding the conversation, and hopefully leading you to the very answers you seek. (???)

Cleveland, J. P. (2008, December 19). *What Socrates Would Say to Undergraduate Tutors*. Retrieved August 4, 2014, from Chronicle: <http://chronicle.com> Section: Commentary Volume 55, Issue 17, Page A26

Rose, M. V. (n.d.). *A Comparative Evaluation of Socratic versus Didactic Tutoring*. Retrieved August 5, 2014

xxx. (n.d.). *Chapter 4 - The Socratic Method*. Retrieved August 4, 2014, from xxx.