

WHAT IS A SOCRATIC DIALOGUE?

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Socratic method is not the art of teaching philosophy but of teaching how to do philosophy , not the art of teaching about philosophers but to make pupils into philosophers

(L. Nelson)

What is a Socratic dialogue?

A Socratic dialogue (further 'SD') is the most popular form of the Socratic method. In this method, participants try to investigate in a more or less structured way the truth and the value of their opinions in attempting to respond to a self-chosen question. The material of the investigation is their own experience, either an experience here and now or a memorable event from the past. The conversation is meant to be a dialogue, rather than a formal debate or informal discussion. The participants try to understand each other and engage in a common enterprise. This doesn't necessarily mean that participants have to find a consensus about the answer to the question in order to have a successful dialogue. An awareness of the complexity of the investigation is often much more satisfactory than a constructed consensus. The attempt to think carefully, slowly and in depth distinguishes itself from other forms of conversation like debates, brainstorming sessions or creative thinking sessions.

Where does the Socratic dialogue come from?

Of course, the dialogue refers to Socrates, Plato's teacher. About 2500 years ago, he is reported to have undertaken rhetorical investigations with his pupils in a very particular manner. One of his approaches to searching for the truth of his pupils' claims was to confront them with the difference between their words and their deeds, so that they became less sure of their motives, intentions and beliefs. The 'shame' (elenchus) that arose as a result of this confrontation was, according to Plato, a necessary step towards a further and more thorough investigation of one's own opinions. And a life not devoted to investigation, according to Socrates, was not worth living.

In the 1920s, Leonard Nelson, a German philosopher (1882-1927), adapted the Socratic method to educational settings and promoted it as an important means to renew education and politics. He was convinced it would serve to create more reflective and critical citizens. Following the thinking of Kant and Fries, Nelson believed that participants in a group could together investigate critically their own beliefs and opinions by 'retracing' the judgements that are implicit in our effort to give meaning to our experiences.

From its roots in the practice developed by Nelson, SD has been further developed in many countries across the world, where different approaches and adaptations have emerged. Some recent developments I have been engaged in are the combination of SD with outdoor work, practical short forms of SD in organisations and the use of SD in integrity-training.

What's the structure of a 'classical' SD?

The structure of a SD varies according to time and context . But common to almost all approaches to SD is that a group starts with a focus on an initial question.. This question can be chosen by the facilitator beforehand but preferably, the participants choose the question themselves. The ways in which the participants find a suitable question in which they are genuinely interested varies according to the creativity of the facilitator, the tradition and the context in which the dialogue is held.. Together with a suitable question, the dialogue requires a focus on a moment in the lived experience of one or more of the participants. This can be an event here and now or an experience from the past. In the latter situation, the example-giver is asked to give a judgement that is meant as an initial answer to the question. Investigating for example a question like "When is distraction constructive?", the example-giver can hold : "On moment X during that particular meeting, I was distracted. This was constructive because of Y and Z". This judgement is then open for investigation by the other participants who of course have their own opinions about the claims of the example-giver.. For example, somebody can doubt that, given the facts of the story, the example-giver was distracted - perhaps he was just concentrating on other things, etc. Such judgements are all carefully investigated on an individual basis

The main 'secret' of a Socratic dialogue is that, in engaging thoroughly into the investigation, sooner or later you can experience and investigate the very subject you are talking about in your own behaviour here and now. For example, in Plato's written dialogue entitled *Laches*, when Socrates' interlocutors are dealing with the question 'What is courage?', they cannot conclude the conversation before they have answered the question how courageous it is to ask this question or to engage in a conversation as they do. The effect is that ones no longer looks for the answer somewhere 'outside' but comes a little closer to self-knowledge. In the example above of the dialogue about distraction, participants will of course be distracted from time to time. And the question if these are constructive moments and why so can be answered immediately. In a Socratic dialogue I recently facilitated, participants wanted to think about the question "Should you tolerate nonsense?" When talking about it and listening to themselves and to others, they had to ask themselves several times if they were listening to nonsense here and now and if so, why they were tolerating it. This experience significantly deepened and intensified the dialogue .

What is the role of the facilitator?

I personally hold to three rules in Socratic dialogue :

1. Say what you want to say, also about the conversation as such, at any moment you think it is suitable
2. Be concrete
3. Try to establish a common enterprise

The interventions of the facilitator can basically be legitimised according to these three rules. He (or she) more specifically embodies these three rules. His role according to the tradition is anti-authoritarian. In many contemporary approaches to the practice of dialogue, the fact that the facilitator can never be merely a benign or neutral presence is recognised; in the more traditionally Socratic approach, it is generally considered that he does not direct or intervene in the content of the dialogue (although directing and intervening is what Plato's Socrates does so well!) . He doesn't offer his own opinions in matters of content , not even when

participants ask him to do so. Instead, he does everything he can to *intensify* the philosophical investigation the participants themselves are engaged with. This ambivalent role of stimulating the courage of the participants to investigate the question while respecting the independence of the participants is very typical. For example, from time to time, the facilitator can help to establish mutual understanding by asking participants to repeat, or summarise what has been said. But his main activity is asking questions and remaining silent. His attitude is ironical. This ‘passionate distance’ allows him both to stay very alert and attentive and to grant the responsibility of what is being said and done fully to the participants.

What are the ‘results’ of a SD?

The aims of a Socratic dialogue vary according to the time and the energy spent. Some minimal aims you can reach in a workshop of a few hours are the following :

1. you get a feeling of thinking in questions instead of answers
2. you experience what it means to think thoroughly together about a certain common issue
3. you listen carefully to what is being said and look for understanding
4. you are attentive to everything that happens
5. you practice formulating correctly complex and vague feelings or thoughts
6. you discover aspects of you own conversational attitude (impulses, monologues, ...)
7. you become more uncomfortable making abstract statements that don’t make anything clear for anybody
8. you acquire a feeling for investigation (inclusive patience, concentration, being alert etc.)
9. you experience differences in points of view and learn how to deal with them whilst concentrating on the agreed topic.
10. you can see alternative interpretations of the concepts you use yourself

Of course most results are not obtained at the end of the dialogue but in the process itself, in doing the hard work. The result can therefore not be reduced to ‘the answer’ to the chosen question. There is never a definite answer at the end of a SD. A SD is first of all a conversation in which participants try to have a dialogue together. While the possibility and necessity of dialogue is increasingly called upon today, actually engaging in dialogue with one another is very difficult and often unpleasant. A dialogue differs in several respects from a discussion :

Discussion (means ‘shaking out’)	Dialogue (means ‘knowing through’)
Rhetoric	Dialectic
Aimed at decisions and actions	Aimed at insight in the value of judgements
Judging	Suspending judgements
Attacking and defending	investigating and checking

Going for your own right	wanting to know the truth
Convincing	investigation
Taking a standpoint	listening to yourself and others
Defensive or offensive attitude	attitude of taking the others point of view
Answering	questioning
Speed	Slowness
Individually orientated	community orientated

Of course, any conversation has a bit of both. So does a SD. But the aim is to exercise the art of undertaking a dialogue together. When participants engage in SD more than once, the urge to defend own judgements is replaced slowly by an attitude of constructive doubt and constant investigation. To put it very strongly : my experience is that trained participants in SD are not only better philosophers but also better coaches, employees, citizens.

Is it possible to do a Socratic dialogue at school?

Given that it was developed as an important instrument to renew education , the Socratic method has a long tradition of being used in schools. In basic schools, the practice of Philosophy with Children, founded on the Socratic method and as developed and characterised by Matthew Lipman and others since the 1970s, has spread throughout the world. The introduction in high schools and in secondary schools has been more difficult. There are several reasons for this and much has been written and talked about it in Europe during the last few years. I will only indicate briefly here some advantages and obstacles of introducing SD in a mainstream secondary school.

In European countries such as the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, France, the school curriculum generally contains citizenship education (often from age 5). Mostly, this requires the development of thinking skills, participation and responsibility in civil life, communication skills, etc. The role of philosophy in citizen education has a long tradition that today needs refreshment. In the 1995 World-wide UNESCO document “Philosophy and democracy in the world” (R.Droit eds.), it is argued that philosophy taught in a contemporary, active and creative way, can contribute to the further democratisation of the contemporary nation states. It is not difficult to argue that the Socratic method as a practical way of doing philosophy, can serve citizenship education in schools very well. It teaches pupils to be critical, independent and respectful towards others, thoughtful and nuanced in their judgements. Moreover, a good facilitator can teach them the art (and difficulty) of dialogue and engaging in collective enquiry, a significant aspect of both the development of a mature attitude to private and public life.

However useful the method might be, there are also many obstacles. First, there is the practical organisation. Time and space-setting is not the main problem here: you can use

version of the method that, for example, take less time or are applicable to larger groups etc. Also integrating SD into mainstream subjects such as maths and geography is relatively straightforward. I have used it during language courses, courses of religion or during lunchtime or on a school trip. The 'level' of a dialogue shouldn't be the problem either. After all, it concerns always a question the participants themselves choose. The only possible obstacle you can face doing a dialogue with "less skilled" pupils is possibly the dominance of the verbal expression. But this can be solved by using creative methods, such as storytelling.

A bigger issue that might cause some trouble is the pedagogical approach of the SD. As I have outlined above, the role of the facilitator is quite different from an ordinary teacher. Nelson in his article about the Socratic method in 1922 was very clear (and a little too harsh) about this when he claimed that every teacher that thinks he has something to teach to the pupils is 'dogmatical'. The Socratic method shouldn't be 'taught' but is instead a critical enterprise that is undertaken by the pupils *voluntarily*. It is a critical way of *doing* philosophy instead of just hearing about it. Moreover, in a SD, there is no fixed subject beforehand, no clearly demarcated learning objectives that can be measured, no standard way of evaluation etc. It is clear that the style of 'teaching' in a SD is so different from the typical pedagogical methods in a school that it should be 'introduced' in schools with great care. My suggestion would be to first introduce some introductory aspects of the Socratic method to teachers, preferably already in teacher education, otherwise in initiatives like pedagogical schooling, formation courses or adult education.. It is important further to encourage talented teachers to start a training course in facilitation. These trained facilitators can in their turn introduce dialogues (preferably) separated from other courses to pupils and colleagues who participate voluntarily. In this way I think, the Socratic method can have a meaningful contribution to the renewal of school pedagogy, which many have recognised as important in facing the problems and challenges of this century.

Where can I get further information?

I have been facilitating Socratic dialogues for several years in different styles and variations for organisations in Belgium, Holland and abroad. Together with the Dutch facilitator Hans Bolten, I am leading an annual training course in SD facilitation . If you would like more information or would like to participate in a dialogue yourself, please contact me on the address below.

Some articles about the matter I have written in Dutch and French :

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- *Wilt u gestoord worden?* Met Hans Bolten, in J.Delnoy, W.Van Dalen, het socratisch gesprek, Damon, Best, 2003.
- *L'extraction de la vérité. A propos du dialogue socratique, et Que ne souffre-t-il pas cet enfant dans le froid? Anamnèse et diagnostic lors d'un dialogue socratique*, ensemble avec Hans Bolten, dans Revue belge de médecine dentaire, 57/4, 2002, p.257-292 (also available in Dutch)
- *Horzels op een paard. Het socratisch gesprek in het vormingswerk*, in Vorming, 16 (2001), nr.3, p.159-188.
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