INTE 2014

Socrates on teaching: looking back to move education forward

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Abstract

This paper discusses the myriad of pedagogy enacted and/or discussed by Socrates within Plato’s dialogues. Methodologies including dialectics, elaboration by example, allegories, analogies, imagery, story telling, recollection, and thoughtful inquiry scattered throughout the dialogues. Educators spend time on “the what” of teaching while “the how” to engage, enlighten, and nurture the love of learning and desire to know is often ignored. This paper provides explicit examples of Socrates teaching and connects his pedagogy to present-day instructional strategies that promote relevance and meaning within the context of contemporary teaching and learning.

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Keywords: Pedagogy, Teaching and Learning, dialectics

1. Introduction

Socrates’ teaching methods as well as his thoughts on teaching and learning are dispersed throughout Plato’s texts. In and of themselves the dialogues are philosophically rich and their meaning has been studied, interpreted, and debated for centuries. It is not the intent of this paper to further such discussion but to address the teaching methods Socrates used as well as his views on teaching and learning and their relevance in the on-going present day debates and deliberation on education paying particular attention to the question: what are the best ways to teach? Plato’s use of dialogue, rather than explanation, is a gift that gives us the experience of dialectics. It allows the reader to observe and become a part of the discussion(s). Not only do we see Socrates using dialectics to teach using the method that bears his name but also why it is important. Other teaching methods and strategies are woven throughout the dialogues to promote or nurture insight and understanding through thoughtful inquiry.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Sakarya University

doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.1142
Socrates also gives an account of his encounters with his teacher Diotima. Her use of teaching strategies is looked at in relation to the thoughts and ideas discussed in other dialogues.

Much time is spent within public schools developing and enacting curriculum while little time is spent on the pedagogical aspect involving the art of teaching. Teachers are telling students what they need to know and textbooks are being read that lead students to answer literal questions asked at the end of each chapter. Thus much time is spent on rote learning with little time spent regarding the understanding that comes from making connections, reasoning, constructing meaning and nurturing thinking. Most public schools and/or school systems have curriculum specialists but not specialists in pedagogy or ways of teaching and learning. The “what” of what needs to be known and support for content is available while the “how” to engage, empower, enlighten, and nurture the love of learning and desire to know is often missing, lost, or has been stolen from the learning experience. Within the United States national and state legislation has led to hyper-accountability and exacerbated the technocratic practice of drill and practice through massive testing and teacher evaluations based on student test results. Socratic pedagogy encourages the love of learning and the desire to know and is thus worthy of our looking at for advice and wisdom.

2. Conceptual Framework

This research investigation is a pedagogical content analysis of the ancient primary source texts of Plato. The conceptual frame for the study was to uncover Socrates teaching methods and learning strategies as presented by Plato. Particular attention was given to the works where the focus of the dialogue is between Socrates and students rather than his discussions with peers. Within the study dialectics the technique of question and answer and the definition of dialectics was examined. This led to the uncovering of various teaching methods and strategies strategically woven into the dialogues to promote understanding, further inquiry, and clarity. The means and methods of teaching that nurture learning and curiosity were identified. Attention was also paid regarding present-day ideas and ideals regarding learning such as student empowerment, the enactment of constructivist theory and student engagement.

3. Findings and Discussion

An analysis of Socrates’ use of various teaching methods and approaches goes from multiple examples exhibiting themselves in any number of texts to specific examples deeply and richly used but once. As one would assume, dialectics was found to be the dominant teaching methodology within the dialogues while other methods and teaching strategies were woven within to promote understanding. Dialectics is also defined and its rationale given by Socrates. Another teaching strategy that occurred multiple times was elaboration by example. Vivid images imbedded within analogies are another strategy often used to make connections, provide clarity, construct knowledge and again promote understanding. The dominants use of metaphor is found in Theaetetus (Plato, trans. Jowett) when Socrates likened himself to a midwife. The richly detailed allegory of the cave found in Book VII of Plato’s Republic (trans. Bloom. 1968) is also vivid imagery. The idea of recollection as it relates dialectics is worth noting. Also worth noting in a discussion on Socrates regarding teaching and learning is his teacher and her teaching methods.

Given that dialectics is the central teaching method with other methods lending support it is appropriate to lead off the discussion of dialectics and its merits with the metaphor that brings understanding to the method. Socrates refers to himself as a midwife of the soul assisting in the birth of ideas within the text of the Theaetetus (Plato, trans. Jowett. 1952). Socrates’ description of the role and work of the midwife goes beyond present-day understanding of the term and thus an elaboration of what she (the midwife) does, brings more meaning and understanding to the method and enriches our understanding of dialectics. Theaetetus tells Socrates that he struggles to answer questions that he has heard Socrates ask. Socrates answers that they are “pangs of labor…something within you which you are bringing to the birth (148e)” and that he can and will assist in their delivery. He further states that not only do midwives assist in labor, they are also past childbearing age but are not barren “because human nature cannot know the mystery of an art without experience (149c).” The importance of experience as the way of knowing is expressed here. The importance of experience as a learning theory has been articulated, discussed and encouraged by distinguished education scholars John Dewey (1938) and Paulo Freire (1970). Yet experiential learning it is rarely mentioned in the debates among legislators and education today.
Socrates goes on to say that the midwife has the potions, skills and knowledge to make difficult labor easy as well as if need be cause a miscarriage in the early stages of the pregnancy. She is also said to be a skilled matchmaker with the knowledge to know a good union to produce good offspring. He refers to himself as a midwife of the soul assisting in the birthing and examination of ideas. He expounds on the commonalities and contrasts between the two types of birthing experiences and the need for the midwife/teacher to assist students to bring forth worthy ideas and to rid themselves of phantom ones. The dialogue continues with Theaetetus stating that knowledge is perception and Socrates responds: “And now, let us examine together this conception of yours, and see whether it is a true birth or a mere, wind-egg (Plato, trans. Jowett, 1952. 151e).” The subsequent discussion between Theaetetus and Socrates enacts the analogy as they discuss the nature of knowledge in which their conceptions of knowledge become phantoms. Socrates and Theaetetus come to consensus and agree that perception is not knowledge, as Theaetetus first thought. The dialogue ends with the need to continue the search to understand the nature of knowledge. Socrates’ analogy and the subsequent enactment provide the reader with the “what” and “why” of the method in action. The use of metaphor as teaching tool or method helps to build and construct meaning by bridging what is not known or understood with that that is known and understood. Today this approach is referred to as Constructivist theory and again is rarely mentioned in present day debates on teaching and learning. The use and misuse of dialectics in teaching and learning is found in Philebus (Plato, trans. Jowett, 1952). Timing is important to ensure learning and the teacher must incorporate the necessary steps to ensure understanding has taken place.

…This, as I was saying, is the way of considering and learning and teaching one another, which the gods have handed down to us. But the wise men of our time are either too quick or too slow in conceiving plurality in unity. Having no method, they make their one and many anyhow, and from unity pass at once to infinity; the intermediate steps never occur to them. And this, I repeat, is what makes the difference between the mere art of disputation and true dialectic (16e-17a).

This statement addressed the fact that dialectics, according to Socrates, is not about arguing, debating or disagreeing. Dialectics is a teaching tool enacted through discussion with reasoning as the means for coming to: an understanding, or a discovery, or the realization that what one thought one knew or believed to be true after deliberation is seen as not true. It is a method of constructing or deconstructing knowledge and understanding. When deliberating on when and how to educate the citizens within the design of the ideal city (Plato, trans. Bloom, 1968) Socrates states “… We have set dialectic above all other studies to be as it were the coping-stone (top) – and that no other higher kind of study could rightly be placed above it…(534e).”

When disputes within the dialogues take place it is important to note that Socrates is speaking with people who purport to know something while Socrates doubts their knowing. This is evident during the discussions Socrates has with Meno and Protagoras in their respective dialogues. When he questions them they appear to care more about winning the argument and proving their point than seeking truth or understanding. On the other hand when Socrates discusses ideas with the youth of Athens they appear to be more willing to question and be led than the adults he speaks to. One might call it manipulation or see it as nurturing thinking, constructing knowledge and/or guided inquiry that will empower the student. An example of this is found in Socrates’ conversation with the boy in Meno (Plato, trans Guthrie, 1989). This also serves as an explanation of Socrates’ belief that knowledge is within us and only needs guidance to be recollected. Socrates argues that we have this knowledge from prior lives but have forgotten it. He demonstrates this to Meno within the context of a geometry lesson. Socrates questions a boy servant on how to double the size of a square. First the student thinks he knows then discovers that he does not know becoming perplexed but still curious. The two, teacher and student, continue the pursuit by Socrates guiding and not telling the youth the information. It is the bringing out of knowledge not the pouring in which Socrates terms recollection. Learning is achieved through questioning as opposed to didactic instruction. Socrates sets dialectics above all other studies (Republic. trans. Bloom, 1968). Within the dialogue Lysis (trans. Wright, 1961) the student becomes the teacher when Socrates asks him to remember and repeat what he learned to his friend. Socrates’ often recaps or reviews midway or at the end of a dialogue as a means to establish clarity and ensure student understanding.

It is also important to note that within The Symposium (trans. Joyce, 1989) Socrates speaks “…of some lessons he was given…by a Mantinea woman called Diotima – a woman who was deeply versed in this (love) and many other fields of knowledge (201d).” He not only speaks of her as his teacher but also credits her with the method that bears his name within the Joyce translation of the Symposium “…I think the easiest way will be to adopt Diotima's own method of inquiry by question and answer (201d).” When it is Socrates’ turn to speak he
recollects his time spent with her in dialogue speaking both her and his parts. They discuss or study a number of
the ideas, which reoccur in other dialogues when he is questioning the youth of Athens. She explains recollection as
the coming and going of knowledge. She guides Socrates to an understanding of “right” opinion, the mean between
wisdom and ignorance. She uses a myth of Eros to bring a visual imagery of the mean. The dialogue is on love and
together they explore the greater and lesser mysteries of love, which embraces and enacts the love of wisdom. The
history of Western education would look quite different had Diotima been given the credit and status for influencing
Socrates’ thinking and his teaching. She would be seen as an historical figure as opposed to her near invisibility
brought on by the masculine-centric scholarship of male classicists (George, L., 2007).

Socrates used common everyday situations and images to promote understanding and construct meaning
through the use of analogies. To explain that knowledge must be more than perception he has Theatetus imagine the
human mind as a block of wax and when images come into our mind the perceptions are imprinted. How long the
perception last depends on the density and consistency of the wax. Once the imprint is rubbed the image is
forgotten and needs to be reminded in order for it to imprint again. When Socrates asks Meno (Plato, trans. Jowett)
what virtue is Meno’s response is a list of virtues. Socrates asks him to define the nature of virtue, that which all
virtues have in common rather than merely listing the virtues. When Meno continues to reiterate the many instead
of the one Socrates likens what he is looking for to a swarm of bees. Bees are different but each has the essence or
nature that gives them the name bee. He uses the image of smashing a plate into many pieces and explains that each
piece is still a part of the plate. Socrates advocates the use of analogies and visual images when teaching. Within
the Republic (Plato, trans. Bloom, 1968) he says: “…listen to the image so you may see still more how greedy I am
for images (488a). Socrates uses the phrase by example or an example no less than 30 times within four dialogues
where the preponderance of text s between a student and himself (Theatetus, Meno, Lysis and Phaedrus). Examples
are given when asked to clarify a thought or further elaborate on a point.

The classic use of allegory, within Plato’s texts, as the means for teaching is found within Book VII of
Plato’s Republic (trans. Bloom, 1968). Socrates tells a story using visual images as the means to clarify and
promote understanding. It is extremely vivid and active as can be witnessed by the hundreds of drawings and
dozens of YouTube interpretations posted on the Internet. The allegory is an approach that builds understanding
using prior knowledge reflects the teaching strategy referred to as scaffolding (giving support to the learner as
knowledge or understanding is under construction). It is learner-centered in that it employs a variety of approaches
to enact learning. Not only do we see the use of allegory as a teaching method but also gain insight into Socrates’
interpretation of the problems of an education that lacks understanding, relevance and active engagement.
Preceding the allegory Socrates says “…make an image of our nature in its education and want of education,
likening it to a condition of the following kind. (514a trans Bloom).”

The allegory begins with the image of a dark cave where prisoners are in chains and cannot move.
Shadows of images are reflected off the wall from the light of a fire behind them. Due to an echo the naming of
images, for the prisoners to learn, are not correct. When one is freed and emerges into the light from the darkness of
the cave he at first cannot see. He initially sees only shadows and images reflected in water but in time the true
images are seen. When he returns to the cave going from light to dark he stumbles and when he tells of what he has
seen and experienced and tells that what they know is not true he is put to death. Following the allegory Socrates
equates it to the previous discussion; “…the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and
you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual
world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed whether rightly or wrongly…(517b)

Much has been written and said about this allegory; interpretations from learned philosophers abound. One
may assume that from an educator’ perspective learning within the cave is through rote memorization and even that
is once removed from truth due to the echo. Socrates concludes this portion of the discussion with an interesting
statement that suggests he was speaking to or disagreeing with John Locke who wrote in the 1600s in his Essay
Concerning Human Understanding that we are born as a blank but receptive slate. More recent behaviorist theory
holds that as blank slates knowledge needs to be poured into us. As Socrates put it “…then, if I am right, certain
professors of education must be wrong when they say that they can put a knowledge into the soul which was not

Conclusion

Reading the dialogues through the lens of an educator rather than a philosopher, paying particular attention
to the relationship between teacher and student brought forth several insights and a renewed sense of the importance of Socrates' teaching methods and strategies. The abundance of images as a way to construct meaning and nurture inquiry was quite overpowering and reinforced the importance of using multiple approaches when teaching to promote and insure understanding. This study supports the use of questioning as a necessary method for educators to enable, empower, and guide student learning. It also brings into consideration the need for educators to take the necessary time to think and question ideas to promote understanding and practice thinking. Teaching that promotes a love of learning and a desire to know goes beyond the pouring in of knowledge that comes from just lecturing and/or repetitive drill and practice. Socrates has much to say on how to engage, empower and enlighten students. Great teachers don’t just know the content of the subject(s) they teach but also know how to make learning meaningful and relevant. Great teachers engage, make the uninterested curious, change the minds of those who think they know but don’t, and take the time to enable understanding. Wisdom comes through understanding, an understanding that brings relevance and meaning, leading not only to remembering but also providing the building block for further and deeper learning. Socrates is said to have been a great teacher and looking to his work to uncover his thoughts, ideas and practices provides us with an opportunity to enact experiences that lead to more powerful and successful outcomes for all students.

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