

# Questioning the Answers

## Teachers Turning to Age-Old Socratic Method to Help Hone Critical Thinking Skills

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**A**my Kelly's students can't get away with silence in her class. They can't get away with having no opinions. And they certainly can't get away from her relentless questioning—her whys and her hows.

"What is the purpose of government?" she recently asked her eighth-graders at Rachel Carson Middle School in Fairfax County.

"To create or keep order for those living in a country or state," answered K.C. O'Malley, 14.

Call Kelly a modern-day Socrates.

It has been more than 2,000 years since the ancient Greek philosopher lived, but teachers to this day are trying to incorporate aspects of the Socratic method with students as early as the primary grades. The result? Teachers are talking less and listening more.

Already a hallmark of law school teaching, Socrates' method of asking people questions to get them to talk their way to an understanding of some deep concept has in recent decades gained a following among teachers of younger students. It has found a place even in subjects, such as math, that traditionally don't lend themselves to much talking.

Schools want to prepare students to think for themselves, to answer complex questions about why things are: in short, to think critically—the tool they need to perform well on some standardized tests. So sticking solely to the traditional didactic method, or the lecture format, just isn't cutting it anymore, some teachers say.

So it raises the question: What is the Socratic method?

The answer, philosophers and teachers say, is not all that clear.

Over the years, the Socratic method has evolved into a generic term to describe the process by which teachers ask students open-ended questions to spark discussions, often with the use of a text. But its modern-day incarnation is not what it was circa 400 B.C.

This was Socrates' way of doing things: He sought common people out for interrogations that ultimately helped them understand concepts such as justice and virtue. But the process, frankly, was often brutal. His unforgiving line of questioning usually left the person puzzled, having to admit that his or her original belief was, well, wrong. In some ways, Socrates set out to show their ignorance for their own good.

"Socrates was fairly confrontational in the questions he asked," said John Rossi, associate professor in the teacher education division of Virginia Commonwealth University. "That can be intimidating to a 15-year-old."



It's hardly the kind of atmosphere fitting for a school. Few teachers use the true form of the Socratic method to teach their courses, not even in law schools, where the technique is most prevalent. The sheer size of classes makes it difficult to have the type of one-on-one discussions Socrates had. And few teachers have the time it takes to prepare for such an intense format.

"If you simply take Plato's dialogues and look at it that way, where essentially all teaching is done by interrogating other people about whether they think they know what justice is or something of that sort, I'm not aware of anyone who has taught an entire course like that," said Peter Singer, a bioethics professor at Princeton University.

Susan Vogel-Hudgins uses a kinder, gentler variation on Socrates' method.

"I'm teaching them more humanity than academics," she said one day as her students waited in her room before class began at Northwestern High School in Hyattsville.

Her seminar, which draws on the example of the Socratic method, "forces kids to think," she said.

Thinking is what U.S. students are often accused of not doing. She said she hears it all the time. America's students don't think deep thoughts. They can't articulate their opinions. They have no opinions.

But there are plenty of opinions in her Advanced Placement psychology class. On a recent day, the students arranged 27 chairs into a circle so they could see each other's faces—a must for the discussion.

She sets a few simple ground rules. Read the text carefully. Listen to each other, and don't interrupt. Raise your hand only if you can't hear the speaker.

For five minutes, there was silence as the students read "On Being Abused by Others," in which the Buddha argues that people should do good to those who harm them. As he speaks, a man hits him, and the Buddha does not fight back.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to open with a question, and remember the rules of the discussion," Vogel-Hudgins said. "When is it important to walk away? When would it be important to not retaliate and walk away?"

Then came an avalanche of responses, with the discussion turning into an examination of love and hate.

"It's hard to walk away, just like it's hard to forgive," said Mi-Mi Gebretsadik, 18. "Personally, it's easier to hate than to love."

"To love someone is to work at it," said Eduardo Coney, 18. "People don't like to work at it because they're lazy. You know what I'm saying?"

In recent decades, several educators have come up with their own variations on Socratic teaching.

Howard Zeiderman, a professor at St. John's College in Annapolis, co-founded the nonprofit Touchstones, which he describes as a "redistribution of power. Who is the legitimate speaker? In most of these programs, the legitimacy is located pretty much with the teacher."

Then there's the Paideia program, created by philosopher Mortimer J. Adler, which mixed lecturing and coaching with a Socratic-type seminar.

Twenty years later, the North Carolina-based National Paideia Center has trained teachers in at least a dozen states. Director Terry Roberts encourages teachers to speak no more than 30 percent of the class time.

"What a lot of teachers do is lecture and practice class management by being the one to talk all the time," he said.

Kelly was more than willing to let her students do most of the talking Friday. "If a government is ineffective, what should be done?" she asked.

Bethany Morris, 14, had this to offer: "If it's really, really ineffective, you overthrow it."

"There's a difference between ineffective and intolerable," said David Lewis, 13.

One student brought up Nazi Germany as an example. "I don't think anyone thinks mass killing is right," David said. "If it involves people dying, we should do something about it."

Staff writer Valerie Strauss contributed to this report.

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