

Running head: DIALOGUE AS TEACHING: SOCRATES LIVES

Socrates Lives:
Dialogue as a Means of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to argue for the ongoing use of dialogue as a modern pedagogical and andragogical method. The author reviewed 18 scholarly sources from three education databases in this literature review. The use of dialogue as mode of instruction dates from the Socratic Method of 399 B.C.E. to present uses. The literature reveals current studies of successful use in math, ESL, business, law, and teacher preparation instruction. Also, the dialogue as avenue into reflective self-learning appears prominently in modern practice. Multimedia, computer, and online dialogue methods also show good results in several well designed models. The author concludes that dialogue in different forms remains an effective method of instruction in wide applications. The research revealed several improvements and new applications for dialogue as method of education from Socrates in ancient Greece to public elementary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions in 2009.

KEYWORDS: Dialogue, Socrates, Socratic Method, Andragogy

Dialogue as a Means to Teaching and Learning: Socrates Lives

In 399 B.C., The Greek philosopher Socrates drank poison hemlock upon conviction of corrupting the youth and interfering with the religion of Athens. Though he was the son of an artist and a well known citizen, his teachings and methods were more disdained than appreciated by the powerful of his day. Socrates taught his students to question anything and everything through dialogue. This method of dialogue as a means to teaching and learning thrives more than two millennia later. The Socratic Method has evolved into many new methods with new names, but all tracing back to the democratic Greek city-state, and its most famous philosopher.

The Socratic Method

In a celebrated dialogue with a boy named Meno, Socrates leads the youth through a series of questions about virtue. At first, the boy claims to know the true essence of virtue. Through questioning, however, Socrates awakens Meno to the realization that neither the boy nor the man truly know what virtue is. The boy then asserts that since neither the student nor the teacher knows the true meaning of virtue, there would be no point in discussing virtue. Socrates then continues the dialogue to convince the boy that the inquiry alone is a worthy exercise for mind and soul (Plato, trans. 1976). Indeed, still today, inquiry through dialogue is healthy for the mind, the soul, and the society.

Critical Thinking

Wasim (2007) emphasizes the benefit of encouraging undergraduate students to develop their analytical and critical thinking skills through dialectical approach of dialogue with colleagues. Students can test their thoughts, ideas, hypotheses, beliefs and conclusions in

discussion with peers. This testing through dialogue develops more knowledgeable and more skillful students (Wasim).

Math Instruction

Through dialogue with leading questions and illustrations, Cohen (1962), developed a program of questions leading to a series of correct answers to ultimately solve a geometry problem. Although the method was not perfect, as Thomas (1963) criticized it the next year, the program demonstrated that the Socratic Method yielded measurable results in math instruction with undergraduate college students.

ESL Instruction

University students in Japan reported four key benefits from instructors using a dialogical class-specific series of questionnaires to guide the future of the course (Davies, 2006). These students found their courses to be more coherent and more responsive to the individual learner as well as having better selection of materials, and better development of the teacher than courses without questionnaires.

Law School

Use of dialogue and questioning leading to understanding is a common method of instruction in law schools around the United States of America. It has its limits, though, as Rhode criticizes (2001). When practiced in a large class format, the high pressure of engaging a law professor often discourages minorities and women to participate. On the other hand, those who are brave enough to enter the fray can gain oral fluency, confidence, and practice interacting on an impromptu basis (Rhode).

Business School

Accounting students in Taiwan showed significantly better attitudes toward learning accounting in a class with the dialogue associated with cooperative learning than their peers showed in a class based on more traditional lecture mode (Cheng & Chen, 2006). The technical college students who worked cooperatively with other students also showed a much more favorable attitude to the general field of accounting at the end of the course than their counterparts in the traditional lecture class (Cheng & Chen).

*Dialogue to Promote Reflective Learning**Critical Dialogue*

Marchel (2007) urges pre-service K-12 teachers to invite the collective inquiry of colleagues in critical dialogue about daily teaching incidents. Such dialogue with peers assists participants to transcend personal bias and presumptions of privilege (Marchel). Similarly, California encourages peer review as part of its formal evaluation process of credentialed teachers (Stull Bill, 1999).

Teaching Circles

Another avenue for dialogue amongst higher education peers is the teaching circle. These small groups of educators meet regularly to discuss the art and methods of teaching as well as practical matters and issues that arise on a frequent basis (Blackwell, Channel, & Williams, 2001). Typically, the employing education institution provides initial training and ongoing support of management, but the circle members create their own agenda and facilitate their own meeting. Mezeske (2006), however, described an even more informal process initiated from the bottom up to develop the dialogue of a teaching circle. In her example, the circle began

with one professor inviting others to read a book together; Mezeske also recommended serving food at the circle meetings.

Action Learning Sets

The action learning set originated in the coal industry in the 1940s as a means of solving specific business problems (Revans, 1982). Higher education administration later adopted action learning and formed action learning sets of managers who share common goals and meet for a concentrated period of time on specific issues (Sanderson, Clewes, & Hand, 1998). The action learning set focuses dialogue with each individual in the set to support her or his future action on a project, initiative, or issue (McGill & Beaty 1995).

Interactive Multimedia

Educators have long used the chalkboard, overhead projector, filmstrips, audio recordings, films, and video recordings to supplement lecturing. The computer has been on campus since the 1950s and has become more and more prominent ever since. Some higher education programs offer accredited distance learning for entire degree programs. Non-verbal learning resources such as pictures, video, and sound on computer or other media increase comprehension, retention, and generalization (Moreno & Mayer, (2007). When students interact with multimedia in a dialogue or reflection on the materials or their performance, students can achieve deeper learning even from a dialogue with a computer (Azevedo, 2005). Reentry adult undergraduate online business students showed marked increases in achievement directly related to increased dialogue with peers through discussion boards and e-mail (Brewer, 2004).

Discussion

Dialogue is an effective method of teaching and learning for adults when used appropriately and selectively. From Socrates to critical dialogue and teaching circles, the exchange of ideas is an essential part of teaching and learning. Dialogue, however, is neither the ultimate nor the only method of leading the adult learner to knowledge, truth, reflection, or competence. As with other modes, methods, and techniques, dialogue should accompany other methods and modes such as reading, writing, direct instruction, rote memorization, and graphic organization for best results.

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