



The Socratic Dialogue and the Three Roles of Socrates

Follow the guidelines below to implement this method in your classroom



Description of the Socratic Dialogue

The Socratic dialogue is a teaching method rooted in inquiry-based learning and philosophical discourse. It diverges from traditional teaching by fostering a dynamic exchange of ideas through probing questions, promoting critical thinking and self-reflection. Participants explore fundamental beliefs and values, driving intellectual growth and personal development.

Central to this method is the Socratic attitude, which encourages questioning and emphasizes not-knowing, cultivating careful argumentation, active listening, and understanding among participants. The facilitator (educator), embodying roles (see Implementation in the Classroom) such as a midwife (maieutics or midwifery), ensures philosophical conversation, clarifies concepts, and maintains neutrality, empowering participants (learners) to form their own judgments.

The dialogue aims to be more than a mere exchange of viewpoints; it aspires to be a collective exploration, where mutual understanding is cultivated through shared focus and a willingness to engage in philosophical inquiry. This approach nurtures autonomy and freedom of thought, enabling both independent thinking and communal dialogue.

What will you need

Practical organization

Groups: Class group split into smaller groups (approximately 8 to 12 participants in a group)

Materials: Safe learning environment, in the classroom, outdoors, ... (see Tips and Tricks)

Duration: Depending on the topic of discussion, between 45 to 60 minutes.

Implementation in the Classroom

- 1. Preparation:** Select a thought-provoking topic or moral dilemma relevant to the curriculum. Encourage students to explore different perspectives and articulate their opinions.
- 2. Introduction:** Introduce the topic and establish conversational guidelines. Emphasize the importance of active listening, respectful discourse, and critical inquiry.
- 3. Questioning:** Initiate the dialogue by posing open-ended questions that challenge students' assumptions and provoke deeper reflection. Encourage students to ask questions of their own and engage in peer-to-peer interaction.
- 4. Facilitation (*):** Act as a facilitator, guiding the discussion while allowing students to drive the conversation. Provide support and encouragement as students struggle with complex ideas.

- 5. Reflection:** Conclude the dialogue with a reflection period where students assess their learning and identify areas for further exploration. Encourage self-reflection and critical evaluation of one's beliefs and values.

The Three Rules of Socrates

Facilitation (*) Implementing the Socratic dialogue in the classroom requires embodying 3 roles. In the Socratic method, Socrates often played different roles during dialogues, each serving a distinct purpose in the pursuit of truth and knowledge. These roles are metaphorically represented as the hornet, the midwife, and the sculptor.

- 1. The Hornet:** In this role, Socrates acts as a provocateur, stinging others out of complacency and ignorance. Like a hornet, he agitates and challenges individuals to question their assumptions, beliefs, and values. Socrates' probing questions serve to unsettle the comfortable certainties of his interlocutors, inciting intellectual discomfort that motivates them to reevaluate their ideas and seek deeper understanding. The hornet role embodies Socrates' commitment to intellectual inquiry and his relentless pursuit of truth, even if it means disrupting conventional wisdom and confronting societal norms.
- 2. The Midwife:** Socrates also assumes the role of a midwife, assisting others in the birthing of their ideas and insights. Similar to how a midwife facilitates the delivery of a baby, Socrates aids his conversation partners in giving birth to their latent knowledge and understanding. Rather than imposing his own beliefs, Socrates helps individuals articulate and clarify their thoughts through a process of questioning and reflection. Like a midwife guiding a mother through labor, Socrates nurtures intellectual growth by fostering self-discovery and critical thinking in his dialogue partners.
- 3. The Sculptor:** As the sculptor, Socrates molds and shapes the intellectual development of his interlocutors. Like a skilled artisan sculpting a block of marble into a refined masterpiece, Socrates guides individuals in refining their ideas and refining their understanding of truth and virtue. Through a dialectical process of inquiry and discussion, Socrates encourages his conversation partners to cut away falsehoods and inconsistencies, sculpting their intellects into more coherent and enlightened forms. The sculptor role embodies Socrates' role as a mentor and facilitator of intellectual growth, shaping the minds of his students through rigorous philosophical inquiry and dialogue.

- These three roles illustrate Socrates' multifaceted approach to teaching and learning, emphasizing the importance of critical questioning, self-discovery, and intellectual development in the pursuit of wisdom.

Tips & Tricks

- **Formation of groups:** It is recommended to aim for groups of approximately 8 to 12 participants. This size provides a balance between sufficient diversity in perspectives and enough space for each participant to actively engage in the dialogue. A group that is too large may lead to overwhelm and hinder effective interaction, while a group that is too small may not offer enough diverse viewpoints for a fruitful discussion.
- **Materials:** To conduct a Socratic dialogue in the classroom, you can make use of the following materials.
 1. **Reading Materials:** Select readings or texts that serve as the basis for the discussion. These texts should be thought-provoking and relevant to the curriculum or the students' interests.
 2. **Writing Utensils:** Provide pens, pencils, or other writing utensils for students to take notes during the discussion or to write down key points.
 3. **Discussion Space:** Arrange the classroom in a way that facilitates dialogue. This could include moving desks/chairs into a circle or semi-circle to encourage face-to-face interaction.
 4. **Facilitator Guide:** The teacher or facilitator should have a plan or guide for conducting the dialogue. This could include a list of questions to prompt discussion, guidelines for participation, and strategies for managing the conversation.
 5. **Timer or Clock:** Keep track of time to ensure that the discussion stays within the allocated timeframe. This helps maintain focus and ensures that all topics can be adequately covered.
 6. **Optional Visual Aids:** Depending on the topic, you may use visual aids such as charts, diagrams, or multimedia presentations to enhance understanding and stimulate discussion.

- 7. Reflection Materials:** After the dialogue, provide students with opportunities to reflect on their learning and contributions. This could include journal prompts, reflection worksheets, or group discussions.
- **Environment:** The Socratic dialogue is not confined to the classroom; it can take place in various settings. Conducting a Socratic dialogue in a natural environment can inspire reflection and creativity, fostering deeper engagement with the topics under discussion and a connection to the world around us.
 - **Attention:** Ensure learners are paying attention, inform them that you may ask them to share with the whole class what their duo-partner just shared in the pairing phase.
 - **Guidelines for participation and strategies for the facilitator:**
 1. **Establish Ground Rules:** Set clear guidelines for participation at the beginning of the discussion. Emphasize the importance of active listening, respectful communication, and the willingness to engage with diverse viewpoints.
 2. **Encourage Openness:** Create an environment where students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions without fear of judgment. Encourage them to be open-minded and willing to consider alternative perspectives.
 3. **Promote Critical Thinking:** Encourage students to question assumptions, challenge ideas, and provide evidence to support their arguments. Emphasize the importance of critical thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and inference.
 4. **Use Open-Ended Questions:** Frame questions in a way that encourages thoughtful discussion and exploration of ideas. Binary questions and open-ended questions require students to think critically and reflect deeply.
 5. **Manage Speaking Time:** Ensure that all students have an opportunity to participate by managing speaking time effectively. Encourage quieter students to contribute and prevent dominant voices from monopolizing the discussion.
 6. **Embrace Silence:** Be comfortable with silence and allow students time to formulate their responses. Use silence as a tool to foster reflection and deeper thought.
 7. **Facilitate:** Take on the role of a facilitator rather than a traditional teacher. Guide the discussion by asking probing questions but allow students to take ownership of the dialogue and explore ideas independently.

8. **Stay Neutral but not distant:** Maintain neutrality throughout the discussion and avoid imposing your own opinions or biases. Instead, focus on facilitating the exchange of ideas and encouraging students to think for themselves.
9. **Encourage Dialogue, not debate:** Emphasize the importance of dialogue over debate. Encourage students to engage in constructive conversation rather than trying to win arguments. Foster collaboration and mutual understanding among participants.
10. **Reflect on Learning:** At the end of the discussion, facilitate a reflection session where students can share their thoughts and insights. Encourage them to reflect on what they have learned and how their perspectives may have evolved during the dialogue.
11. **Provide Feedback:** Offer constructive feedback to students on their participation in the Socratic dialogue. Recognize their contributions, encourage further engagement, and provide guidance for improvement where needed.



Examples

Referring to:

Learning activity: Democracy decoded: election toolkit

LESSON PACKAGE:

1. Political system – elections (national and European)
 - a. How is it organized?
 - b. How are votes distributed? (could be a recap of previous knowledge)
2. Political parties/views
3. Political programs and topics
4. Voting tests, how to elect?
 - a. Differences
 - b. Meaning
5. Social media and politics
6. Discussion

- **The Socratic Dialogue and the Three Roles of Socrates**

Objectives:

- To critically evaluate various political systems and election processes.
- To understand the distribution of votes, political parties, political programs, and the influence of social media on politics.
- To develop critical thinking, active listening, and self-reflection through a structured Socratic dialogue.

6

Implementation in the Classroom:

1. Preparation:

- The offered learning materials and lesson package (political systems, vote distribution, political parties/views, political programs, voting tests, and the role of social media in politics).
- Encourage students to explore different perspectives and articulate their opinions.

2. Introduction (10 minutes):

- Introduce the format of the Socratic dialogue.
- Establish conversational guidelines emphasizing active listening, respectful discourse, and critical inquiry.

3. Questioning and Facilitation (30-40 minutes):

- **Role of the Hornet:**
 - Start the dialogue by posing provocative questions that challenge students' assumptions about political systems and election processes.
 - **Example Question:** "Why do different countries use different voting systems, and how do these differences impact election outcomes?"

- **Role of the Midwife:**
 - Guide students to articulate and clarify their thoughts through questioning and reflection.
 - Encourage them to explore underlying principles and values behind different political systems.
 - **Example Question:** "What are the core values that each political party represents, and how do they reflect on their political programs?"

- **Role of the Sculptor:**
 - Help students refine their ideas by addressing inconsistencies and deepening their understanding.
 - **Example Question:** "In what ways does social media influence voter behaviour and public opinion during elections?"

- Rotate among these roles to ensure a balanced and thorough exploration of the topic.

4. Reflection (10 minutes):

- Conclude the dialogue with a reflection period where students assess their learning and identify areas for further exploration.
- Encourage self-reflection and critical evaluation of one's beliefs and values.

Example of a Socratic Dialogue:

Teacher (Hornet): "Let's start by discussing the different voting systems used in national and European elections. Why do various countries choose different voting systems, and what are the impacts of these choices on election results?"

Student A: "Some countries use proportional representation to

ensure a fairer distribution of seats among different parties, while others use first-past-the-post to create more stable governance. But doesn't first-past-the-post often lead to smaller parties being underrepresented?"

Teacher (Midwife): "That's a valid observation. Can anyone think of a situation where proportional representation significantly altered the political landscape in a country?"

Student B: "In Germany, for instance, proportional representation has led to a more diverse parliament with multiple parties."

Teacher (Sculptor): "Interesting example. How does this compare to the stability of governance seen in countries with a two-party system like the United States or the United Kingdom?"

Student C: "Countries with two-party systems, like the US, tend to have more stable governments, but they might not represent all political views as effectively."

Teacher (Hornet): "Great points. Now, let's consider the role of social media in elections. How do social media platforms influence voter behavior and election outcomes?"

Student D: "Social media can create echo chambers where people are only exposed to opinions similar to their own, which can skew their perception of the political landscape."

Teacher (Midwife): "Interesting perspective. How have we seen this effect in recent elections? Can anyone provide specific examples?"

Student E: "In the 2016 US presidential election, social media was instrumental in spreading misinformation."

Teacher (Sculptor): "Yes, and what measures can be taken to mitigate the negative impact of social media on elections in the future?"

Student F: "Implementing stricter regulations on social media platforms to control the spread of misinformation could be one way."

Teacher: "Excellent discussion, everyone. Let's reflect on what we've learned today. How has your understanding of political systems and elections deepened through our dialogue?"



This work is licensed under a [CC-BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) | Learning Lines for Teaching Advanced Critical Thinking (2022-2025) | Erasmus+ Project | t-act.eu | Version March 2025