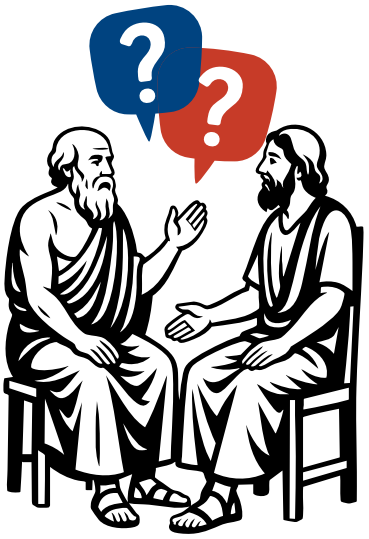
Socratic Questioning

Summary

This method, commonly described as a dialogue between student and teacher, is a discussion tool which promotes critical thinking. It is based on 6 categories of questions which encourage learners to interrogate their own assumptions and to unlearn and reconstruct taken for granted perspectives.

The questioning is not intended to uncover what a learner knows; rather the questions are used to dig deeper into complex issues relating to ethics, morals or justice. Learners need to have built up knowledge and developed views on the issue before carrying out this method.

The method can be done in small discussion groups or it can be an educator-led, whole-class discussion.



Steps

1. Based on the topic under exploration, identify a statement/question to be interrogated: for example, 'Waste is a global justice issue' or 'Why is climate change happening?'
2. For an educator-led approach, display the 6 categories of questions with some examples (see the table below). Lead the discussion by dipping in and out of each category.
3. In small groups, provide learners with the 6 categories and the examples. Decide on an approach; for example, identify 1 'questioner' who keeps posing questions from each category, or divide up the categories among the group members so that the role of questioner changes.
4. Summarise the discussion in bullet points or a mind-map.
5. Tip: Learners may feel uncomfortable or unprepared for the continued questioning. Prepare them for this by creating a respectful and safe environment, emphasising good communication and listening skills and establishing a group contract.

More information

- Video (3.09 mins) on How to do the Socratic Method from TeachLikeThis
- Infographic illustrating the 6 types of Socratic questions
- PDF summarising the 6 types of Socratic Questions
- Explaining the Socratic Questioning Technique, 2 page PDF from Humintell with an example exploring climate change.
- Article discussing the pros and cons of Socratic Questioning: from the Resilient Educator.
- Video (1.46 mins) on Socratic Questioning for Teachers: Gadfly, Stingray, Midwife, Ignoramus.

CATEGORIES OF SOCRATIC QUESTIONS

Here we offer 3 examples for each category. These can be adapted or added to; see the links below for more examples of questions.

SOCRATIC QUESTION TYPE	EXAMPLES
1. Questions for clarification	• Why do you say that? • What do you mean by….? • How does this relate to the question?
2. Questions that challenge assumptions and misconceptions	• How can you verify that? • What would happen if…? • Explain how you arrived at that opinion?
3. Questions that probe reasons and evidence	• What would be an example? • How do you know that? • What evidence supports that?
4. Questions about viewpoints and perspectives	• Are there any alternatives? • What are the other sides of the argument? • How could you add to this viewpoint?
5. Questions that probe implications and consequences	• What are the consequences of…? • How does that affect…? • What generalisations can you make?
6. Questions about the question itself	• What is the point of this question? • What else can we ask? • Why do you think I asked that question?

"The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing"

Socrates *(circa 400-470 BCE), the Greek philosopher from Athens,is credited as the founder of Western philosophy. He was known for his relentless pursuit of knowledge, his willingness to question everything and his claim that the unexamined life is not worth living.*