

**INDIAN AND WESTERN QUESTIONING METHODS: COMPARING SOCRATIC
AND GURUKUL TRADITION OF TEACHING**

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Abstract

“The mind is everything; what you think you become”

Socrates (The Psychology of Fate & of Free Will)

Teaching is one of the noblest professions indeed. It has enjoyed this status across societies, across all time periods. The biggest reason for such uncontested importance of this profession is its direct contact with the young minds and thus with the future of any society. It is also a profession that is responsible for directing the minds of any society to construct the nature of the society. There have been several ways to explain and at the same time to understand the purposes and methods of teaching and all of them have their relevance. This paper is focused on one particular method of teaching: the Socratic method of teaching. It is known by the name of the Greek thinker who devised a method of discussion; rather a method of questioning and counter-questioning a concept or a phenomenon till the reason behind it is fully realized beyond any further doubts. The paper begins with writing about Socrates and his ideas and continues to analyze his ideas about education. In the next part the paper compares a few seemingly similar teaching methods and attempts to clarify the difference. The paper discusses the Socratic method in relation with the Lockean concept of Tabula Rasa. The paper concludes with an attempt to compare this method with the Indian culture of education, which is the Gurukul Pratha or the Gurukul Tradition. In India a teacher (Guru) had to submit completely to the lives of his pupils in order to inculcate dedication in them.

Introduction:

A society is known by the knowledge it keeps or escapes. This is most probably the reason why since ages teaching has been considered one amongst the highly respected professions in every society. It will not be incorrect to say that the relationship of the teacher and taught is richer than that of a mother and her child as the umbilical cord between the minds and thoughts of a teacher and his/her student never breaks, or at least this is how this relationship is ought to be. Socrates has been a famous and popular

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Greek thinker who was in his times known as an eccentric and even a traitor. Because this is how a society without knowledge would treat a thinking mind. He lived from 469 BCE to 399 BCE in Athens, Greece. Sophroniscus was the father of Socrates, who was a sculptor and stone-mason. His mother was Phaenarete, a midwife.¹ Socrates was (in)famous for visiting public places and even brothels to indulge in discussions with ordinary unassuming people. He used to engage people in dissecting small concepts like honor, morality, happiness etc. He believed that it is of utmost importance to know why one is doing what is one doing and then to evaluate if that is worth doing. Socrates says:

'The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being'.

He believed that knowledge is limited to an academy or any institution it exists in every mind. His famous quote expresses it best:

'I cannot teach anybody, I can only make them think'.

Another focus of his ideas was to constantly chasing knowledge and to challenge everything in order to know its relevance. He used to take an individual to a conflicting position of a concept so that it can be dismantled and atomize the complex and blur thoughts. He beautifully writes:

'Sometimes you put walls up, not to keep people out, but to see who cares enough to break them down'.

He also believed that knowledge is just a spark not a fulfilling sentiment.² According to Socrates true knowledge is in doubting oneself, as this is the only route to find true knowledge. Therefore, acknowledging the 'not known' is the plinth of knowledge. His ideas reached their ultimate stage when he witnessed the fall of Athens at the hands of another Greek city state, Sparta. It was heart wrenching for Socrates since for him it was a fall of the intellect of Athens to the physical might of Sparta; which indicated the barrenness of Athenian mind. He spoke against the Athenian democracy and was put behind bars. After a trial he was sentenced to death.

It is worth mentioning here that Socrates never wrote anything. He was so devoted to thinking that he did not even want to limit his thinking to his own writing. But he lived on in the writings of his student, Plato. The devotion of Plato towards his teacher is another aspect which needs special mention in a

¹ "Socrates: His Life and Times". Available at: <http://kendallkpsd401.weebly.com/uploads/4/0/3/7/40379583/socrates.pdf>. Accessed on 14 September 2019.

² For further reading, see: Gustavo Araujo Batista, "Socrates: Philosophy Applied to Education-Search for Virtue". Available at: <https://www.atiner.gr/journals/education/2014-1-X-Y-Batista.pdf>. Visited on 18 September 2019.

paper which is based on teaching, that is, the bond between the teacher and the taught. Not only Plato remained on the path shown by his teacher but he also penned his philosophy. The classic written by Plato, *the Republic*, has Socrates as the main speaker and also in his other great writings like *the Symposium*, *the Apology* and *the Crito*.

Socratic Method of Teaching:

Before we compare the Socratic method of teaching with other methods it is important to understand that this method has a narrower view as well as a broader view. In the narrowest sense the Socratic method is a method of questioning and counter-questioning an idea until no further doubts are left regarding the idea at hand. However, in the background of this activity there is a spectacular range of principles which generally go unnoticed. This must be borne in mind that firstly, this method is based on a casual discussion which is highly serious in nature and only an ignited mind can manage such a method, since the participants are to be directed in a right direction of true reason, without even their realizing this. Another basis of this method is respectful relationship with the students. They need not be ridiculed for being ignorant since Socrates makes it very clear that ‘not knowing is the only knowing’, therefore. The method is highly scientific as it takes only reasonable, provable points as arguments. It is methodically designed so as to direct the questions towards the real answers and thus has more than one set of questions planned, primarily because each student or person would take a different route to the same ultimate answer. Thus, it is very closely focused on each of the students involved.

Similar Modern Approaches in Teaching and Learning:

Socratic method¹ is one of the oldest methods of inculcating a sense of knowledge amongst individuals (not just students). On one hand the modern pedagogy acknowledges this as a fact, while on the other hand has developed similar approaches which are at best a reflection of this method. Faith Lam in the research work titled “The Socratic Method as an Approach to Learning and Its Benefits” clarifies this argument of the authors in the excerpt below:

Since the Socratic dialogues are among the earliest documented instances of learning through inquiry, it is reasonable to argue that what is now known as inquiry-based learning can trace its origin to the Socratic Learning Method. This thesis, however, does not use the two terms

¹ For further details, see: <http://www.notablebiographies.com/Sc-St/Socrates.html>. Accessed on 14 September 2019.

interchangeably: there are no clear rules of how to conduct inquiry-based learning or guidelines to what kind of questions can be asked in the process; the Socratic Learning Method, on the other hand, is more systematic and has four defined component steps that naturally lead to certain types of questions.¹

Another seemingly similar approach is of informal teaching. One of the features of informal teaching is that it exists inside as well as outside the classroom. It is not strictly based on or limited to books and has horizontal design of learning since everyone is a participant and analyses are welcomed from everyone. It appears to be very close to Socrates' approach of teaching, however, this modern and popular method of teaching also falls short of matching the beauty of Socratic method. The latter had informal appearance to it but was highly organized exercise. It was based on cause and effect principles coupled with mystique of ideas.

The Purpose and Stages of Socratic Method

Socrates believed that science is supreme and society can achieve its ideal form only if it is based on pure science or reason. Therefore, he devised a theory of Justice which was based on human anatomy. According to Socrates, there are three cavities in the human body and each of these represents a capability lying in each individual. These cavities are which are placed in an order, all for a purpose. The first cavity is of the skull, which holds brain and the brain represents reason or intellect which is supreme hence placed at top most position. Second cavity is that of the rib cage which has heart which further represents courage or valor; which is definitely another capability of an individual, however, second to intellect. The third cavity is that of diaphragm which has stomach etc. which signifies appetite and lust as a drive in individuals.

Socrates proposes a society in which every one is assigned a role in the society according to his or her capability or aptitude, and such a society would definitely be a just one as the justice is coming from within and not from outside, or merely through law. Also, he says that it is scientific to divide a society into three classes and assign each class a role or profession according to the dominant capability of the three. So he proposes that people with reason as dominant aptitude should be made rulers, he calls his ruler 'the philosopher king'. Those with valor as dominant instinct must be put in the class of soldiers

¹Faith Lam, "The Socratic Method as an Approach to Learning and Its Benefits". Available at: <http://repository.cmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1126&context=hsshonors>. Accessed on 18 September 2019.

and those with appetite are to become the working class, traders etc. as they are driven by natural sense for profit etc.

His ideal society is to be created through a well planned education system which is focused on identifying the real aptitude of every individual. Hence, his class system is not hereditary but based on education.

According to Faith Lam are eliciting relevant preconceptions, clarifying preconceptions, testing one's own hypotheses or encountered propositions, and deciding whether to accept the hypotheses or propositions.¹ Generally it is understood that the first pre-requisite to apply a Socratic method is to have a contradictory context or a concept, which is only partially true to the authors of this paper, because, Socrates' purpose was not only to look for contradictions but to know everything with clarity. According to Christopher M. Ford, in his writing, "Socratic Method in 21st Century" enumerates the following goals of the method:

...Paul Bateman notes the following goals that the method seeks to develop:

- (1) "Attitudes of inquiry that involve an ability to recognize the existence of problems and an acceptance of the general need for evidence in support of what is asserted to be true (2) Knowledge of the nature of valid inferences, abstractions, and generalizations in which the weight or accuracy of different kinds of evidence are logically determined, (3) Skills in employing and applying the above attitude and knowledge. (4) The ability to recognize stated and unstated assumptions, and (5) The ability to draw conclusions validly and to judge the validity of inferences"²

His famous dictum was 'Know thyself' and the only way to do that was to 'know the idea of the good', which further meant the truest sense behind everything which is based on pure reason. And when that is sought contradictions automatically disappear. Centuries later, John Locke in his idea on education mentions a term 'Tabula Rasa'³ where he says that human mind is like a blank tablet and he acquires all knowledge or ideas when he acquires experience.⁴ He appears to be similar to Socrates' ideas on

¹Faith Lam, "The Socratic Method as an Approach to Learning and Its Benefits". Available at: <http://repository.cmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1126&context=hsshonors>. Accessed on 14 September 2019.

² Available at: https://www.usma.edu/cfe/Literature/Ford_08.pdf. Accessed on 15 September 2019.

³"Locke's Concept of Tabula Rasa". Available at: <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~freeman/courses/phil100/10a.%20Locke.pdf>. Accessed on 18 September 2019.

⁴ For further details, see: http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/philosophy/john_locke_tabula_rasa.html.

knowledge, however, John Locke refutes the presumption that everyone has a potential to be knowledgeable and also refutes the presence of universal knowledge.¹ Plato very firmly explains Socrates' theory of education and takes it one step further and says that after acquiring all knowledge the human mind should still be 'Tabula Rasa' as the quest for true knowledge never ends. This might also be understood in a way that knowledge should not pre-suppose itself. And also neither it should impose itself.

Now, if we put this Socratic view to his four stages or steps of it becomes clearer that in this pursuit of knowledge the teacher is also the student or should also be a learner, simply because Tabula Rasa is to be achieved and maintained!

For a teacher this method gives an opportunity to be a learner. A teacher using this method is a part of the discussants and does not stand out as a spectator or pronouncer. Therefore, the teacher has more chances to be better. Secondly, the teacher using this method breaks away from all inhibitions as there is no need to presume anyone to be 'knowing better'. However, there is a twist in this. The teacher only appears to be 'not knowing any better' but he/she is actually directing the whole discussion with of course an open mind to an argument which might be new to him/her also. The teacher has the biggest advantage by using this method and that is that he/she gets connected to the thought process of the pupils which leads to a much stronger relationship, any society would need. Before using the Socratic methods the teacher is required to read and understand to the level that he/ she develops his/her own vision, which is presented to students to invoke arguments and to trigger the questions. The method makes a teacher tolerant and more receptive as during the implementation of this method several views and view-points may appear.

Advantages of the Socratic Method

This method of teaching is beneficial to the students since, the students are introduced to a completely new world of thought process. They are told to believe the strongest person in their lives; themselves! This method opens a door to a student's own mind and encourages them to be thinking citizens. This

Visited on 14 October 2019.

¹ For further details on this aspect, please visit: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/innateness-history/>.
Accessed on 2 April 2019.

also helps in healthier relationship between the teacher and taught as far as triggering of thinking is concerned. The biggest advantage of this method is that it becomes part of their personalities forever.

Institutions can also be benefitted by such method of teaching. The educational institutions in general and in India, in particular are challenged by social questions which are posed by way of deteriorating value systems, lack of empathy amongst members of the society, barrenness of minds shown by degraded actions etc. In such a context the institutions must promote methods like Socratic method so that alongwith the degrees the institution also grants them a quality of thought process which gradually would re-define the society for better. In another way the institutions son not live within the four walls of the classrooms or campus but they live in the minds of their products, their students. An institution promoting rich and free teaching methods like Socratic method would definitely reach the top notch.

The Indian Model/Culture of Education:

India has been known as intellectual capital of ancient times. We have given to the world some fines educational institutions, classic writings and finest thinkers. The Socratic method of teaching reminds the authors of the *Gurukul* culture of Indian tradition, where there was unconditional surrender to the *Guru* just because of his knowledge and experience. Socrates never mentioned any caste or even class basis to impart knowledge/education, which cannot be said entirely about the *Gurukuls* in India. We all have grew up with the example of *Eklavya* and *Guru Drona*, where *Eklavya* despite his capability was rejected by *Guru Drona* as a disciple, in order to favor a prince. The *Gurukuls* had gone one step further than Socrates by *Asharam* practice. Wherein, all pupils used to live with their *Guru* in a small settlement with very primitive life sans luxury. Another added feature of *Gurukul* tradition was that the *Guru* used several other methods to teach his students than just questioning and counter-questioning. For example, they used to put them in practical problems which challenged their values and even reason rather than just discussing in abstract. However, both the classic practices have survived good, bad and ugly societies, therefore, are worthy of respect and adoption.

Gurukul is a residential school, with pupils or *shishya* living near the *guru*, often within the same house. India has been known as the land of *Gurus* and *Gurukuls*. *Gurukuls* were great centres of learning in the ancient India. In the *Gurukul* system of education, students lived in the *kula* (family) of their *Guru* (teacher) and studied the *Vedas* (Sacred Scriptures) and other subjects, such as *Śikshā* (Phonetics),

Vyākaraṇa (Grammar) and Jyotiṣa (Astronomy), and sciences like Arthaśāstra (Economics), Dharmaśāstra (Laws), Śāstravidyā (Art of Warfare), Kalā (Fine Arts) etc. under his guidance for a minimum period of 9 to 12 years. Dr. A.S. Altekar says, “The Gurukul system which necessitated the stay of the student away from his home at the home of the teacher or in boarding house of established reputation, was one of the most important features of ancient Indian education.” The Guru identified the capability of his students and accordingly imparted knowledge. So, unlike Socratic method the Indian approach to teach was adapted as per each student.

The students learnt everything amidst the natural surroundings of the kula or āshram, in open air, in close contact with nature. The Gurukul System of Education was dedicated to the highest ideals of ‘all-round human development’, namely, physical (practical), mental (intellectual) and spiritual (religious), leading to God-realization (Brahmasākshātkāra). The system was based on the principle, “Experience (anubhava) is the best teacher.” At the end of their training, the students thus emerged as responsible individuals who are well learned in the Vedas and capable of facing the toughest challenges of life. The word, Gurukul, literally means the ‘family’ (kula) of the teacher (Guru). Gurukul is an ancient Indian concept of education, wherein the student imbibed knowledge by residing with his Guru as part of his family. The word, kula, indicates the close relationship that existed between the teacher and students. Since kula means a ‘family’, Gurukul did not mean the ‘school’ of a teacher but the ‘family’ of a teacher. The Guru was more than merely a teacher; he was a parent, a guide and role model for all the students.

The following text from the Atharva Veda captures the spirit of family in the Gurukul:

“ācārya upanayamāno brahmacārinam kṛṇute garbha-mantaha.”

That is, the Guru or acharya, while accepting a child, protects her/him as a pregnant woman protects her child in her womb. The Guru used to take the place of their real father the moment the children joined the Gurukul. It is true that while getting admission in the Gurukul, the students leave behind their parents who had given them birth, but their place is taken by the Guru, who is not only a teacher but also a parent to them. In some accounts, the Guru’s wife – Guru-Ma – lived in the āshram along with her husband, providing material care for the students. The āshram was veritably Gurukul, where the students

were loved and cared for as members of the Guru's family. It is believed to be a modern discovery in the field of education that a child should at no stage feel cut off from the family or society. It may be pointed out that this very belief lay at the bottom of Gurukul System of Education.¹

A Guru, irrespective of the nature of students, has three tumultuous things to enact, namely: i) to induce and promote creativity among all levels of students, ii) to equip students with confidence and ability, and iii) to maintain integrity in their words and deeds. If the Guru could perform these functions perfectly, the other functions would take care of themselves, and the education system would be on the correct trail to the limelight. The main responsibility of the Guru would be to embed creativity into the mechanical minds of students. Where and when creativity is wanting, even the coveted students in many fields would not come up with immediate solutions to many prevailing problems. Creativity in educational institutions would leave no room for boredom, and which would, in turn, generate interest for studies. It has to be stated that the teachers should concentrate upon unlocking the imagination of students rather than restricting them to the boundaries of curriculum.

Apart from imbibing the knowledge imparted by the Guru, the students would also be expected to shoulder some of the household chores or responsibilities (Āshrama-seva).

As Apastamba puts it more definitely, the student shall "assist his teacher daily by acts tending to the acquisition of spiritual merit and of wealth." The former class of acts will comprise of collecting sacred fuel, grass, earth and flowers for sacrifice as also fetching a pot full of water, while the latter class implies gathering fuel for cooking, begging alms, etc. Every day the student is to go round the neighbouring villages begging food for himself and his Guru, and collecting fuel for the maintenance of the sacred fire. Apart from the services to be rendered to the teacher, there is a second class of duties connected with the student's own welfare, such as bathing three times a day, performing morning and evening devotions, offering libations of water to gods, sages, manes, etc.²

Therefore the Indian model of teaching gives emphasis to submission to one's Guru as well as to root out any ego of self prevalence by making pupils seek help from others. This feature of interdependence

¹ Cheong Cheng, *et. al.* (eds.) *Subject Teaching and Teacher Education in the New Century: Research and Innovation*. Springer. 2002, p. 194. Also, please see: N. Jaypalan, *Education in Ancient India*, Atlantic Publishers, 2005, pp. 5.

² Subodh Kapoor, ed. *Ancient Indian Education*, Vol. 80, Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2002, pp. 263.

is getting eroded from every society now-a-days including Indian society. Therefore, aspects like this in an educational model are very much needed.

Comparison of Socratic and Indian Models of Education

Socrates must be understood in the context of pressing times in Athens and hence his staunch suggestions to design an ideal society on basis of intellect and in order to find this intellect he depends on only education. However, he would consider education as good enough only if it is as per his theory of three aptitudes of human mind and hence assigning everyone one of the three corresponding roles in the society. This is not the context of the Indian model nor is the purpose. The Indian education system is far more liberal in letting every child or pupil discover his own self. There is no artificial effort to create an ideal society, only the literature that was majorly taught was meant to guide pupils towards being righteous. Therefore, I see a similarity in Indian and Socratic idea that sense of justice would come from within and only then it can be sustainable.

Also, Socrates, attached limited role to the teacher/philosopher in the life of the learner. As compared the Gurukul system brings a teacher and the pupils as close as one body and one soul. Pupils are always being observed by the Guru and the same was true for the Guru, who would teach them without actually doing the act deliberately. It is because of this closeness the pupils never 'leave' the Guru, and are always ready to come at their beck and call. We have several instances of lifelong indebtedness of the pupils towards their Gurus, in Indian literature.

Indian model of education was also 'environment friendly' as the students were kept close to nature and were taught how humans must respect other living beings. NO such reference is seen in Socratic approach.

There can be several points to discuss but to close my paper I think lastly, Socrates never actually teach and bring his theory of education to practice, however, in India Gurukuls have been thriving since ancient times. Rabindranath Tagore's Shanti Niketan was also ideologically based on traditional education model of India, which is a modern example of Gurukul model in practice.

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