SOCRATIC TECHNIQUES IN DEBATE EDUCATION

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Even experienced debate educators seem to find out year after year that there is more to learn about the process of teaching debate. With each crop of debaters we are faced with completely different obstacles to successfully teaching the practices of argumentation. One tool, employed in much of the academic community, designed to teach students in a variety of disciplines is the Socratic method. It appears that the possibility of employing the Socratic technique in debate education may be a fruitful avenue for instructors to consider. The process of Socrates' approach forces student debaters to learn the practices of advocacy, clash, refutation and extension which are critical to advancing in the learning process. The main difficulty with such an approach is time. Socrates was not burdened with an extensive debate travel schedule nor with the research requirements of life in the information age. Additional time constraints require us to allow our students to balance debate education with their other personal and academic pursuits. WE need not be reminded the penalty Socrates received for ignoring such issues. Assuming that most of us distaste the prospect of hemlock we cannot afford to teach every aspect of debate to our students Socratically. The solution, it seems, is to instruct our students in the Socratic method and employ the technique to force them to use it in their debate preparations. Such an approach is empowering to the students -- teaching them to undertake intrapersonal and interpersonal Socratic dialogues. We believe that such an approach can most effectively incorporate Socratic technique into debate education. The rewards of such an approach in terms of tournament and educational success are not insubstantial. In this essay we will explore the application of the Socratic technique to teaching the theory and practice of debate. First, we will present a conceptual definition of instruction. And second, we will describe the strengths of teaching debate through the Socratic method.

A Conceptual Definition of the Socratic Technique

It is necessary to begin with an interpretation of what we mean by the Socratic technique. This is a key point, and one that could involve entire papers or panels among forensic educators. It appears in discussing the matter informally with our peers that most instructors claim to be familiar and competent in Socratic techniques of instruction. Ironically, when one pushes (Socratically) below the surface of such claims, most educators have incredibly disparate notions of what the Socratic technique is and how it is to be employed at all -- let alone how it might be fashioned in a competent way in the instruction of all aspects of debate. As a result, we feel that some definitional analysis of the Socratic technique is warranted before considering its application to the practices of argumentation.

It seems a bit silly to base any paradigm for educating through Socratic techniques from anything but the exemplar, Socrates himself. Surprisingly, it appears that many educators have a misconception in this regard. The method of Socratic inquiry is treated as any form of group discussion. The model *persona* is not the wit of Socrates, but the pompous character of John Houseman in the film *Paper Chase*. We believe that common sense dictates drawing our understanding of the Socratic technique from the character of Socrates himself.

A cursory survey of literature concerning Socratic rhetorical theory provides a clear description of the general steps in the Socratic process. Golden, Berquist, and Coleman (1983) explain the Socratic technique simply:

> The sequence and rhetorical strategies that are used give dialectic its uniqueness and scientific thrust. Adhering to a chronological pattern, it begins with a definition of terms and proceeds through analysis and synthesis to an ultimate conclusion based on enlightened understanding. (p. 53)

As Golden, et al. (1983) express, the technique of Socratic dialogue is a particular form of educating *via* a unique chronological or sequential procedure of inquiry - not any loose form of discussion. They highlight the four distinct steps of the Socratic technique:

> The particular communication strategies also unfold in a sequential manner that utilizes four steps. One of the participants initiates the discussion by phrasing one or more questions. Among the points considered here will be the defining of appropriate terms. This is followed by the presentation of a response that sets forth hypotheses which are developed through demonstration. As soon as these answers are introduced, the third step, comprised of refutation and cross-examination, takes place. The final phase hopefully will consist of a modification of the original position held by each participant. The desired end result is shared meaning and enlarged understanding. (p. 53).

Central to the process is the focus on reaching a definition of the terms in question. The type of definition involved is more than mere denotative understanding of a term. The understanding for which the definitional step is designed is a conceptual or philosophical definition of the term in question. For the purpose of argumentation the definition of the argument is more than merely a statement -- but a clear and distinct description of the precise position at a conceptual level.

The student is not expected to demonstrate a clear and distinct definition of the argumentative concept -- be it an understanding of theories concerning risk or which particular form of post-modernism is the basis for today's kritik of the affirmative. The definitional step of the method is a process of critical inquiry described as "adduction." Indeed, it is this initial stage of the process along with the final stage that provide the major difference between the Socratic technique and traditional lecture-based alternatives. Tredennick (1969) describes this induction process in his introduction to *The Last Days of Socrates*:

> He [Socrates] set himself to accomplish his divine mission by systematic questioning, in the course of which he not only cleared up his opponent's minds muddle and misconception, but developed his own two important contributions to

> logic, namely adduction (A better word for the Socratic method than "induction", which has a more technical meaning) and general definition. What he did was this. As soon as a term like Courage cropped up in the course of a conversation, he began by asking what it meant; and then, when the attempted answers proved to be unsatisfactory, proceeded to adduce various instances of courage, and show that, though different in detail, they have some common characteristic by which they are all recognizable as what they are; and this, expressed in words, is the definition. All this may seem obvious now, but it had never been made clear before; and it had a most important effect on both logic and metaphysics. It led, through the genius of Plato and Aristotle, to the discovery and distinction of such concepts as quality, substance, essence, attribute, matter and form, genus and species, and innumerable others. (p. 10)

The adduction process moves the definitional level from the conventional analysis of the practitioner or artist to the conceptual level of the philosopher. It is achieved through the accepted pattern of questioning for clarification from examples, and synthesizing or adducing a definition at a higher level of abstraction than the examples considered.

Several qualifiers may be important in considering the unique character of Socrates as an educator. These characteristics appear fundamental to his technique, yet are often ignored by instructors claiming to employ the Socratic method. First, while Socrates was uniquely gifted in intellect, he learned that his true gift was his recognition of ignorance. Many approaching the Socratic technique with qualifications far less than a proclamation from the Oracle at Delphi fail to grasp the importance of this lesson about teaching from the character of Socrates. Unlike the traditional notion of instruction, Socrates' method helped the students learn how to think for themselves. The instructor establishes a hierarchy of power based on knowledge which undermines the ability of students to think critically for themselves. The Socratic technique, on the other hand, is an empowering method where students gain their own insights from the Dialogue. Indeed the dialectical traps set by Socrates are designed to force the students to think for themselves.

Second, one must recognize Socrates distaste for the teaching methods of the Sophists. In the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* Socrates demonstrates a distinction between false rhetoric and good rhetoric. The latter demonstrates the possibility of employing rhetoric for philosophical purposes. It appears that Socrates would only approve of the use of the Socratic technique IF it is employed in a non-Sophistic manner -- in a search for philosophical truth on the subject in question.

Third, the interpersonal tone of Socrates' technique employs irony and humor to assist in each of the four steps. This attitude towards the entire philosophical process is sometimes difficult for instructors trained in the seriousness of the epistemic hierarchy between teacher and student. The method is playful in manner which seems integral to encouraging the students to give birth to their own ideas. Absent this playful tone, the force of the Socratic technique may be threatening to the development of the knowledge within each student.

These explanations provide a brief interpretation of the technique operationalized in this essay as the Socratic Method. The sequential four steps of conceptual definition, creation of the hypothesis, analysis and refutation, and ultimate understanding coupled with the pedagogical attitudes of intellectual humility, philosophical purpose, and playful *persona* are the concept of the technique we are discussing for the purposes of debate education.

Coaching Debate Through Socratic Techniques

We feel that employing the Socratic technique can augment more traditional methods of debate education. Three strengths of the Socratic technique are clearly visible; first, the technique teaches students to present clear and cohesive argumentative positions; second, the technique teaches students the ability to effectively extend arguments; and third, the technique teaches students to honestly assess the big picture of the interactions of various positions in the round.

We feel that the Socratic technique teaches students to present clear and cohesive arguments. So often, the presentation of the argumentation begins with a skeletal form. The gaps in the logic or narrative of a given position initiated in such a manner do not include the depth of development present in the form advanced under a Socratic method. Unfortunately, tradition merely requires the student to answer the specific line-by-line argumentation of the opponent in a given round. The difficulty with such an approach is that the communicative interaction between the student and the judge may leave the judge with only a skeletal understanding of the position. The Socratic technique allows the student to initiate the argument in a skeletal form but begin the extension with development of the conceptual definition of the argument consistent with the process learned in the first step of the Socratic technique. This assures that a judge does not dismiss an important argument merely due to a misunderstanding of the concept involved. It seems that such misunderstandings are a glaring cause of unforced defeats tournament after tournament and year after year. Too often a brief quiz of debater and judge after a defeat demonstrates a fundamental difference of understanding as to what a specific argument is. This is a definitional difficulty. We are torn between understanding the argument the debater articulates and the argument the judge articulates. It is clear that they are not on the same page. By simulating a Socratic dialogue concerning the conceptual definition of the argument and presenting the additional development in each level of extension, students can be more likely to guarantee that they and the judge will be on the same communicative page. While it would be possible to provide such development without employing the Socratic technique, the adduction process provides students with a procedure to incorporate an internal dialogue between themselves and an imaginary critic for the purpose of assuring a common understanding of the argumentative position being advanced. We believe that the incorporation of such an internal dialogue into the decisions concerning extension should eliminate a large portion of defeats now attributed to critic-misunderstanding.

We feel that the Socratic technique teaches students the ability to effectively extend arguments. In contemporary debate perhaps the greatest weakness across-the-board is in the area of extension. This is not necessarily the fault of the debaters. Rather, it seems that the pedagogical method for teaching the art of extension has become horribly compressed. For the most part it

appears that students and judges have come to define extension as synonymous with refutation. Debate is so focused on line-by-line analysis that as a community we have forgotten that such point-by-point techniques -- while critical -- constitute a mere fragment of the art of extension. Many debates are evaluated completely by a mechanical determination of sufficient refutation. If the students from one school refute their opponents points in succession they have, by contemporary standards mastered the art of extension. One difficulty of such a perspective is that conceptual level of argument (so important to Socrates) is lost and ignored. Quality extension is more than refutation. In fact, the Socratic technique provides an excellent blueprint for quality extension.

Initially, the student should make the conceptual definition of the argument clear. Second, students should present a response which sets forth their hypothesis concerning the position. Popular wisdom suggests providing "Three Reasons We're Winning." It seems that often this discussion comes too late in the debate -- following the totality of the line-by-line analysis. The placement of this response may be better understood by the chronological sequence of the Socratic technique. In addition, the arbitrariness of the "Three Reasons" standard is suspect. The conceptual definition of the argumentative situation will dictate the scope of the hypothesis response. In some situations there may be merely one great reason rather than three. In some debates, it may be ten reasons which force the opponents away from the hypothesis responses presented in their last speech. The critical factor is the number of reasons depends on the conceptual situation. The third step in the line-by-line analysis or refutation. Given the current emphasis on this form of debate practice, current teaching seems sufficient versus "defensive" responses by the opponent. In regard to "offensive" responses (for example, counterdefinitions on topicality or turnarounds on disadvantages or kritiks), however, the student should learn to employ the entire arsenal of Socratic technique against each element of the offensive response.

Finally comes the stage of synthesis. It is critical to recognize this as an independent step following the refutation stage. Otherwise the synthesis stage which is so critical to student-judge common understanding gets lost in the art of refutation. Synthesis is an art in itself and needs to be incorporated following the refutation to demonstrate the student's awareness and honest assessment of the preceding string of points. Golden refers to this as a modification of the original position in light of the argumentation to that point. Rarely do debaters do this. It is an important art to learn to incorporate into both constructives and rebuttals. The synthetic step is a modification of the original argument. If the opponent ignores the modification and simply retains its original attacks, the lack of clash will be obvious. In addition, most judges are left to synthesize the arguments and are subsequently berated by the losing team for poor synthesis. The obvious solution is to incorporate the synthesis stage into the art of extension as perhaps the most important component. Two types of synthesis which are employed late in some debates can be incorporated into initial extension -- the even-if synthesis and the risk assessment synthesis. Even-if synthesis assesses a position in light of accepting the possible truth of the opponents' responses. For example, "All the arguments are just defensive link mitigators. The evidence in the shell and the link extension evidence is sufficient to provide a significant probability of the impact." Risk assessment is practiced much better with the possible exception of comparing the standards of risk assessment. Often debaters will use one standard to measure the risk of their arguments and a much stricter standard in the evaluation of opponents' arguments' risk. The main trouble with current argumentative assessment is that it comes within the refutation. Often the risk assessment comes in the form of blips on the flowsheet. It is important for us to teach that the art of synthesis is separate from refutation and needs to be developed separately. In other words, debaters know how to make risk assessment type arguments, but don't understand when to make these synthetic arguments. According to our analysis of the Socratic technique, it is this synthetic stage which demonstrates most clearly the difference between false and philosophical rhetoric. It is not wise to let it be lost in the blither of a sequence of refutation. Fortunately, the chronological-sequential explanation of the Socratic technique Golden outlines demonstrates the proper stage for risk assessment at the point of hypothesis modification following line-by-line analysis.

We feel that the Socratic technique teaches students to honestly assess the big picture of the interactions of various positions in the debate. So many judges' evaluations suggest that the outcome was determined by poor choices that it seems that the most important area for improving debate education is a method for teaching the proper means of choice-making. The difficulty with most methods for choice-making are that they are inflexible. Invariably when we have coached our teams concerning a particular strategy in a round, as the situation enfolds in the debate a completely different set of choices is most strategic. As a result we back off from a particular strategic method and leave room to the students and the flexibility backfires as they make no choices or poor choices. Fortunately, the Socratic technique provides an excellent method for students to employ during the debate to determine the most intelligent choices. The process involved moving the question for Socratic dialogue to a higher level of abstraction -- from individual positions to the round as a whole. This conceptual stage employs an internal dialogue to determine the honest conceptual definition of the round. The process of internal dialogue helps students escape their subjectivity and begin to view the debate as a whole in the manner that the judge is asked to evaluate it. The students should internally present both the hypothesis that they lost the debate and the best intellectually honest reasons for that assessment as well as the hypothesis that they won the debate and the most persuasive reasons for that assessment. The refutation stage involves going through all the particular positions and arguments on the flowsheet. In terms of positions they once again should begin with the perspective that they lost the argument and then that they won. In the synthesis stage the student will learn which choices to make. The student will learn which arguments require substantial attention and which can be covered quickly. Most importantly, perhaps, the student will learn the best introduction for the rebuttal answering the question, "Why are you winning this debate?" The answer will reflect the entire debate as opposed to a given position. Such a synthesis prevents the opponent from winning by the strategy of going where you don't because your introduction will have justified your assessment of the entire debate strategy of your time allocation.

Conclusion

We have attempted a conceptual defi-

nition of the Socratic technique based on the *persona* of Socrates as reported by experts in Socratic rhetoric. The definition includes a sequential four step process and several qualifiers based on Socrates' own pedagogical beliefs. Unfortunately, we lack the background in classical rhetoric and argumentation to adequately develop the details of the Socratic dialogues as depicted by Plato. In addition we did not consider other classical evidence concerning the character and methods of Socrates. Perhaps a comparison between the references from Platonic sources and from Xenophonic sources would provide a more meaningful adduction process. We encourage scholars in these fields to augment our efforts.

Our original hypothesis was that the Socratic technique might be a fruitful avenue for debate education. We refuted the original hypothesis in the name of efficiency. The time constraints on instructors prevent us from being all places at all times. Our modified hypothesis suggests teaching the students to think Socratically by teaching them the Socratic method. This appears a reasonable pedagogical suggestion akin to teaching the students the use of the scientific method in natural and social science courses. Such an approach gains the strengths of the Socratic approach we have outlined while avoiding the danger of administrative hemlock for ignoring our other duties.

Finally, we should add that improving our expertise in the Socratic method may be useful in other areas of debate education. Future research could consider the interdisciplinary nature of the Socratic technique as a means of teaching quality argumentative content across the multi-disciplined fields of arguments which appear in resolutions from year to year. The debaters would become responsible for expertise within the field and the coach would test their preparation Socratically. This forces them to focus their positions and defend their expertise to several lines of extension. Unfortunately such a discussion would require a deeper understanding of argumentation theories concerning the concepts of fields of argument than our collective long term memories could produce. We hope that interested scholars who are more involved in such theories might suggest the possibilities such a coaching approach might entail. Finally, it seems obvious that the Socratic technique could be used in a completely different arena of debate education -- the pedagogical role of the judge. It would be interesting to see if a paradigm based on a refined conceptual definition of the Socratic technique might bridge some of the current misunderstanding between strict constructionists and argument evaluators. It appears that theoretical discussion of paradigms will once again be necessary to synthesize the different styles which are gradually merging across the United States. Given that the judges hold the power of defeat or victory, it seems that such considerations of methods to transcend the peculiarities of many different judging perspectives might help the debaters know what is expected in any given round. Such a judicial synthesis would make the merging of debate styles a much easier prospect for the students for which this game is designed.

(This article originally appeared in the Kansas Speech Journal. Eric Krug was formerly director of debate at Ft. Scott (KS) State University. David Rhaesa was a champion collegiate debater.)