

## **Bridging Logic and Rhetoric with Socratic Discussion**

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Socratic discussion is a powerful form of education that can be frustrating to employ in a classroom. Some of this frustration can be removed by accurately describing it and distinguishing it from some common misconceptions. Once we are clear about what Socratic discussion is, we can see how it unites the logic stage of the trivium with the rhetoric stage. This can be done at the curriculum level, syllabus level, and the level of individual lessons.

### **Starting Points**

*Discussion: Two or more people seeking a single, unknown truth together.*

—Discussion is “Socratic” when done in the spirit of Socrates, which is hopeful and open-ended.

—Cf. *Phaedrus* and *Protagoras* by Plato:

Protagoras, I [Socrates] said, do not suppose that I have any other desire in discussing [*dialegesthai*] with you than to examine the difficulties which occur to myself at each point. I think that Homer said it all, “Advancing in tandem, one perceives before the other” [*Iliad* 10.224]. Human beings are simply more resourceful this way in action, speech, and thought. If someone has an inner experience, he immediately starts going around seeking to whom he might show it and to whom he might confirm it, until he is successful. And so for this reason I would gladly discourse [*dialegomai*] with you more than anyone else, considering that you would investigate most impressively concerning matters that are suitable for decent men to examine, and particularly concerning virtue. (*Protagoras* 348c5–e1)

*Two senses of dialectic:*

1. Question and answer (discussion): E.g. (from *Republic*), Q: What is justice? A: Helping friends and harming enemies.

—The art of questioning consists of discovering the right questions. The art of answering consists of saying what you believe.

2. Analysis and synthesis (thought): E.g. (from *Phaedrus*), There are two forms of madness, human and divine. The perception of physical beauty that reminds us of eternal beauty is true love, i.e., divine madness.

—Socrates’s terminology for this is division and collection.

*Logic: the science of inference*

—E.g., inference from premises to conclusion: All men are mortal, and Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal.

—Logic presupposes some truths. Other truths can be discovered by means of logical reasoning.

—The logic “stage” of a curriculum is the period in which students become logic-scientists. The goal of teaching logic is to enable students to make good inferences, to distinguish good inferences from bad ones.

—NB: in other contexts and at various points of history, “logic” and “dialectic” were used synonymously; however, for present purposes it will be helpful to distinguish them.

*Two senses of rhetoric:*

1. Persuading to believe (“Friends, Romans, countrymen . . .”)

2. Preparing to inquire (cf. the organization of *Phaedrus*)

—The rhetoric stage of a curriculum is the period in which students learn to prepare others to inquire with them, that is, to engage in Socratic discussion. Note the inherent humility of this approach.

*Truth: a thought or statement is true when what the thought or statement is about is as the thought or statement represents it to be.*

*Knowledge: the ability to represent (talk about, think about) things as they are on the basis of appropriate thought and experience.*

—Logic and dialectic are essential to knowledge, regardless of the subject matter (e.g., biology, mathematics, history, music) because they enable us to represent reality as it is.

## The Value of Dialectic

In both senses of dialectic—question and answer, and analysis and synthesis—it is useful in both the logic and rhetoric stages.

Analysis and synthesis is useful for discovering good definitions. Good definitions are useful in logic (because they provide the clearest of terms) and rhetoric (because they make the speaker's starting points clear and prevent the speaker from misleading himself and his audience) (*Phaedrus* 262b–264a).

Question-and-answer is the starting point for instruction in logic and the goal of rhetoric.

1. *Logic.* Logic must be taught differently from the grammar subjects: In grammar, it is usually sufficient for the student to understand what is being said and to remember it. In logic, the student must learn how to “move” correctly from premise to conclusion; that is, the student must understand less *what* is being taught and more *how* and *why* to make a good inference. The teacher should aim to help students understand the shape, essence, and feel of an argument from the inside out.

—So, presenting a set of statements and asking students questions as they work through the logical relations among them is a good use of question and answer. E.g.,

1. Socrates is mortal.
2. Socrates is dead.
3. A man is mortal only if there is a future time at which he dies.
4. A man cannot die twice.

2. *Rhetoric.* In rhetoric, the student must learn to interact with others in order to prepare them for joint inquiry through question-and-answer discussion. In other words, sparking a good discussion should be the goal of the rhetorician.

—Rhetoric teachers should consider adding this to their assessments: After a student's speech, how prepared was his or her audience to discuss what he or she talked about? How well did the audience discuss that topic?

## Applications

1. *Curriculum.* Think about how what you and your colleagues teach is organized beginning in the grammar stage, through the logic stage, and into the rhetoric stage. These stages are not just sequential but intertwined. Are the different teachers guided by a curriculum that is well understood by all? Are they aware of their role in the part of the curriculum for which they are responsible? Do they understand the need to employ pedagogies appropriate to each stage?

2. *Syllabus.* Look at the syllabus for your class. Does it contain elements of logic (helping students make good inferences about the subject matter), rhetoric (helping students prepare one another to discuss the subject matter well), and dialectic (using question and answer as well as analysis and synthesis). Do you assess these things in your class, regardless of the subject matter?

3. *Lesson.* How to organize a speech.

—Discover definitions through dialectic using both question and answer discussion and analysis and synthesis

—Organize the speech (*Phaedrus* 264a–265a)

—Discuss the subject matter of the speech (with and without the text of the speech)

E.g., a speech on gene editing:

—Start with: What are the definitions of “gene” and “editing”? (NB: dictionaries do not necessarily point to the true definitions of terms; they record how words are used at a given time.) Answering these and subsequent questions should be done in a discussion (two or more people seeking a single, unknown truth together). What other questions are important to answer? Remember that the art of questioning consists of discovering the right questions to ask; what are the right questions to ask concerning gene editing?

—What is the best organization of this speech? The audience must be considered.

—After the speech, how well did the audience discuss gene editing?