Tool 49: Socratic Dialogue

> **Aim of the tool**
> Help a group gain a better understanding of something.
>
> **When to use it?**
> The convergence stage, when the focus is on creating a shared understanding.

What is Socratic Dialogue?

Socratic dialogue is a form of dialogue, which encourages a group to question and reach consensus in answering a universal question. By using personal experiences in the inquiry process, this type of dialogue is a cooperative attempt to reach for the universal from the particular.

Socratic dialogue is neither a debate nor a competition. The group, as a whole, takes on the challenge of finding a concluding answer all participants can agree upon. Cooperative reflection and the search for consensus form the backbone of the Socratic dialogue. Participants are therefore encouraged to share any relevant reflection for the group to consider.

Socratic dialogue is based on a virtue of slowing down the reflection process. Therefore they can be very time consuming. Socratic dialogues of more than 3 days are common. Practicing elements of a real Socratic Dialogue can be fruitful as well – and less time consuming.

The inquiry process starts with an universal question relevant to the MSP such as "Can conflict be fruitful?" or "What is the value of cooperation?" In consultation with the facilitator, the group can also come up with or suggest a question beforehand.

Source: Young World Socratic Dialogue

How to facilitate a Socratic dialogue?

To answer the selected question, the facilitator guides the group through a structured process of systematic reflection, based on the personal experiences of the participants. Inspired by the

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question, each participant is asked to think of a personal example, which he or she considers to represent the topic of inquiry well.

Criteria of a good example:

1. Should be a first-person experience
2. Should be closed in time (i.e. not an experience that has not yet concluded)
3. Should not be too emotional
4. Should be brief
5. Should be simple
6. Owner of the example should be willing to answer questions

(Source: Marinoff, L.)

When sharing personal examples, other group members are invited to question the examples in order to see to which extent they illustrate or embody the question. After sharing, the group will try to reach consensus on a relevant example for further investigation. The remaining examples are then summarized and displayed for future reference.

As soon as one key example is chosen, it becomes the focus of the Socratic dialogue. As much detail as possible is shared and written on a flipover, after which, the group investigates which information this particular case study provides to answer the universal question. When the group comes up with a preliminary conclusion, their view will be tested against the other examples and modified if necessary. The agreed upon answer can be fine-tuned until the end, since the participants will finally also look for counterexamples.

Marinoff refers to this process as an 'hourglass', narrowing the focus from a universal question to a particular situation and broadening the focus again to look for a universal answer.

At all stages of the dialogue, the facilitator promotes independent critical reflection. This goes beyond the discourse of the dialogue itself, as the Socratic dialogue also has two additional levels of dialogue. There is also the strategic discourse about the direction or shape of the dialogue and the meta discourse about the rules governing the dialogue.

While the facilitator guides the group through the dialogue, there are some general rules for participants to follow:

General dialogue rules:

1. Express your doubts.
2. Be attentive to others
3. Refrain from monologues
4. Ask no hypothetical questions
5. Make no reference to published works.
6. Strive for consensus

(Source: Marinoff, L.)

Learn more

Marinoff, L. (Enteléquia. Filosofia Pràtiqa). The Structure and Function of a Socratic Dialogue: https://sites.google.com/site/entelequiafilosofiapratica/aconselhamento-filosofico-1/the-structure-and-function-of-a-socratic-dialogue-by-lou-marinoff

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_method

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