

Sophist or Socratic Teaching Methods in Fostering Learning in US Graduate Education

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of some of the important characteristics of both the Socratic and Sophist traditions and discusses their impact and relation to graduate education in the United States through the discipline of psychology. In the discussion, it is important to note that there are inherent conflicts that stem from the foundational principles of each of these teaching/learning traditions. Before undertaking an examination of the implications it is necessary to establish a common framework for understanding the core principles of each method. The initial question then is what is meant by Socratic and Sophist traditions?

Socratic and Sophist Implications in Graduate Education: An Illustration through the lens of the discipline of Psychology

The Sophist Tradition

The term Sophist traces to a group of philosophers, teachers, and orators of the fifth century with which Plato identified himself and that included the well-known philosophers Gorgias and Protagoras. The word sophist in Greek refers to a person of wisdom. One of the key identifiers for those labeled as sophists was the financial component – they charged for their teaching. There was much debate over the elitism and division that ensued as a result of their fee structure; however, one of the defining characteristics of the sophists was their claim that they were professional educators who were contributing to the development and growth of democracy. The irony to those who were not of their viewpoint was that the development and growth of democracy would fare better through free access to teaching (Schiappa, 1991). Irony aside, it remains difficult to identify many of the defining characteristics of sophists due to the eclectic nature of the group, which at times even included Socrates. Because it is not advantageous to treat the group as consisting of every thinker, teacher, or philosopher, it is best to focus on those traits that are best known to be associated with the sophist tradition.

The most common trait associated with the sophists is that of rhetoric (Furedy & Furedy, 1986; Schiappa, 1991). However, there are three senses of rhetoric that derive from the sophist tradition: “rhetorical theory, practice, and ideology” (Schiappa, 1991, p. 8). Once again there are no precise, consensus-built definitions. For example, Gorgias treated “persuasion as a matter of deception and questioned the possibility of communication, while Protagoras viewed making the weaker account the stronger” (Schiappa, 1991, pp. 8-9). The ensuing result of these divergences is the difficulty of identifying or defining precise parameters for the traits of this tradition.

However, there are some commonly accepted defining factors that we attribute to the Sophists, who served as catalysts and participants in the intellectual revolution of the fifth

century (Jarratt, 1987, p. 67). The first, although often cast in a negative light and ill-defined, is that as rhetoricians they were manipulators who preyed on emotions (Jarratt, p. 67). In addition, the Sophists were often accused of using verbal skills to create illusions and trick and entice through their words. Hippias and Gorgias both claimed they could speak on any topic at any time and captivate their audiences through well-spun prose and memory tricks (Jarrat, p. 68). Although the disparaging characterization of the Sophists allowed them to drift into some obscurity for nearly a century and a half, in the 1800s, Hegel found legitimation in the Sophists. The rationalists and the positivists also found value in the Sophists ability to build consensus among many and their philosophical skepticism (Jarrat, p. 69).

Despite the explicit negative context of the rhetorical techniques of the Sophists and their resurrection in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is hard to deny that the rhetorical approach has embedded itself in certain philosophies of education that exist today. One illustration is apparent in community and citizenship – the goal that education seeks to produce those who can contribute value to their society (Furedy & Furedy, 1986). Other illustrations are apparent in the taxonomy developed by Jarrat (1987) who identified (a) an analytic (epistemological or philosophical); (b) performative; and (c) pragmatic version of the Sophists, all of which have pedagogical applications.

The Socratic Tradition

Socrates known as the Father of Western philosophy is famous from his portrayal in Plato's Dialogues. Unlike the Sophists, the term Socratic Method is well-known within certain professional educational methodologies, particularly those used in legal education. Socrates engaged in asking questions and answering questions with questions (a dialectic method of inquiry). Its original purpose was to develop skills to identify and challenge underlying assumptions so that people could examine their belief structure in the context of their analysis of knowledge. As a result, the concept of critical thinking grounded in logic emerged from this type of inquiry. As one would expect, this methodology was in direct "opposition to the Sophist tradition, which sought to elevate tradition by rhetoric instead of examining its assumptions by logic" (Furedy & Furedy, 1986, p. 241).

The Socratic method is not based on an indoctrination through persuasive rhetoric (a Sophist position) but rather requires an exchange, a dialogue where the teacher and student examine information based on questions targeted towards challenging the premises and assumptions of the targeted information (a Socratic tradition). Anderson (1961) stated that "for Socrates, the 'uncritical acceptance of tradition ... is no education at all' because any tradition 'requires the most careful scrutiny, and until this process of examination has begun, education has not begun'" (p. 207). Socrates illustrated an unbiased method of inquiry –one that held a disinterested view toward the outcome and emphasized the technique of examination and inquiry. This was an attitude that is known as the 'Greek way' of thinking about the world (Burnet, 1930). According to Furedy and Furedy (1986) the Greeks, which often included pre-Socratic philosophers introduced debate and dialogue of problems for the sake of debate and dialogue rather than connecting it to real issues and human problems.

According to Furedy and Furedy (1986), a major contribution of the Socratic tradition to education is

a disposition for disciplined inquiry, based on a readiness to question all assumptions and

an ability to recognize when it is necessary so to question. Critical thinking also entails the capacity to carry out analysis and evaluation in a rational manner, and an understanding of disinterested scholarship. These qualities are imbedded in the intellectual make-up of the critical thinker and should carry over from one's specialty to other fields of interest and inquiry (p.2 41).

As a result it can be argued that based on current beliefs the Socratic Method (questioning, critical approach) is one of the distinguishing factors in certain fields of higher education; (i.e., law school), then according to Furedy (1982), it is important to note that it was Plato “who founded the first western university, the Academy and what differentiated Plato's Academy from other professional schools (for example, the Egyptians had for a long time maintained excellent medical schools) is that tradition was not merely passed on but was examined” (p. 244). This is in contrast to the Sophist tradition, which, through rhetoric and oration, elevated the rituals of indoctrination and acceptance rather than questioning and examination. In an earlier article by Furedy and Furedy (1986) they wrote that “perhaps the most important contrast hinges on the difference between *enquiry* and *persuasion*. Enquiry is directed at the phenomenon of nature rather than at influencing or persuading people to change their minds. . . Consistent with this difference between *enquiry* and *persuasion* is the fact that whereas Socrates and his followers concentrated on logic, the Sophists focused on rhetoric” (p. 14).

Implications for Graduate Education in the Discipline of Psychology

Before one can discuss the implications for a field of study, it is important to identify some of the characteristics that define graduate study in psychology. This is not an easy task, because there are many disciplines within psychology, and not all adhere to the same methodologies that correlate to preferred methods of instruction. Psychology is a broad scientific discipline with many influencing factors including philosophy, neuroscience, biology, and an array of social sciences. In addition, graduate education in the field of psychology can have as its learning outcomes preparation for clinical practice, academic scholarship and a host of other options.

As discussed previously, the Sophist and Socratic traditions emphasize different approaches to education, and the selection of an appropriate approach is contingent upon myriad factors including subject matter, learning outcomes, learning environment, time parameters, and so on. The context or environmental structure for which the specific learning content targets is a critical factor in the discussion of the implications of both these traditions for graduate education in psychology. Furedy and Furedy (1986) noted that, “in the past educational systems were concerned with the passing on of culture, ritual or the skills of living. The cognitive complexity of this sort of education can be enormous even in so-called primitive societies. The dos and don'ts of traditional medicine or the details of genealogical history probably demanded more memorization of information than that required for an understanding of nuclear physics” (p. 245). Their illustration is relevant to the content and goals of instruction.

One might reason that the debate between Socratic Method and Sophistic rhetoric is not black and white and that many in academia would assert their own pedagogy and instructional strategies that are steeped in a mixture of combined traditions. Although certain environments might claim a preferred position (e.g., law and the Socratic method), it might be difficult to find those who would claim to be “rigidly Socratic or Sophistic, and that individual positions represent a mix of ideas, values and procedures (Furedy & Furedy, 1986). In their article, Furedy

and Furedy (1986) examine Socratic and Sophist strains in undergraduate education in psychology. Although we will consider many of their points, it is important to note that in most institutions of higher education in the United States, there is a marked difference between undergraduate and graduate study as well as emphasis on teaching methodologies within certain disciplines (MBA – case study; Law – Socratic Method). Robinson (1979) stated “ the difference between a trade-school and a university is, among other considerations, the difference between mere technique and perspective; put another way the difference between craft and judgment” (p. 6).

In noting the distinction not to create an analogy between a trade-school and a university with an undergraduate program and a graduate program but to emphasize the importance of discussing the implications of the Socratic and Sophist traditions within the context of the diversity of graduate education in psychology. Therefore, instead of assessing individual differences among institutions or scholars perhaps a meaningful approach is to consider purpose and goals. Furedy and Furedy (1986) suggested that Sophistic influences have been mainly implicit and manifest themselves in the shift towards instrumentalism and affective learning as well as in the choice of curricula and curricula development. “The curricular change would be justified from a Sophistic view merely by demonstrating that more students and/or researchers want to deal with [a topic]. A Socratic approach would require evidence . . .” (p. 15). Another factor is seen in the use of the Socratic approach to challenge all assumptions and use critical reasoning to extrapolate analysis. The Sophist might emphasize the importance of interest in the content rather than exploration of its structure since the Sophistic tradition is focused on a connection with the individual to persuade and convince him/her of a point or position.

Furedy and Furedy (1986) make an interesting distinction in the “writing and presentation of texts. A text in the Socratic tradition makes no concession to relevance, attractiveness . . . An example is Woodworth and Schlosberg’s *Experimental Psychology* (1938) which is logically organized but not constructed for student appeal. A text in the Sophist tradition will usually contain many pictures to arouse interest as well as be designed for easy reading” (p. 15). This illustration raises some interesting questions as to whether the Socratic tradition is in fact indifferent to “relationship” or “connection” with the learner and the Sophist the affective comforter. More importantly, in graduate education in psychology, the questions often hinge on purpose and scope. A clinical program may be very concerned with a Socratic technique for investigation and eliciting of response but would need to have a strong “connection” and “relationship” as well as a subjective (or Sophist) mode to be successful, whereas a quantitative experimental program may emphasize an objective or Socratic mode with an emphasis on inquiry.

Another arena for application is in whether graduate education in psychology focuses on applied or pure research. Furedy and Furedy (1986) pointed out that in pure, research there is usually an emphasis on inquiry or basic research which is Socratic tradition-based. The Socratic inquiring attitude requires willingness to seek explanations for the purpose of increasing knowledge. The applied attitude that is characteristic of the Sophist will place a preeminence on practical questions.

Because one of the foundational features of the Socratic tradition is the “presentation and consideration of conflicting views” (Furedy & Furedy, 1986, p. 17) it would appear to be well-aligned with graduate education in psychology. As we have discovered, psychology is a multiparadigmatic science and requires the analysis and synthesis of many differing theorists

and theories. In addition, by structure, many graduate programs in psychology, particularly at the doctoral level, engage in discourse through questioning in a collaborative environment, emphasizing a Socratic approach while also providing opportunity through symposia and other structured-learning environments to “learn” through rhetoric (a distinguished speaker series, for example).

Summary

Overall, it is apparent from the constructs of both ontologies that their contribution to the development and richness of graduate education in psychology is a necessity. Although, there still remain obvious prejudices towards sophistry as pedagogy its influences have permeated teaching methods and instructional design. As Furedy and Furedy (1986) noted, it is not a dichotomy but a continuum.

The goals of education may differ significantly according to one’s position. From a Socratic vantage the aim is to teach the student about a particular subject matter in a critical way so that the student learns to question and analyze all assumptions. From an extreme Sophist vantage the opposite applies. It was in reaction to this sense of “teaching” that Socrates insisted himself that he himself did not “teach” but only talked to (and asked questions) of people (p. 16).

The emphasis on disinterested inquiry and the challenging of assumptions through critical questioning is a fundamental part of any graduate education in psychology. On the other hand, the Sophistic traits of connection and consensus through rhetoric manifest themselves in many of the delivery mediums of graduate education. As Furedy and Furedy (1986) pointed out

one often encounters a general reluctance in academic forums to explore basic concepts, definitions, and values in interactive dialogue. The way in which question periods are set up and conducted at conferences seems often to discourage a back-and-forth exchange. It is permissible to ask a clarificatory or critical question of a speaker, but is considered bad manners to reformulate the question. However, from a Socratic point of view, the reformulation of questions is an important part of any discussion. If this attitude prevails in academic conferences, it is an even more powerful deterrent to dialogue in teacher-student interactions (p. 246).

It remains clear that, despite current practices, there are implications from both traditions that can steer us towards our ideals for graduate education in psychology, change can arrive one teacher at a time.

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