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

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Overview

- 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.
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The Initial Question

- What is meant by Socratic and Sophist traditions?



The Sophist Tradition

- 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
 - 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.
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The Sophist Tradition

- The most common trait associated with the sophists is that of rhetoric
 - as rhetoricians they were manipulators who preyed on emotions
 - Sophists were often accused of using verbal skills to create illusions and trick and entice through their words.
 - they could speak on any topic at any time and captivate their audiences through well-spun prose and memory tricks
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The Sophist Tradition

- 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.
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The Socratic Tradition

- Unlike the Sophists, the term Socratic Method is well-known within certain professional educational methodologies, particularly those used in legal education.
 - 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.
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The Socratic Tradition

- The Socratic method is not based on an indoctrination through persuasive rhetoric (a Sophist position) but rather requires an exchange - a dialogue
 - Socrates illustrated an unbiased method of inquiry –one that held a disinterested view toward the outcome and emphasized the technique of examination and inquiry.
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A Contrast

- 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
 - 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.
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Implications

- 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
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Implications

- 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.
 - 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
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Implications

- 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).
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Summary

- Instead of assessing individual differences among institutions or scholars perhaps a meaningful approach is to consider purpose and goals.
 - 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.
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Summary

- Although, there still remain obvious prejudices towards sophistry as pedagogy its influences have permeated teaching methods and instructional design.
 - The emphasis on disinterested inquiry and the challenging of assumptions through critical questioning is a fundamental part of any education.
 - On the other hand, the Sophistic traits of connection and consensus through rhetoric manifest themselves in many of the delivery mediums of education
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Summary

- Which One?
 - Your choice
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