

Socrates is often considered to be one of the founders of western philosophy. He developed the *Socratic* or *dialectical* method of philosophy which is based on persistent questioning and the belief that the life which is unexamined is not worth living.

Here is a summary of some of the key questions and answers that Socrates posed related to teaching and learning:

- **What is knowledge?** He categorised knowledge into the trivial and the important. Trivial knowledge doesn't provide the possessor with any useful expertise or wisdom. Important knowledge relates to ethics and morals and can be defined by how best to live one's life.
- **Why do we need to learn?** Although he believed that goodness and truth, and ethical and moral instincts are inherent in everyone, they can only be brought to the surface through learning.
- **How do we learn?** He described learning as the search for truth. Learning will only occur as the result of questioning and interpreting the wisdom of others and when one comes to recognise his/her own ignorance and faults.
- **Who do we learn from?** He didn't believe that any one person, or any one particular school of thought, had the wisdom or legitimate authority to teach things. He did, however, argue that individuals are not self-sufficient and that other people are necessary to share the experience and wisdom from which learning can flourish.
- **Where do we learn?** He questioned the established idea that learning could only take place in educational establishments and advocated that learning should take place wherever and whenever people meet.
- **When do we learn?** He argued that this happened whenever two or more people engaged in meaningful dialogue and when one person was willing to see their own faults, weaknesses and negative tendencies.

The Socratic method of teaching is based on the teacher asking leading questions and guiding the learner to discovery. Its cornerstone is the dialogue between the teacher and the learner, which uses critical inquiry to challenge preconceived thoughts and established doctrines.

THE UNEXAMINED LIFE IS WORTHLESS

How to use it

If you follow the principle of the unexamined life being worthless, then you must be honest in how you examine what you've done. Admitting failure and learning from errors are as important as reflecting on your successes in making you a good teacher.

Michael Jordan, arguably one of the greatest basketball players of all times, admitted that, throughout a career spanning 15 years, he had: missed more than 9000 shots at the basket; lost nearly 300 games; and missed important game-winning shots on 26 occasions. He admits to having failed time and time again, which is why he feels he was a success.

To be prepared to fully reflect on what you have done, look at the reflective practice models covered in Theories 96-98. There's something there for everyone in terms of the scope and scale of reflection and some great models to use.

If you want to follow the doctrines of Socrates:

- Never be afraid of making mistakes. OK, giving out wrong information will have to be corrected as soon as possible, but mistakes are always forgivable if you learn from them.
- Be aware of the boundaries that you are working to. Although you may not have the licence to challenge your learners' ethics and morals, if they are preventing learning from taking place it may come into your jurisdiction and you may have to do something about it. Read Theories 26 and 29 for more on this.
- Try to avoid giving out too many answers. Concentrate on guiding learners to discover more about the subject by asking them challenging questions. A good rule of thumb here is to ask four times as many questions as you give answers.
- Encourage members of the class to engage in meaningful dialogue, unhindered by your presence, whenever possible. Get them to summarise their discussions with the rest of the group. In this way, the sharing of wisdom and experiences will be more widespread.

Socrates believed that unless people examined their lives and gained the wisdom that accrued from this, they would continue to make mistakes.

In the classroom

- Accept that mistakes will happen.
- Treat all mistakes as a learning opportunity.
- Encourage learners to constantly question what they, and you, are saying or doing.

For more on Socrates' ideas, read

Navia, L.E. (2007) *Socrates: A Life Examined*. New York: Prometheus Books.

Plato (1997) *The Trial and Death of Socrates: Four Dialogues*. New York: Classic Books International.