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Remembrance of Things Past: A History of the Socratic Method in the United States

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The Socratic method is a common touchstone in conversations about classroom pedagogy, widely believed to enhance student engagement and promote critical thinking. Understood as the historical inheritance of antiquity, the method is generally accepted by teachers, administrators, and scholars as a legitimate approach to instruction.

As this article reveals, however, the Socratic method was not passed down from ancient Athens across continents and millennia. Instead, it was re-created and reimagined by different groups of educators who were less concerned with establishing a consistent and specific meaning for the method than they were with using it to advance their own distinct agendas. Thus, while the Socratic method is commonly perceived as both identifiable and ancient, it is in reality a vaguely defined and relatively modern pedagogical concept—a fact that should give pause to educators presuming to employ it.

A PLACE IN THE PANTHEON

The Socratic method is a common touchstone in conversations about classroom pedagogy, from the early grades to graduate school. Understood as the historical inheritance of antiquity—a pedagogy of rigorous questioning passed down from ancient Athens across continents and millennia—the method is widely accepted by teachers, administrators, and scholars as a legitimate approach to instruction. And among its supporters, the method is widely believed to enhance student engagement and promote critical thinking.[1]

Equally worth our attention is the fact that educators engaged in discourse about the Socratic method tend to express great certainty about what that method is. Frequently, teachers will cite the Socratic method without further elaboration, using the phrase as if it is sufficiently explanatory (Carter, 2011). Other times, those citing the method will provide a brief explanation in which Socratic teaching is equated with general

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practices like asking questions and encouraging students to become independent thinkers (Rud, 1997). Typical is the description that "Socrates believed that we learn best by asking essential questions and testing tentative answers against reason and fact in a continual and virtuous circle of honest debate" (Cookson, 2009, p. 8).

At first glance, then, conversations about the Socratic method, at least in U.S. schools, seem to indicate that something specific is being communicated. They suggest that educators are the inheritors of a historic legacy—an instructional method perfected in ancient Athens and rightly located at the bedrock of pedagogical practice. They indicate that the science of teaching is an old one, structured around the search for certain fundamental and enduring principles of instruction. In short, a reference to the Socratic method is likely to raise very few questions.

But this picture becomes more complicated when we ask what, exactly, we know about Socrates and his method, given that he lived and died well over 2,000 years ago. As classicist Gary Alan Scott (2002) has written, "our knowledge of such a question-and-answer method as deriving from an ancient Greek philosopher named Socrates—who is also famous for not having written anything himself—comes primarily from the portrayal of a character called *Socrates* in the philosophical dramas written by Plato, and to a lesser extent from Xenophon's Socratic conversations, the comedy of Aristophanes, and the writings of Aristotle" (p. 1). And because any method employed by Socrates must be derived from portrayals of him in the works of other authors—authors who present conflicting images of Socrates as a teacher—it is notoriously difficult to determine what his actual instructional practices may have been. Even Plato's *Meno*, for instance, depicts a quite different Socrates than Plato's *Theaetetus*. Thus, as the *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education* puts it succinctly, the question of what might be called "Socratic teaching" is "the most contentious of all the questions scholars have tried to answer about Socrates" (Brickhouse & Smith, 2009, p. 182).

We might further trouble our understandings of the Socratic method by asking how and why it crossed such great temporal and geographic distances to land in modern classrooms. Certainly it is possible that it did so as a product of its technical superiority. Yet it is also possible that other factors won for the Socratic method a place in the pedagogical pantheon—factors that might change the way we perceive the method in modern classrooms. Would the Socratic method remain such a mainstay if it had established its foothold in practice for some reason other than its technical perfection?

As this article demonstrates, the Socratic method is a relatively modern invention with various interpretations and not, contrary to popular belief, the product of an unbroken historical tradition. This is not to say that educators have calculatingly misrepresented the pedagogy of Socrates, whose teaching practices are still a matter of debate. Rather, what seems apparent is that teachers and administrators laid claim to the method,

often quite sincerely, because they needed an authoritative past to legitimize various efforts ranging from professionalization to curriculum redesign. Thus, with little coordination, American educators in different times, places, and fields willed the Socratic method into what they so desired: a specific and time-tested pedagogy. Of course, given that lack of coordination, interpretations of the Socratic method differed. Yet as time erased even the recent past from memory, something more singular, if more general, would emerge and take root.

A REDISCOVERY

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the scholarship of ancient Greece receded from the Western memory. Texts remained untranslated, papyrus scrolls decayed, and the religious focus of early Medieval scholarship meant that many philosophical texts were seen as irrelevant; many were simply destroyed.

Scholarship on ancient Greece did continue, but it did so in the Islamic world. In the 8th and 9th centuries, Greek works were translated into Arabic and collected in libraries like that of Caliph Abdallah-al-Mamum of Baghdad. Philosophical works, disregarded by scholars in the Byzantine Empire, were translated into Arabic and filtered through North Africa and the Near East (Brickman, 1961; Gutas, 1998; Rosenthal, 1975). Eventually, through libraries and universities in the regions that would later become Spain and Italy, European scholars would gain access to Arabic translations of ancient texts, as well as texts in the original Greek.

Eventually, the broader rediscovery of ancient Greece during the Northern Renaissance in Europe brought renewed interest in classical philosophy and the figure of Socrates. Still, even though texts could be recovered through translation, or in rare cases, from preserved manuscripts, a key difficulty remained with regard to understanding the historical Socrates. According to John Beversluis (1993), "Anyone who writes about Socrates must sooner or later take a stand on the notorious 'Socratic Problem' generated by the fact that Aristophanes, Xenophon, and Plato have handed down three different and radically incompatible portraits" (p. 293). Further, there was the problem that biography in classical antiquity was hardly held to the set of standards emerging in modernity. As Arnaldo Momigliano (1971) put it, biography in the ancient world occupied "an ambiguous position between fact and imagination" (p. 46).

Despite all of this, scholars in countries like Germany, France, and Switzerland were by the 16th century referencing Socratic dialogues in their work, examining techniques of questioning, dialectic, and maieutics—a drawing-out of the latent knowledge within students. French scholar Pierre de la Ramée, for instance, published several works on Socratically inspired "dialectical" methods between 1543 and 1555.[2] And

others, like Johannes Sturm in Germany, breathed life into Socrates through work as teachers (Brockett, 1874, pp. 194–195).[3]

Yet despite the interest in Socratic dialogues, the first mentions of a genuine Socratic teaching technique did not appear until the early 18th century. Such discussions were often superficial in nature, drew only casually from original sources, and rarely referenced each other. Thus, as Gregory Vlastos (1994) has observed, prior to the mid-19th century, the approach to dialogue taken by Socrates—today largely identified as the "elenchus" by classicists—had no proper name. Still, educators began to discuss the application of Socratic technique to the classroom, inspired no doubt by the European Enlightenment in which the ancient philosopher appeared in plays, operas, paintings, and academic periodicals.

Given the religious orientation of most Western European schooling of the period, the Socratic "method" was often portrayed as a means of achieving deeper moral and ethical understanding. To a somewhat lesser degree, though, the method was also contrasted against traditional religious instruction via lecture and memorization. A 1738 text by Thomas Baker, for instance, noted that "the *Socratic* and *Platonic* way[s]" were "Enemies to dogmatizing, and rather doubting and denying than asserting any thing" (p. 78). To modern ears, such an analysis might take on a favorable tone. That, however, was not Baker's intention. Whatever the growing prestige of Socrates in the English-speaking world, Baker was determined to refute ostensibly Socratic practices—an aim communicated through the title of his book, *Reflections Upon Learning; Wherein Is Shewn the Insufficiency Thereof, in Its Several Particulars: In Order to Evince the Usefulness and Necessity of Revelation.* Inquisitiveness, in short, was not a match for religious inspiration in Baker's mind.

Generally speaking, those writing about an ostensibly Socratic approach to education in the 18th century were generous in their appraisals. In 1745, Scottish scholar David Fordyce published his *Dialogues Concerning Education*, in which he asserted that "the *Socratic* Doctrine . . . sets [the mental] Faculty a working, and supplies it with Materials to fashion." The process, he argued, freed the mind from "Dependence on Authority" (p. 210). Reverend Vicesimus Knox, Oxford fellow and headmaster of Tunbridge School in England, made numerous references to Socrates in his 1781 treatise *Liberal Education: Or, a Practical Treatise on the Methods of Acquiring Useful and Polite Learning*. And in 1743, an English hymn writer named Isaac Watts published *The Improvement of the Mind* in which he dedicated a chapter to the "Socratic Way of Disputation." This method, Watts wrote, "represents the form of a dialogue or common conversation, which is a much more easy, more pleasant, and a more sprightly way of instruction, and more fit to excite the attention and sharpen the penetration of the learner, than solitary reading, or silent attention to a lecture" (p. 126). In 1754 Watts's text was printed in Boston—the first print reference to the Socratic method in the American colonies, though certainly not the last.[4]

ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

American admiration for the figure of Socrates, at least until the 19th century, was more evident than discussion of any particular classroom teaching method inspired by the ancient philosopher. That began to slowly change, however, as schooling became more regular and school enrollments expanded as a product of increasing state involvement. In 1789, for instance, Massachusetts required towns of 50 or more families to provide elementary education and required towns of 200 or more to create grammar schools. In 1795, New York and Connecticut followed suit, going one step further by providing state funding for such projects.[5]

Education, of course, remained a locally controlled matter. Still, rising enrollments, along with a growing European literature on pedagogy, contributed to an increased interest in teaching method. Works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Friedrich Herbart, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and others were translated into English and referenced in English-language periodicals. Pestalozzi (1894) himself, in fact, mentioned the Socratic method, writing in *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children* of the schoolmaster Krüsi who "tried to combine the catechizing, with Socratizing" (p. 45). Noting that the effort was unsuccessful and "essentially impossible for children," his mention of the method is nevertheless evidence of the idea's growing visibility among educators (p. 46).

Still, although enrollments were growing, funds were badly managed, there was little centralization of authority, and traditional practices persisted. Most instruction in the United States remained quite conservative, consisting mainly of lecture and rote memorization (Kaestle, 1983, p. 29). As Samuel Goodrich (1873) recalled, education during the period was characterized by "repetition, drilling, line upon line, and precept upon precept, with here and there a little of the birch" (p. 379). Consequently, while the Socratic method was mentioned in different venues, there was hardly a support structure in place to promote any particular method that differed from what American teachers had learned from their own experience as students. Further, there was no particular incentive for them to look beyond that tradition, as it largely matched community expectations.

In the 1830s, a number of cities began to open their charity schools to all students, effectively creating public schools under district control. As reformers set to work building systems, they quickly began making a case for improved instruction. To some extent, these calls reflected an actual problem associated with poor quality control mechanisms, and to some extent they were the result of reformers flexing their muscles. In either case, as historian Carl Kaestle (1983) has observed, by the 1840s "reports of the ignorance of common-school teachers were widespread" (p. 21). Advocating for greater professionalization of the practice of teaching, they helped create an environment conducive to the adoption of new methods. The question, of course, was what those methods might be.

Some, like Henry Edwin Dwight (1829) argued that the United States should take a cue from Prussia, where the training and certification of teachers was a matter of state control (p. 244). Yet little capacity for state-directed teacher training existed in the 1830s, or even the 1840s. Consequently, pedagogical reform in the antebellum period was largely driven by teachers themselves, rather than by policy elites.

Teachers employing what a number of authors were calling the "Socratic method" stood to benefit in a number of ways. Certainly they were interested in improving professional practice. But no less importantly to teachers, the method seemed to have the potential to function as the foundation of a professional pedagogy—the ostensibly common inheritance of all Western teachers. The problem with teaching, as Orville Taylor surmised in 1834, was that "teachers [had] not made instruction their business—their profession" (p. 91). Professionalization, though, would require more than commitment. It would require unique skills. As Taylor put it, "the reason why the art of teaching is so little understood is—*there is no instruction in the past.* If teaching had been made a profession, there would be a record of the success and the failure of the past, which would contain [valuable] lessons" (p. 92). The past, in other words, might hold the power to professionalize teaching.

Given this desire to develop pedagogy and ground it in a shared past, references to the Socratic method appeared more frequently in the mid-19th century. But rather than offering a specific account of ancient practices, descriptions of the Socratic method were often quite vague, framed as a part of the teachings of wise men—many of them modern. In an 1836 education and instruction annual, for instance, the Socratic method was discussed in the context of 18th-century German reformer Johann Bernhard Basedow's writings. Basedow, according to the work, believed that "in order to exclude all mechanical instruction and to rouse the minds of the young to activity," didactic instruction should be rejected in favor of the Socratic method (Woodbridge, 1836, p. 484). In 1837, the same annual claimed that Johann Pestalozzi "opposed the abuse which was made of the Socratic method in many of the Philanthropinic [sic] and other schools, by attempting to draw something out of children before they had received any knowledge" (Woodbridge, 1837, p. 10). Such hazy definitions would be useful for rhetorical purposes—for billing teaching as a methodized profession—but seemingly not for guiding classroom practice.

Other authors were similarly vague about the nature of Socratic instruction, but associated it with exemplary classroom teachers rather than with theorists like Basedow and Pestalozzi. Englishman Ebenezer Cooke (1894), in his introduction to a translated edition of Pestalozzi's *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*, wrote that between 1845 and 1850 his own school underwent a transition from "the old school of our forefathers . . . to the new school of trained teachers." By "Socratising," he recalled, his

teacher taught pupils to think. "It was a revelation," he recalled, "and the impression of it lives still an example of what a teacher may do" (pp. viii–ix). Similarly, in an 1853 lecture to the American Institute of Instruction in Troy, New York, Joshua Bates, Jr. (1852)—son of the former president of Middlebury College—expounded on the teachings of Dr. Thomas Arnold, former headmaster of England's Rugby School. Arnold, according to Bates, "valued highly the Socratic method of instruction and taught his scholars by questioning them" (p. 26). Such a method, he proposed, could be adopted by others, though it would be "no small attainment for a teacher to know how to ask questions" (p. 26).

In part, definitions of Socratic teaching practice were imprecise because the task of piecing together the philosopher's method is extremely challenging. The nature of Socratic instructional practices, as modern classicists and scholars of education have pointed out, is highly ambiguous (Hansen, 1988; Scott, 2000). And as Gregory Vlastos has pointed out, Socrates offers no clear definition for his approach to dialogue, variously describing his practice as refuting, examining critically, and censuring (Vlastos, 1994). Further, Socrates is portrayed differently by different authors, and even differently across the works of a single author like Plato.

Yet descriptions of the method were also vague because educators were seemingly more interested in naming and substantiating a pedagogical method than they were in working with ancient texts. The real reward of the Socratic method, after all, was in its name—a name that carried the authority of the past and that implied a specificity of approach characteristic of professionals.

Many educators produced adequate and serviceable definitions of the Socratic method by contrasting it with traditional approaches to classroom instruction. And by the mid-19th century, a growing class of teacher educators began to use the terminology of the Socratic method—employing it to name, and seemingly justify, an alternative to what most teachers had been exposed to as students. In 1856, for instance, Samuel Simon Schmucker, cofounder of Gettysburg College, addressed the Teachers' Convention of Adams County, Pennsylvania, and advocated for a diverse approach to instruction which would include the Socratic method. "Strive, by thorough drilling, repetition, and the *Socratic* method of questioning," he directed his audience, "to impress on the pupils' minds clear and distinct impressions of the subject under consideration" (p. 319). That same year, a dispatch from *The Rhode Island Schoolmaster* noted that if the aim is "rapidity in acquisition, without much thought or ability to seek further than the book, we shall use [rote], and if we want [the pupil] . . . to acquire these possessions not for a day or a year, but for eternity, we shall then undoubtedly use the [Socratic] method" (Editor's Department, 1856, p. 281). Thus, by the time of the Civil War the Socratic method was being identified as a professional tool that could be taught to teachers and used as a basis for evaluating them.

After the Civil War, more extensive networks for disseminating pedagogy—state-supported teacher training institutions, educational journals, and a pedagogy lecture circuit, among them—emerged. And as they did, they accelerated not only the entrance of the Socratic method into the professional language of teachers and teacher educators, but also the belief that the method was the inheritance of antiquity. In 1877, for example, Joseph Baldwin of the State Normal School in Kirkville, Missouri observed that "this old, old method is slowly but irresistibly tending to become universal." And though Baldwin noted that the method was old, he was sure to point out its continued relevance. "Mere school *keepers*, rote teachers, quacks, shams, and fossils will never adopt this plan of teaching," he observed; "but as teachers become familiar with the science of education, and skillful in the art of teaching, they will necessarily use the Socratic method of giving instruction." It was, he noted, "the natural method" (p. 163).

Baldwin's feelings were echoed by other teacher educators like J.W. Stearns of Wisconsin State University, who in an 1887 address argued that teaching Socratically "requires very great skill . . . not merely knowledge" (1888, p. 66). And attendees of a Chautauqua, New York National Educational Association meeting during that period were told that no other method of instruction "requires such consummate skill for its successful management" (National Educational Association, 1880, p. 48). In short, the Socratic method was increasingly billed by its promoters as the method of professionals, even if it remained less than clear what exactly the Socratic method consisted of.

Did teachers actually employ the various interpretations of the Socratic method that were being advocated by policy leaders and teacher educators? It is difficult to say. An 1866 volume of *New York Teacher* noted that the Socratic method was being employed in New York City (Resident Editor's Department, p. 12). Michigan reports from 1869 (Practical Department) and Wisconsin (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction) cited use of the Socratic method, as did an 1879 publication from the Iowa State Department of Education (*Iowa Normal Monthly*). The historical record, however, is thin, and saying anything definitive is impossible. Nevertheless, such reports indicate that something called the Socratic method—likely oriented around engaging students with questions, and framed as an alternative to traditional pedagogy—was being used in American classrooms.

Another factor here is worth considering, and that is the degree to which teachers would have seen something to gain in using the Socratic method. As compulsory schooling laws in the mid- to late 19th century grew stronger and more widespread, a new cross-section of students was drawn into the schools. At the same time, laws against the use of corporal punishment were being instituted, reducing the teacher's toolkit for controlling the classroom. Many teachers, consequently, saw traditional methods of lecture and

rote instruction as outmoded and ineffective. And the Socratic method, however generally defined, had been positioned as a foil to lecture and recitation. Consequently, many teachers may have seen the method as a solution to the increasingly pressing problem of generating student engagement—adopting it as an ostensibly time-worn approach that had finally been remembered.

Whatever the depth of the Socratic method's penetration into practice, though, it can be said with relative certainty that there was a strong professionalization incentive for teachers to adopt specialized approaches to their work, that a growing number of teacher training institutions were happy to meet that demand, and that the Socratic method was one of few named methods that was consistently identified in the literature and by policy leaders. As a consequence, the Socratic method emerged in the era after the Civil War as a common concept in discussions about professional teaching.

THE METHOD OF PROFESSIONALS

By the late 19th century, the Socratic method was widely mentioned in the world of K–12 education. Still, it would be hard to make a case that it was a cornerstone of teacher training or professional practice. But as a more formal educational system emerged—replete with licensure exams and required pedagogy courses—that began to change. Consequently, though the Socratic method continued to be defined in relatively general terms, the reach of that definition extended further across teacher education, the literature in the field, and the knowledge base of teachers.

As with earlier interpreters of the method, those in the late 19th and early 20th century expressed little concern with what the practices of Socrates may have been. In an 1891 article in *Educational Review*, R. M. Wenley observed that what was passing for the Socratic method was "not the true Socratic method" (p. 408). Still, he expressed an understanding of the perceived misuse of the methods of the ancient Athenian. "In the personality of Socrates," he wrote, "there is so much that attracts" (p. 409) particularly for teachers afraid that they are "toiling aimlessly, or without consciousness of the effects which we desire to produce" (p. 412). But rather than suggesting that educators sever ties with Socrates, Wenley made the case that, instead, they "be prepared . . . to put a liberal interpretation upon the phrase." As "long as we remember that we are doing so," he concluded, "no fault can be found" (p. 409). But remembering that fact was easier said than done, particularly in a period dominated by an impulse to codify and standardize.

One manifestation of this impulse was the rise of state licensing exams, which became more prevalent at the turn of the century. From New York to Montana, leaders in emerging educational bureaucracies were searching

for a basis upon which they might distinguish trained teachers from their unprepared counterparts. Naturally, then, many licensure tests began to include the Socratic method on them—defining the method as a key concept in educational "theory and practice" (Montana State Board of Education, 1897, p. 14). In turn-of-the-century Oklahoma, for instance, the annual examination of applicants for Conductors' and Instructors' Certificates included the question "What is the so-called Socratic method? Illustrate" (*First Biennial Report*, 1893, p. 61). And a list prepared by the superintendent of Kansas City Schools included a question asking: "What is the Socratic method, and to what extent do you use it?" (Questions on History of Pedagogy, 1894, p. 230). But because such tests were oriented toward easily scorable items and often provided limited space for answers to open-ended questions, they frequently fostered narrow and ahistorical understandings of the method. A guide to the 1904 New York State Uniform Examination provided a typical "correct" definition of the method: teaching "by means of questions" (Teachers Examinations, 1904, p. 317). Thus, educators were not only being increasingly exposed to the Socratic method, but also to an ever-more simply and broadly defined version of it.

Pedagogy textbooks also reflected this shift, providing brief descriptions of the method, sometimes situating it among dozens of other ideas that a professional educator should be familiar with. In 1900, Joseph Baldwin of the University of Texas wrote in his textbook *School Management and School Methods* that when employing the Socratic method "the teacher leads the pupil to find out for himself" (p. 164). And an article by John Adams included in a 1904 textbook declared that "the essential element of the method is the reciprocal action between teacher and pupil" (p. 411). Though such definitions differed, they did convey a common message: the Socratic method involved asking students questions and letting them respond openly.

In the early 20th century, the Socratic method was also put to new use in departments and colleges of education—as an element of pedagogical "science." No longer merely used as a foil to the traditional practices of rote and lecture, it was increasingly used to buffer what Jürgen Herbst (1989) has called the "theoretical-systematic bent" of teacher education at the turn of the century (p. 225). Consequently, while the method continued to be defined as a means of generating student interest and easing the work of the teacher, professors of education also began to make the case that teaching by means of questions promoted cognitive development among pupils. As the author of an 1899 article wrote, "the old Socratic method which slumbered for centuries [has] been unearthed in this age and made the basis of *modern* education . . . [because it] tends to develop power to think rather than to cram the mind with facts" (Beggs, 1899, pp. 182, 183). That same year, William Lowe Bryan—a graduate of G. Stanley Hall's Clark University and later president of Indiana University—concluded that the

Socratic method was exerting "a strong and wholesome influence in pedagogical training" (1899, p. 444). And in 1901, Yale Pedagogy instructor Edward Franklin Buchner wrote in *The Review of Education* that "the so-called *Socratic method* . . . is the chief type of modern methods" (p. 181). The old, in short, was also new. The Socratic method, as framed by departments and colleges of education, was a pillar of modern pedagogical science—a highly relevant pedagogy that trained professionals might apply in their classrooms.

Departments and colleges of education, of course, also taught other methods alongside the Socratic method. Some, like the lecture method, were products of tradition that had merely been labeled as methodologies. Others, like the "topic method"—studying a subject across texts—were more recent creations, spreading by word of mouth, textbook, or training. A look at pedagogy textbooks from the first decades of the 20th century, for instance, makes clear the degree to which teacher educators sought to establish a fixed set of methods that would serve as the basis of a professional knowledge base. George Wallace Neet's 1903 *Studies in Pedagogy* included the object method (interacting with various items of ostensibly educational value), the consecutive method (asking and answering questions in recitation), the promiscuous method (random questioning), the lecture method, the laboratory method, and the Socratic method. A 1903 textbook by John P. Munson outlined "General Methods" including the Socratic method, the catechetical method, the textbook method, the discovery method, and the lecture method. In a 1907 textbook, Jacob Young referenced the Socratic method along with others like the heuristic method (p. 61). Textbooks from 1908 (Sloan, p. 103), 1910 (Adams, p. 83), and 1911 (Barrett, p. 130) discussed the Socratic method as one of dozens of methods that might be employed by teachers. In his 1915 textbook *What Is Education?* Harvard professor of education Ernest Carroll Moore described just four methods: lecture, recitation, heuristic, and Socratic. And William Herschel Bruce (1916), president of the North Texas State Normal College, listed four in his textbook, keeping the lecture method and the Socratic method and dropping the recitation and heuristic methods for the topic method and the developing method (pp. 213–218). Thus, in many such lists, the Socratic method was a constant. As James Chapman and George Counts wrote in their 1924 work, *Principles of Education*, "the recent convert to the Socratic method of instruction," was likely the product of "the 'method courses'" taught at normal schools, colleges, and universities (p. 549).

Most of the methods listed in such works did not stand the test of time. Many lacked the advantage of being grounded in a real or imagined tradition. Some were referred to by different names, or only by one author, and never reached critical mass. And some, like the promiscuous method, simply sounded like bad ideas. The Socratic method, however, was connected to one of Western culture's most authoritative figures. Further, as

John Dewey and his ilk became standard-bearers for a more student-centered instruction, the Socratic method increasingly aligned with the pedagogy of modernity.

THE DISAPPEARED PAST

By the early decades of the 20th century, the history of the Socratic method's "rediscovery" had faded, as had much of the uncertainty among educators about what Socrates may have done in ancient Athens. After all, a fairly uniform definition of the method—teaching by asking questions—had emerged, and any reference to classical texts was exceedingly rare. Thus, by the 20th century even many critics assumed that what passed as the Socratic method was the direct inheritance of antiquity. As New York superintendent of schools Joseph S. Taylor wrote in 1908, it was "evident that the purely Socratic form of dialetical [sic] discussion is ill adapted to modern conditions of teaching in any grade or kind of educational institution known to us" (p. 502). And Ralph Pringle, of the Illinois State Normal School, noted in 1927 that the Socratic method was no longer appropriate because the needs of ancient Athenians were different from "the needs of the high-school classroom of to-day" (p. 106). The working assumption among many was that an unbroken line ran from the past directly to the present.

As the history of the method's rediscovery and reinvention was lost, the figure of Socrates was also being minimized. After all, the assumption was that Socratic pedagogy survived in some recognizable form, diminishing the need for discussion and debate about what Socrates may or may not have done in antiquity. Several texts in the 1920s and 1930s, consequently, stripped the method of its capitalized first letter, referring to the "socratic method" as if unrelated to the historical figure. In Edgar Dawson's 1927 *Teaching the Social Studies*, he observed that the "project method, the problem method, the socratic method [etc.] . . . all produce good results" (p. 182). A 1930 article from *School Executives* magazine noted that "the old socratic method of questioning, wisely framed, holds much of merit" (Tucker, 1930, p. 198). Articles in the *Journal of Education* (1935, p. 673) and *The Social Studies* (1937, p. 150) advocated for a lower-case "socratic method," whether studying poetry or the travels of Columbus.

Thus, the Socratic method became characterized by a kind of duality. It was perceived as the direct inheritance of antiquity—a time-traveling product of the ancient past. Yet, at the same time, it was a piece of common teacher knowledge—a well-known product of the present. As a popular 1950 textbook noted, Socrates "is important not only because he was the first," but also because "throughout the world there are teachers who use the Socratic method" (Cole, 1959, pp. 8, 25). A piece of collective memory, it was seemingly something that all teachers had the power to use.

Yet contrary to what American K–12 educators in the 20th century came to believe, the Socratic method was not handed down from the ancient past. In fact, though a case might be made that it was partially "rediscovered" in the 18th century, it might equally be argued that the Socratic method was invented from scratch. Those who extolled its virtues had their particular reasons, of course. That history, however, was largely forgotten, and with it was lost a sense of doubt and uncertainty about the method.

Often perceived as an antidote to traditional teaching methods, the Socratic method became synonymous with the asking of questions in the classroom—not exactly the practice of Socrates, at least as his methods can be deduced from study of works by Plato, Aristotle, Aristophanes, and Xenophon. Yet even if the ancient philosopher's method *had* been rediscovered in some authentic form, it would have quickly mutated as it entered textbook definitions, licensure tests, and the classrooms of college and normal school pedagogues. Any more complicated, perhaps even historical, understandings of the method were smoothed away as the concept was reduced to a single common denominator: questioning.

Asking questions, then, became enshrined not only as a teaching "method," but also as a highly legitimate one. Even though it was vaguely defined, the Socratic method had, by the mid-20th century, become a widely recognized concept in K–12 education.

A NEW METHOD FOR LEGAL EDUCATION

Professed adherence to the Socratic method was not confined to K–12 classrooms or the teacher education programs responsible for instruction in pedagogy. In fact, perhaps the most consistent self-identification of Socratic instruction over the past 100 years has been in university schools of law, where it took on yet another kind of meaning.

American law schools began to emerge in the early 19th century. While colleges and universities had long offered classes in the subject, legal training remained primarily a matter of apprenticeship rather than of formal education. By the dawn of the Civil War, however, dozens of law schools had been established in the United States—many at prestigious universities like Harvard and Yale. Still, most lawyers entered the profession without passing through the halls of such institutions. As such, schools of law were faced with many of the same dilemmas as schools of education, and particularly with developing a methodology that would distinguish the unique contribution of formal education in the place of work experience.

In those early days of legal education, teaching practices mirrored those in other parts of the university. In the post-bellum period, the so-called Dwight method, which consisted of lecture, memorization, drill, and frequent practice in moot court, was as common as any other. Still, while the method was popular, it inadequately defended law schools against the

criticism that they provided nothing more than what could be acquired with a library card and an internship. Further, though the approach was named for a particular educator—Columbia University Professor Theodore W. Dwight—it was hardly unique from what was common practice across the university.

In 1870, Christopher Columbus Langdell was appointed dean of Harvard Law School by the school's president, Charles Eliot. Believing that law could be taught as a science, replete with "certain principles or doctrines," Langdell (1871) developed a method in which students would make intense study of particular cases. Knowledge of each individual principle, he believed, was best acquired "by studying the cases in which it is embodied." Coupled with what he identified as "the Socratic dialogue," Langdell contended that students would gain deep and well-rounded understandings of fundamental aspects of so-called legal science (Stone, 1971, p. 406). Thus, by fusing an ostensibly ancient pedagogical technique with a modern method, Harvard would prepare its graduates to face any legal question with mental dexterity—a new kind of rationale for legal education.

The case method, somewhat surprisingly, was initially rejected by students accustomed to more traditional legal instruction, and many insisted that they were learning little in their classes (Stuckey, 2007). Yet Langdell had the unflinching support of Harvard's president, Charles Eliot, who in his 1880 annual report advised "a large admixture of the Socratic method" in instruction. Consequently, Langdell was able to leverage Harvard's institutional prestige and a tie to antiquity to promote a method that he believed would make a powerful case for legal education inside the university (Stone, 1971, p. 93). Soon, the case method—including its allegedly Socratic component—gained traction and spread, taking root at several leading law schools including the University of Chicago, Yale, and Columbia. In fact, Theodore Dwight left Columbia as a result, moving to New York University in an effort to preserve traditional legal instruction.

Despite professed adherence to the Socratic method, it seems that few legal educators were particularly concerned with the practices of antiquity. One reason, of course, is that riddling out a particularly authentic Socratic method remained a significant challenge. But perhaps more important was the fact that, like their peers in K–12 classrooms and schools of education, law professors were less focused on questions of ancient history than they were on establishing a signature pedagogy. And the case method, with its emphasis on Socratic questioning, was an effective means to that end. According to a 1914 Carnegie Foundation description, such an approach was "completely opposed" to the characterless "method of instruction by means of text-books and lectures" (Redlich, 1914, p. 12).

Like their counterparts in K–12 education, legal educators were using the Socratic method to "methodize" an alternative to traditional instruction—lending increased credibility to a new kind of practice by

endowing it with a specific, and historical, name. Despite similar motives, however, the general interpretation of the Socratic method in legal education was quite distinct (Mertz, 2007). Specifically, the method became associated with an aggressive approach to questioning, in which instructors "unremittingly" pushed students to think through cases and their particulars (Redlich, 1914, p. 12). As a 1918 centennial history of Harvard Law School put it, legal professors used their Socratic questions to pit "one good student against another" and subject students "to close scrutiny and severe criticism" (Harvard Law School Association, 1918, pp. 37, 194). In short, a different kind of Socratic teaching was emerging.

Endorsed by the nation's most prestigious institutions, the case method swept across American law schools as "those aspiring to be considered elite rapidly followed" (Stevens, 2001, p. 63). As a 1947 article from the *University of Chicago Law Review* put it, "the method first and perhaps best used by Socrates" had become a new "tradition" in legal instruction (Kalven, 1947, p. 221). Once firmly established, the method was perpetuated by an apprenticeship of observation, in which instructors employed the methods they had experienced as students, and in turn trained a new generation in the style of their own instruction (Lortie, 1975; Mertz, 2007). Further, as a mark of distinction for legal pedagogy, it became entrenched by notions of legitimacy (Riesman, 1956). As a later commenter observed, "a law school just isn't a law school without the Socratic method" (Garner, 2001, p. 1597). According to one recent study, 97% of law professors use what they refer to as the Socratic method (Friedland, 1996, p. 27).

But even though legal educators across the 20th century increasingly employed a similar pedagogy, often identifying their approach as "Socratic," there was hardly uniformity in application. Some legal educators, for instance, emphasized problem solving, while others focused on modeling the courtroom experience. Some saw it as a means of holding students accountable for readings, while others saw it as a way of promoting critical thinking (Dickinson, 2009). Without a single definition of the method, diversity of interpretation was seemingly inevitable.

Still, some themes in Socratic legal instruction became dominant. Many, for instance, describe a pedagogical approach that resembles a hazing ritual. As one author explained, "the object of the game is to produce the answer that the professor thinks is correct. If the student fails to answer correctly, personal humiliation follows in various forms" (Rosato, 1997, pp. 41–42). Others have called the use of the Socratic method in American law schools a form of "ritualized combat," a "civilized battle," and a "boot camp" in which professors "destroy" students through "friendly assault" (Garner, 2001, p. 1601). And a recent legal education textbook notes that "many of the complaints about classroom abuse of students involve the misuse of Socratic dialogue" (Stuckey, 2007, p. 216). Such examples are no doubt extreme. They do, however, reveal the degree to which cultural norms have shaped the Socratic method—giving the use of the method in

law schools its own nuances and peculiarities—even as the method's exact meaning has grown more slippery.

It is certainly possible to find passages in classical texts, specifically in works like Plato's *Meno*, that correspond with common teaching practices in legal education (Cicchino, 2001; Eisele, 1994). Yet the Socratic method in American law schools, not unlike the method in K–12 education, was shaped more by the needs and concerns of modernity than it was by interpretations of antiquity. Specifically, it was used to legitimize a new approach to legal education that, it was hoped, would frame legal education as work best suited for universities.

Yet even though a particular conception of the Socratic method took hold as a signature pedagogy in law schools, there remained no singular definition of it. Consequently, it bent and flexed between and within law schools (Dickinson, 2009; Mertz, 2007, pp. 142–144). Nevertheless, nomenclature sent a particular message—promoting an illusion of consistency not just across law schools, but across the world of education.

GREAT BOOKS AND THE SOCRATIC SEMINAR

Although references to the Socratic method caught on later among those teaching undergraduate seminars than it did among those teaching future teachers and lawyers, professed admiration for it was just as great. Professors of the liberal arts, of course, had been teaching Socrates for centuries. But the first systematic discussion of applying the Socratic method to teaching undergraduates was in the context of what would eventually become known as the Great Books movement—a movement with roots in the early 20th century, and a highly visible offshoot of the broader push to restore general education at colleges and universities.

The Great Books movement family tree often traces the origin of the idea back to John Erskine of Columbia University. A professor of English, Erskine was a committed and adventurous teacher and in 1917—8 years after arriving on campus—he proposed a 2-year honors program in which students would read roughly 50 so-called "great books" (Adler, 1977, p. 60; Erskine, 1948). Consideration of the proposal was interrupted by World War I, but soon afterward was taken up to lasting effect.

The method Erskine employed in his General Honors course, which he called "the most natural of all methods," focused on discussion and questioning rather than lecture and recall (Erskine, 1948, p. 174). Such an approach to teaching, of course, could have been defended without reference to antiquity. Yet the figure of Socrates was a powerful symbol in the intellectual world Erskine inhabited. Recalling the influence of his colleague Frederick Woodbridge, for instance, Erskine (1948) noted that Woodbridge "was devoted to Plato, not because he cared overmuch for the Platonic philosophy, but because the dialogues contain the portrait of

Socrates, and Socrates was precisely the kind of man Woodbridge wanted us all to be—that is, all Columbia professors" (pp. 80–81). Other scholars whom he held in esteem, like Amherst president Alexander Meiklejohn, presented Socrates as the founding father of the liberal arts ideal whose example might help stave off anti-intellectualism among the student body. Recalling his time at Amherst, Erskine praised his students for having become "masters of dialectic," much like the ancient philosopher (p. 71).

The figure of Socrates was drawn on by a number of academics in the early 20th century who were concerned with what they saw as a dissipating curricular core and an increasing concern among students with practical and vocational matters. Most, however, like Erskine, addressed such issues within their own institutions. They referenced a Socratic approach, but made no claims about a particular methodology of instruction. A new generation, however—many of them graduates of schools like Columbia and Amherst—sought to work on a larger scale, and as they pursued that vision, they would draw on common symbols of intellectual life to represent the cause.

One such young scholar was John Erskine's student Mortimer Adler. Adler had moved through Columbia as an undergraduate, graduate student, and instructor. And, in 1927 he published his first book, *Dialectic*, in which he lionized the Socratic habit of entering conversation "completely, freely, and without the expectation of practical issue or intellectual reward" (p. 106). Attracted to Adler's views on instruction, and particularly Adler's commitment to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, University of Chicago president Robert Maynard Hutchins invited him in 1930 to join the Chicago faculty.

Hutchins was determined to restore the liberal or "general" education mission of American higher education, which he perceived as being threatened not just by the elective system, but by rising trends of vocationalism and specialization. But even though they venerated a traditional liberal education, Hutchins and his cohort were not entirely backward looking. In fact, Socratic discussion, which Adler (1946) called in his *Manual for Discussion Leaders* "the very core of liberal education," was not the pedagogy employed by educators of previous eras, in which liberal education was dominant (p. 53). Adler knew this. Yet Adler and others were not concerned with the history of liberal education per se. Their interest, instead, was in an *ideal* of liberal education, which they believed required a greater degree of commitment to learning, and not merely to the pursuit of a career.

Like other interpreters of the Socratic method, Adler and his fellow travelers expressed little concern about how their readings of it squared with whatever may have happened in the ancient past. What seemingly mattered most was the authority inherent in a figure that they could draw on—a figure who they could position as a foil to the uncritical vocationalism of the modern university. Consequently, the Socrates they collectively

imagined was more like the leader of a book group than like a university lecturer—concerned more with the flow of ideas than with the acquisition of specific information.

The idea of undergraduates sitting around engaging in open-ended discussion was still a fairly radical proposition at the time. Even the figure of Socrates, it seems, was not enough to legitimize such a directional shift. Consequently, when Hutchins proposed a Committee on Liberal Arts in 1936 and invited Alexander Meiklejohn protégé Scott Buchanan to join Adler and philosopher Richard McKeon on such a committee, the move was met by strong resistance among the University of Chicago faculty.

Rather than come to Chicago, then, Buchanan left for St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, where he, along with Stringfellow Barr, founded the school's New Program (Smith, 1983, p. 9). The two Rhodes scholars envisioned a program designed around what they called the Socratic discussion of important books. Again, the Socratic method was loosely defined and reflected little of the obsession with ancient texts that would characterize the work of classical philologists. Instead, their concern was with a more modern pedagogical ideal—one promoted by the likes of John Erskine, Alexander Meiklejohn, Robert Hutchins, and Mortimer Adler, as well as by scholars (and former Erskine students) like Jacques Barzun and Lionel Trilling.

Within the small worlds of the burgeoning Great Books movement and the general education movement, the Socratic method soon took on a new meaning particular to liberal arts education. This was most clearly evident at St. John's, where a failing college provided Buchanan and Barr with a virtually blank slate on which to make their mark. By design, all classes at St. John's were "Socratic"—meaning that they were small, discussion-based seminars. As one of the college's in-house publications put it, "the argument will drift and it should be followed wherever it leads, but all opinions should be advanced with reasons; this is what makes the seminar somewhat Socratic" (Bomhardt, 1968, p. 27). Even tutors, who led such discussions, were to have themselves passed through "several stages of a Socratic dialectical education" (Grant & Riesman, 1974, p. 34).

Other colleges mirrored the work of St. John's. Shimer College, Monteith College, Thomas Aquinas College, Gutenberg College, and Rose Hill College all adopted some version of the program carried out at St. John's, though with mixed levels of success. Other schools, like the University of Notre Dame or Wesleyan University, created honors programs or schools-within-schools that used the Great Books concept. Outside of academia, Great Books discussion groups built around the "so-called Socratic method" and designed for working adults experienced a phenomenal period of growth in the late 1940s before eventually losing steam (Mayer, 1946, p. 2).

Yet while the Great Books movement was the purest manifestation of the ostensibly Socratic undergraduate seminar, it was hardly the only point of

impact. Columbia University, for instance, had built on Erskine's General Honors course to create a core curriculum for its undergraduates, instituting it in 1947. Core classes were small, discussion-based, and broad in scope. Likewise, at other leading schools like Harvard, school leaders created new rules mandating a particular breadth of study while advocating for a new approach to classroom teaching (Hawkins, 1986, pp. 21–23). A 1945 Harvard committee, for instance, wrote that "one of the most fundamental problems in education" was, in their view, "how to reconcile [the] necessity for common belief with the equally obvious necessity for new and independent insights leading to change." Put another way, students needed a core of knowledge, but should also be prepared to challenge that core in light of "new conditions which call for new qualities of mind and outlook" (Harvard Committee, 1945, pp. 43–58).

The so-called Socratic seminar—at least as defined within this small world—aligned with that vision, as it implied reading a core of well-regarded works and discussing them in small classes. As a 1936 editorial in the *Bulletin of the Association of American Colleges* noted, elements of "the Old Tradition" might be preserved while injecting new life into the classroom that would allow instructors to "learn along with the students, to exercise patience and tolerance, to put questions directly . . . [and] to stimulate students to undertake seemingly impossible tasks" (Changing Criteria for Testing, 1936, p. 534). Not surprisingly, then, the Socratic seminar—yet another interpretation of the Socratic method—became a common descriptor for changes taking place in the world of undergraduate education.

By the 20th century's midpoint, the Socratic method, or at least the language of it, had made deep inroads into the plural worlds of higher education. The figure of Socrates had proven useful to those training teachers, those educating future lawyers, and those working with undergraduates. By referring to a "Socratic method" with supposed roots in antiquity, educators in each subfield were able to promote a sense of substance and internal coherence for their particular projects. Yet clearly delineating a method was of no more importance to those working in higher education than it had been to their counterparts in the K–12 arena. As such, though ostensibly Socratic teaching practices would continue to gain status and increase in visibility, they would remain difficult to pin down.

SOCRATES UNBOUND

By the second half of the 20th century the Socratic method had been liberated, both from ancient texts and from its more recent history. A nominal tie with antiquity persisted, certainly. But for the most part, educators were free to identify a wide range of practices as Socratic.

In large measure, this was due to the absence of clear directives about what, exactly, constituted the method. Seeking to employ Socratic teaching practices, many educators turned not to a set of clearly delineated principles of instruction, but to their own personal experiences. After all, many had observed something called the Socratic method in their own schooling—at the K–12 level, in undergraduate classrooms, and in graduate training—all of which would have varied across instructors and across contexts. Thus, with many models to work with and few agreed-upon guidelines beyond the general rule of asking questions, educators were free to borrow what they liked from others, take their own liberties, and make of the method what they wished.

This is not to say that educators completely dismissed the historical figure of Socrates. They did not. Many continued to reference the fact that Socrates taught by asking questions. The claim, of course, was indistinct, leaving undefined the nature of his questions, their tone, their number, their purpose, and so on. But it was repeated so often that many understandably perceived the statement as having captured the essence of Socratic practices. Rather than viewing that basic truth about asking questions as the beginning of a puzzle to which we have few additional answers, many saw it as a complete picture. Such a perspective would have allowed an educator to call nearly any kind of practice Socratic as long as questions were involved.

Ironically, all of this was taking place as scholars of ancient Greece were struggling to pin down what was unique about the teaching method of Socrates. In the 1970s, for instance, Gregory Vlastos, then of Princeton University, made the case that the truest representation of Socrates was that of the early Platonic dialogues. As Vlastos and others—among them Norman Gulley and Terry Irwin—saw it, the key aspect of Socratic practice was the "standard elenchus" in which individuals would agree to answer all of the philosopher's questions according to their own beliefs (Vlastos, 1971, pp. 1–21). But what were the unique characteristics of the elenchus? Socrates, as some scholars pointed out, used the elenchus in myriad ways, including as a form of helping interlocutors "recall" information. In *Meno*, for example, Socrates uses the elenchus to guide a slave through a geometrical problem, concluding that the boy must have known the relevant theorem in a previous life. Some scholars, however, like W. K. C. Guthrie (1968), made the case that the elenchus was not a means by which answers to problems could be found. Its purpose, he argued, was merely to demonstrate ignorance and promote humility. Others, like Vlastos, insisted that the elenchus was not just a tool for refutation. According to Vlastos (1982), the elenchus could be used to discover truth through a two-party argument, but that the truths in question must be moral in nature. Others, still, including Vlastos's students Alexander Nehamas and Richard Kraut, developed their own particular interpretations of the elenchus.[6]

Of course, not all scholars in the field agreed that the elenchus was always characteristic of Socratic teaching. And future classicists would eventually call into question whether Socrates had any method at all.[7]

But while scholars of ancient Greece were wrestling to extract Socrates from the works of Plato, Aristotle, Aristophanes, and Xenophon, K–12 educators and college professors were adopting ever-more ambiguous interpretations of ostensibly Socratic teaching. K–12 applications of Mortimer Adler's "Socratic seminar," for instance, as well as various reinterpretations of that idea—most popularly, "Socratic circles"—introduced even more variability into the way educators at all levels understood Socratic teaching (Copeland, 2005; Moeller & Moeller, 2001). Thus, in addition to student participation, asking and answering questions, and the back-and-forth between teacher and student, the term "Socratic" came to imply student-centered class discussion and working with original texts rather than textbooks. In other words, it was beginning to mean so much that use of the term on its own specified very little about the particular nature of instruction.

At all levels, then, context-driven interpretations gave way to an even-more amorphous Socratic method. Still, many continued to imagine that the method had persisted without change across time and space. As one teacher training textbook noted, Socrates developed the "form of questioning . . . [that] we refer to today as the Socratic method" (Ebert & Culyer, 2011, p. 264). As another textbook observed, the approach "is the foundation of current methods that use questioning" and "dates back to the time of Plato and Socrates" (Holt & Kysilka, 2006, p. 333). And as the unscholarly but highly trafficked Web site eHow.com put it, "The Socratic style is probably the oldest method of teaching, and it aims at fostering critical thinking among students" (Fuller, n.d.). Consequently, though the method became something of a pedagogical free-for-all in the late 20th century, it maintained its legitimacy as the presumed inheritance of antiquity. As such, many assumed that the Socratic method they were exposed to was not only a standard representation, but also that it was more or less the teaching practice of the ancient philosopher.

All of this, of course, ignored the particular histories of the Socratic method in various educational subfields, eroding a sense of skepticism about how it might look and what its value might be. If the method—an apparently foundational approach to pedagogy, supposedly passed down from antiquity—was primarily about asking questions, there may have seemed to educators little about it in need of scrutiny or deeper consideration. Not surprisingly, then, many described it as a practically intuitive pedagogy. Some modern commentators praised it as a "spontaneous or unplanned" method requiring no "predetermined questions" (Paul & Elder, 2008, p. 35; Tredway, 1995, p. 21). One proponent noted in the *Journal of Experimental Education* that "the nature of this method is relatively unstructured" (Smith, 1987, p. 150). And, as professional development

provider Rick Garlikov (n.d.) put it, "It sort of comes naturally to me." In some descriptions, it hardly seemed like a method at all.

But whatever the haziness of meaning associated with it, the Socratic method maintained its status as a signature pedagogy because it continued to provide a sense of professional identity for many educators. A clear definition of it had never emerged. In fact, the Socratic method seemed to veer into abstraction in the second half of the 20th century, even in law schools where a central point of origin and common institutional structure had long promoted a relatively common interpretation. Yet despite that fact, it continued to provide its users with a sense of legitimacy and aptitude, as well as an apparently common language for discussing teaching practice. It did so imperfectly, often seeming to communicate more than it actually did. And it certainly had unintended consequences, particularly insofar as it may have provided cover for questionable approaches to instruction. But despite its flaws, the Socratic method remained a known and often beloved concept in American education.

CONCLUSION

The Socratic method in the United States has rarely been about Socrates. Instead, for most of its history, it has been shaped to a greater extent by educators seeking to address their present concerns, whether related to student engagement, professional status, or curricular legitimacy. In fact, American educators working in various fields across different time periods generally took little interest in carefully defining the Socratic method. Some of that, certainly, was due to the complexity of piecing together the incomplete fragments of the ancient past. Equally, however, it was because the method was more often a means to a policy end rather than to a pedagogical one.

Given this focus, the Socratic method evolved into a highly recognizable and thoroughly legitimate, yet hazily understood, concept. In fact, as the method was passed across generations through the apprenticeship of observation, through professional discourse, and through works like teacher training texts, more specific or involved definitions tended to lose ground to a more basic and commonsense reading of it. Educators did borrow or build more specific interpretations of the Socratic method, seeking to realize whatever potential it had as a basis for instruction. In so doing, many no doubt created thoughtful approaches that engaged students in the process of intellectual, moral, and emotional growth. Such efforts, however, would have required not only resources like time and access to support materials, but also an inclination to move beyond the common belief that it is simply the act of "teaching with questions" or that it "comes naturally." In other words, it would have required that educators recognize what they did not know—a difficult task for even the most Socratic among us.

Perhaps, then, the time has come to acknowledge that there is no authentic version of the Socratic method. Such a move, while it might alarm those who purport to use the method, might actually prompt the sort of critical reflection presumably at the core of Socratic teaching. It is unlikely, of course, that a single method would emerge from such discussions. Yet those approaching the issue from different angles and perspectives—whether by grounding their methods in ancient texts or not—might specifically identify different kinds of practices and, in so doing, might provoke closer examinations of pedagogy and facilitate more productive professional communication.

By troubling our understandings of the Socratic method, educators at all levels might be turned back into conversation with one another, to uncertainty about the educative process, and to the daunting but rewarding process of inquiry. Those, after all, are the characteristics of educators who continue to grow and refine their craft. They live with uncertainty and questions, when there is so much pressure to have solutions and answers. They live examined professional lives.

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NOTES

1. Assessing teacher perceptions of the Socratic method across different localities and levels of schooling is, of course, an impossible task. And given the breadth of the field, even an abundance of evidence is more anecdotal than definitive. Nevertheless, it is possible to say that praise for the Socratic method among educators is widespread. Such praise is perhaps most easily accessed and best illustrated in sources like school Web pages, many of which proudly lay a claim on the method, and which serve as a more effective proxy for teacher practice than, say, journal articles. Examples abound, but for illustrative examples from K–8, 9–12, undergraduate, and graduate education, see the following in the reference list: Spring Garden Waldorf School; Greece Central School District; Colorado State University; University of Chicago Law School. With specific regard to critical thinking, one need only search the Web for the phrases "Socratic method" and "critical thinking" to find a plethora of resources ranging from general descriptions of the method to more teacher-oriented materials. For an example, see Lee College in the reference list.

2. See, for example, *Aristotelicae Animadversiones*, *Dialecticae Partitiones*, *Institutiones Dialecticae*, *Scholae Dialecticae*, and *Dialectique*. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie (1917), *Teachers' problems and how to solve them: A handbook of educational history and practice, or, comparative pedagogy* (Grantwood, NJ: Comparative Literature Press), 61.

3. Sturm was a German educator, Protestant reformer, and diplomat whose life spanned most of the 16th century. His work on course design, school

management, and curricula were highly influential in Western Europe during the period, as well as beyond his death in 1589.

4. While this was the first text printed in the new world to mention a Socratic method, it is important to note that there was extensive circulation of books between New and Old England at the time. For more on this, see Thomas Goddard Wright's (1920) book *Literary Culture in Early New England, 1620–1730* and David Hall's (1979) chapter, "The World of Print and Collective Mentality in Seventeenth-Century New England" in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*.

5. For a more thorough account of this history, see Carl Kaestle (1983), *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860*.

6. In *The Art of Living*, Nehamas (1998) argued that the elenchus could just as easily be used to prove a proposition as to refute it, and made the case that Plato's literary motives led him to present Socratic questioning as a tool for revealing the ignorance of others. For Kraut's (1983) particular take, see "Comments on Gregory Vlastos, 'The Socratic Elenchus.'"

7. For an in-depth examination of this question, see Gary Alan Scott's (2002) edited volume, *Does Socrates Have a Method?* The chapters included in the work make the case that the techniques employed by Socrates were too diverse and too inconsistently portrayed by Plato (and others) to constitute a single "method."

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