(Re)Examining the Socratic Method: A Lesson in Tutoring

Gary Jaeger
Vanderbilt University
gary.a.jaeger@vanderbilt.edu

Introduction

In a recent blog post on the University of Wisconsin writing center's webpage, Matthew Capdevielle asserts that it has become common to describe writing center methods as Socratic. In fact, writing center professionals have embraced the Socratic Method for quite some time. In his classic and agenda-setting article, "The Idea of a Writing Center," North writes:

> If writing centers are going to finally be accepted, surely they must be accepted on their own terms as places whose primary responsibility, whose only reason for being, is to talk to writers. That is their heritage, and it stretches… back, in fact, to Athens where in a busy marketplace a tutor called Socrates set up the same kind of shop: open to all comers, no fees charged, offering, on whatever subject a visitor might propose, a continuous dialectic that is, finally, its own end. (North 46)

While Capdevielle and North are right to make some connections between writing center practices and the Socratic Method, I nevertheless wonder just how Socratic our methods are or should be.

North does not explain what he means by the phrase, "continuous dialectic that is… its own end." He could mean that writing tutors should be Socratic only in the sense that they ask questions without ever answering them. This interpretation would fit some writing center practices well, and is consonant with the advice given by Jeff Brooks in "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Students Do All the Work." In addition to the pedagogical value of making clients answer questions for themselves, there are good reasons for adopting a minimalist approach that proceeds by asking questions. For instance, since we are called on to be generalists and to consult in disciplines with which we are unfamiliar, asking questions is sometimes the only available approach, as we otherwise would have no expertise from which to speak.

Socrates, especially in the early dialogues, knowingly capitalizes on the virtue of ignorance (Grano). In Plato's *Apology*, he explains that he has received a prophecy from the oracle at Delphi who has told him that he is the wisest of all Athenians because he knows of himself one precious thing that no other Athenian knows of him or herself; he knows that he knows nothing. Because he is not blinded by commitment to doctrinaire teachings, like the Sophists of his day were, he can see more clearly and discover the truth more completely (20c-24e). If ever there were a mascot for a minimalist approach to conversation that requires nothing more than genuine curiosity, it is Socrates. If we only take Socrates to be a mascot, however, we might end up with a distorted caricature of the minimalist tutor. Just as being too directive in one's intent to lead one's interlocutor to a predetermined answer can be dangerous, so too can being insufficiently directive. If we take North's call to pursue "a continuous dialectic that is its own end" as an invitation to ask open-ended questions with the intent to continue conversation indefinitely, then we run the risk of facilitating an unfocused discussion that unhelpfully widens the scope of a client's paper. It would seem, then, that a more structured adoption of the Socratic Method is in order.

Being selective in how to construct our Socratic practices will also allow us to reject those aspects of Socrates' own method that could be detrimental to tutoring sessions. Socrates' approach often resembles a competitive debate and his interlocutors often leave their discussions with him feeling defeated and frustrated. In the dialogues, he often engages in an *elenchus*, an argumentative exchange that leads his interlocutors to discover the inconsistency of their own claims. In so doing, he is not just asking questions indefinitely. He has an end in sight: pressing his interlocutors to revise or abandon their claims as needed. While this end is noble, it can be taken too far. In her *Socrates in Chains*, Sarah Viehman has recently cautioned writing center professionals *against* the troubling power dynamic that can emerge from deploying the Socratic Method. Certainly, in adopting the Socratic Method, we do not mean to endorse an approach that undermines our clients.

Indeed, we ought to temper the Socratic Method, but in doing so, we need not strip it of those aspects of Socratic practice that could make writing

consultations richer and more productive. A re-examination of the master himself, as we find him in Plato's dialogues, might give us some clues on how to engage clients in ways that are constructively Socratic. In particular, it can model how to argumentatively engage our clients in three ways: by destabilizing commonplaces, by charitably rehearsing arguments before pointing out inconsistencies, and by developing inchoate claims with focused examples. In order to ensure that writing center practitioners have the most constructively Socratic practices in mind when they describe writing center methods as being Socratic, a nuanced analysis of the Socratic Method is in order.

Modeling Systematic Reasoning in the Platonic Dialogues

In the *Meno*, Socrates gives us reasons to think that his method is indeed quite minimalist, but a closer look reveals that he has more ambitious intentions. Here we find Socrates giving a geometry lesson to an uneducated slave-boy. Rather than show the boy how to double the area of a square, he asks a number of questions until the boy arrives at the correct answer. After doing so, he proudly tells Meno, with whom he has been discussing the nature of learning, "You see, Meno? I'm not teaching him anything. All I'm doing is asking questions. And now he thinks he knows which line will get us an area of eight square feet" (82e). Now if Socrates' claim were an accurate description of what he was up to, then it might seem like the Socratic Method really is only a matter of asking questions for the sake of asking questions. However, Socrates, who is not merely asking questions, is trying to prove to Meno that the form of the square is something that everyone, including this uneducated slave, knows intuitively, and so learning is merely a matter of recollecting what we already know by way of systematic reasoning. Whether or not Socrates is helping the boy recollect the form of the square, he is certainly helping the boy to arrive at the correct answer by guiding him through the reasoning required to do so. This modeling would not be possible if Socrates did not already know the correct answer.

Just as the geometry lesson takes us away from a minimalist depiction by demonstrating the ways in which the Socratic Method is more about engaging in systematic reasoning than it is about asking open-ended questions, it also seems to take us away from a model of what we want to be doing in writing centers. The presumption that tutors must know the answers sets before us an impossible task. It presumes that the point of a client's paper is to find *the* right answer, as if writing a paper were like solving a geometry problem.

Moreover, even if we did have all the right answers, we would still have to encourage our clients to think through matters for themselves. Simply giving them answers would not allow them to grow as writers and thinkers. Nevertheless, we must not ask our questions for the mere sake of asking them. Our questions should lead our clients to some end. This is why the first step of guiding our clients through systematic reasoning must be helping them understand the point of their papers. This does not mean that we must know what that point is, but rather that we be willing to discover it alongside them.

Destabilizing Commonplaces

Although the Socrates we see in the *Meno* knows many of the answers to the questions he asks, this is only common in Plato's middle dialogues, where the character of Socrates serves as a mouthpiece for Plato's own theories. These middle dialogues present a Socrates who comes to a number of his own conclusions associated with Plato's mature views, which are only fully expounded in the late dialogues, where Socrates does not even appear as a character. In opposition to these middle dialogues, the early dialogues present a Socrates who comes to no conclusions of his own (Cooper xii-xviii; Vlastos 46-47). For a better look at the Socratic Method as the actual Socrates used it, we are better off consulting one of Plato's early dialogues, like the *Euthyphro*, where we find Socrates deploying systematic reasoning to help his interlocutor answer a question to which Socrates does not know the answer.

Socrates meets his interlocutor Euthyphro, for whom the dialogue is named, on his way to court where he is being indicted on charges that include impiety. Euthyphro is on his way out, having just indicted his own father on the very same charge. Socrates is hoping that he has found in Euthyphro an expert on all matters of piety. After all, only someone truly confident in his knowledge about the matter would be brazen enough to indict his own father, knowing that such an act could itself be seen as filial impiety. Socrates asks, "do you think that you have such exact knowledge of religion, of things holy and unholy? Is it so exact that in the circumstances you describe, you aren't afraid that, by bringing your father to trial, you might prove guilty of unholy conduct yourself?" (5e). Euthyphro assures him that he really is an expert. Here we have a case of an ignorant Socrates who has nothing but genuine questions for his interlocutor. Notice, however, that even here, Socrates is not simply asking questions for the sake of asking questions. He desperately wants Euthyphro to tell him

what piety is so that he may use this knowledge in his own defense. As it turns out, Euthyphro knows much less than he thinks he does and so it is up to Socrates to help Euthyphro reason his way towards a more complete understanding of what piety is. He does this by way of an *elenchus*.

The most typical Socratic *elenchus* begins with some commonly held beliefs. These beliefs are what in "Inventing the University" David Bartholomae calls a commonplace, defined as "A culturally or institutionally authorized concept or statement that carries with it its own necessary elaboration… (commonplaces) provide points of reference and a set of 'pre-articulated' explorations that are readily available to organize and interpret experience" (137-8). Here we begin with Euthyphro's belief that something is pious just so long as the gods love it. Socrates has two goals. First, he questions whether Euthyphro really knows what the gods love. Second, he questions Euthyphro's claim that the gods' love for an action makes that action pious. As Socrates sees it, the trouble with Euthyphro's reasoning is that he relies too heavily on commonplaces without questioning the ways in which those commonplaces might be misguided or limited.

Often writers struggle not because they rely too heavily on commonplaces, but because they fail to properly situate their work within and against a commonplace. Sometimes students fail to do this because they do not know what the accepted academic commonplaces are in a given discipline. Received views held widely across society are too broad for work that seeks to make a focused contribution to a particular field. Other times, students understand what the received view in their field is, but fail to explicitly articulate the ways in which their work departs from that commonplace. One such writer, falling into this latter category, a graduate student from the Epidemiology Department, came into our writing center to discuss a presentation he was writing about his research on cancer diagnosis. Although he was quite able to discuss the causes of tumors and to provide statistics about the prevalence of such tumors, he was having difficulty gaining traction from all those facts and statistics. In order to figure out the contribution of this research, the tutor asked this student to explain what other researchers in the field have already accomplished and to provide an argument for why this research would add something to that field. Their conversation ended like this:

> TUTOR. You say, your research helps surgeons diagnose lung cancer and avoid unnecessary surgeries and that no model exists for surgeons to estimate lung cancer risk… Okay, this is one of the key flaws, I take it?
>
> CLIENT. Right!
>
> TUTOR. So you're saying in the most basic terms, there is a research gap here... Saying something to that effect, like I found a research gap, can really help locate the listener.
>
> CLIENT. Yes! A research gap that no model exists.

What this student began to realize is that presenting one's research requires commonplaces that make a claim for the novelty and importance of that research. Rather than just providing information, the student could now begin to structure that information in a way that was clearly organized into distinct parts. He was able to lay out the state of the field, destabilize it by pointing to a research gap in that field, and then explain how his research would begin to fill in that gap.

Charitably Rehearsing Arguments before Pointing Out Inconsistencies

Guiding an interlocutor through systematic reasoning need not begin with criticism. In order to help Euthyphro, Socrates first charitably rehearses the inchoate argument that Euthyphro offers:

> Come then, let us examine what we mean. An action or man dear to the gods is pious, but an action or a man hated by the gods is impious. They are not the same, but quite opposite, the pious and the impious is not that so?… We have also stated that the gods are in a state of discord, that they are at odds with each other, Euthyphro, and that they are at enmity with each other. (7a-b)

After Euthyprho agrees to this rendering of his argument, Socrates moves on to point out an inconsistency in the argument. "Then according to your argument, my good Euthyphro, different gods consider different things to be just….The same things then are loved by the gods and hated by the gods… And the same things would be both pious and impious according to this argument" (7e-8a). In other words, because Euthyphro holds both that the pious is what the gods love and that the gods disagree, he is committed to the contradictory conclusion that the very same thing can be pious and impious. Represented schematically, Euthyphro's argument looks like this:

1. X is pious if and only if the gods love it (6e-7a).
2. There are many gods and they disagree (7b).
3. What some gods love, other gods hate (8a).

4. Some things are both pious and not pious (8a). Premise one is Euthyphro's main claim. Premises two and three are claims that Euthyphro readily agrees to. Premise four follows from the first three, but is a contradiction revealing a flaw in Euthyphro's reasoning. By the end of the *elenchus*, Socrates has revealed this contradiction and in doing so, he has made Euthyphro realize that his beliefs about the gods and about what they love, when taken together, are inconsistent.

Clearly Euthyphro needs to revise his argument, which is exactly what Socrates presses him to do. All of his attempts to revise, however, lead back to contradictions. After several rounds with Socrates, Euthyphro appears to be at wit's end, remarking, "But Socrates, I have no way of telling you what I have in mind, for whatever proposition we put forward goes around and refuses to stay put where we establish it" (11b). But even at this point, Socrates does not relent; he seems committed to make Euthyphro fully admit his own hubris. The two never do settle on a definition of piety and their entire discussion appears to destroy Euthyphro's beliefs on the matter without constructing any new ones. If we were to proceed this way with our clients, we would only undermine what confidence they have. One might wonder why writing center practitioners ever thought it a good idea to co-opt the Socratic Method in the first place.

Pointing out the inconsistencies in a client's argument might lead him or her to want to abandon that argument entirely. If done well, however, helping a client see those inconsistencies can be a great boon as he or she moves towards revision. To see how it can go well, consider the following series of exchanges from a consultation on a paper arguing that antiquities should not be returned to their country of origin if they can be seen and appreciated by more visitors in more prominent locations:

> CLIENT. [*reading from the penultimate paragraph of the paper*] The key to preserving ancient societies is the sense of awareness among the general public. Taking coveted artifacts out of the limelight and placing them in relatively obscure museums is counter-productive to this aim. In essence, that is what is often achieved by the recovery efforts of less prosperous countries. Museums such as the British Museum and the Met simply possess better facilities to research, protect, and display artifacts of the ancient world. TUTOR: Why is perpetuating or augmenting awareness of an artifact the key to doing justice to its history?

> CLIENT. Because, I mean, by putting these artifacts in other museums where no one is going to know about them, the artifacts become esoteric. No one will know about them but the core few who study Greek history.
> TUTOR. So is your point then, that returning artifacts to smaller, lesser known museums actually causes the loss of history?
> CLIENT. Yeah.
> TUTOR. So that is something that you haven't explicitly said in your paper.

As is common in undergraduate papers, the main thread of this argument only emerges towards the end of the paper. Here we see the tutor rehearsing this thread and emphasizing its importance in rebutting opposing views, much the way Socrates does when he charitably interprets his interlocutors' claims.

With some appreciation of how important this thread is to the overall argument, the client and tutor are ready to move on to the last paragraph of the paper:

> CLIENT. In the age of globalization, the world is becoming an increasingly smaller place. By placing pieces of historical significance in museums that have the highest traffic, they are more likely to be observed and appreciated. It is detrimental to place artifacts of the ancient world on display in the current nation associated with that ancient society if that nation does not possess adequate resources needed to give these artifacts the justice they deserve.
> TUTOR. My only question about this paragraph is why do we talk about globalization and a shrinking world? Because the one thing you don't want to do is—
> CLIENT. --Yeah it is counterintuitive. If the world is a smaller place, then it shouldn't really matter that these museums are remote.

Notice, the tutor refrains from telling the client that he contradicts himself. Rather, he invites the client to reflect on the reasoning behind his claim about globalization. We can see that with only the slightest bit of prodding, the client comes to his own conclusion about how troubling the inconsistency is. Because he comes to this conclusion on his own, he does not feel defeated like Socrates' interlocutors.

Making Focused Claims by Turning to Examples

When even charitably rehearsing an argument leaves some claims obscure, Socrates helps his

interlocutors focus those claims. To see this, let's turn to an *elenchus* from Plato's middle dialogue, the *Protagoras*. Here we find Socrates conversing with Protagoras, an old and renowned sophist. They have been discussing the nature of virtue and whether it can be taught when they get caught up in a debate about whether each virtue is a distinct entity, as Protagoras believes, or whether they are all unified, as Socrates believes.

They begin with Protagoras' main claim that the virtues are distinct. To elaborate on this, Socrates focuses in on one example, namely stupidity, which he sees as being an opposite of virtue. Focusing on an example is an excellent way to help our clients see more precisely what they mean when they are prevented from doing so by the vagueness of their own claims. Socrates has chosen stupidity as their example because Protagoras has previously mentioned it. Although Protagoras thinks that the definition of stupidity is clear enough, Socrates is not sure. To get Protagoras to see just how ambiguous the term is, he encourages Protagoras to develop his definition. And perhaps it goes without saying that getting our clients to define their terms is a great way to help them to be more precise as well. The *elenchus* begins like this:

1. There is such a thing as being stupid (332a).
2. Wisdom is its opposite (332a).
3. When people act in a beneficial way, they are acting temperately (332a).
4. When people act stupidly, they are acting intemperately (332b).

From this it appears that stupidity can actually be the opposite of two different virtues: wisdom and temperance. The issue that remains is whether wisdom and temperance are the same or distinct. Socrates decides to press his own agenda and make a case for them being the same.

He gets Protagoras to consider not just stupidity and its opposites, but several other examples of qualities and their opposites:

5. Strength is the opposite of weakness (332b).
6. Speed is the opposite of slowness (332b).
7. Ugliness is the only opposite of beauty (332c).
8. Bad is the opposite of good (332c).
9. High pitch is the only opposite of low pitch (332c).
10. Everything has only one opposite (332d).

Here, Socrates gets Protagoras to elaborate on his initial claim by pressing him to define his terms, focusing him in on concrete examples, and drawing general inferences from those claims. All of these are good strategies when deployed with one's interlocutor's well-being in mind, but in this case,

Socrates deploys them to undermine the hubris of Protagoras' sophistry. He notes:

11. Either stupidity has 2 opposites, which contradicts premise ten, or temperance and wisdom are the same things, which contradicts Protagoras' main point that the virtues are distinct (333a).

He then asks, "Then which of these propositions should we abandon, Protagoras? The proposition that for one thing there is only one opposite, or the one stating that wisdom is different from temperance…The two statements are dissonant; they are not in harmony with one another" (333a-b). Protagoras does not know how to resolve the contradiction and so his conversation with Socrates only ends when they run out of time and Protagoras must be on his way—a scenario that is probably all too familiar to those of us who have tutored writers. Perhaps their time together would have been more productive if Socrates were less intent on pressing his own agenda and proving the shortcoming of Protagoras' wisdom.

Helping clients to sharpen their arguments need not end in such consternation as long as we remain sensitive to our clients' feelings and remind them of how we are trying to help them when they get frustrated. To see how this can go, consider the following session with an undergraduate client, who, like Protagoras, gets frustrated when pressed to make her abstract claims more concrete:

CLIENT. [*reading from the introduction to her paper*] Through a series of metaphors the speaker of A. E. Stallings "Sine Qua Non" provides her father with a definition of his absence. The speaker defines the many facets of her father's absence by comparing his absence to a number of objects and ideas, each of which works towards clarifying a different element of his absence. The speaker's multiple comparisons suggest that her father's absence affected her in a number of ways. A. E. Stallings suggests that absence or nothingness is an element with profound implications upon people's feelings.

Clearly this student could benefit from being more specific. Her mention of the "many facets of her father's absence" and "a number of objects and ideas" is vague and does little to help her readers understand what she has in mind.

A good first step might be to ask her to specify. Let us see what happens when her tutor does just this:

TUTOR. Within this introductory paragraph you say the speaker works through many

metaphors, the speaker works through a number of objects, there are multiple implications, and there are profound implications. So if we were to go through these, piece by piece, how could you clarify some of these things? For instance, when you say that there are a number of metaphors, what metaphors are there and how are you going to show them?

CLIENT. Well the thing is, I think I am going to show a lot of different metaphors and the one thing they have in common is that they are all a part of the definition of her father's absence. But I cannot think of anything else that they have in common and I don't want to list out all ten of the metaphors.

The client does have her finger on a problem faced by many writers when they attempt to author the introductions to their papers. If she discusses all of the specific elements of her paper at the beginning, then her introduction will be weighed down by lists. Her tutor can see that this is indeed a problem and suggests that instead of getting bogged down by all of the items on the list, the writer might do better to generalize, as Socrates does in the Protagoras, and say something concrete about how all of the items are related. As he presses her to do this, she has the following to say:

CLIENT. Like absence and nothingness are something.

TUTOR. And what do you mean by that?

CLIENT. --Emptiness still connects things.

TUTOR. What are they connecting? How are they doing so? How do they persist?

CLIENT. They persist by being in between things.

TUTOR. What do we mean by being in between things?

CLIENT. Like… Um… can you help me here?

Here we can see that the client is beginning to get frustrated with the tutor's line of questioning. Even though pressing her to generalize could have been a good strategy to pursue, the prospect of doing so overwhelms her. Each answer she gives shifts her claim in a new direction rather than tying up the loose ends. If the tutor were simply to continue asking questions as Socrates does, then the client would likely become as confused as Socrates' interlocutors. Luckily the tutor senses this and proceeds by reminding the client what all the questioning is for:

TUTOR. I'm trying to help you think through the most explicit form of your claim. I'm looking to help you get out the thesis of your paper so that all your terms are defined.

CLIENT. Maybe I should say that A.E. Stallings defines absence, emptiness, and nothingness as substantive elements.

TUTOR. Good. Can you give me an example?

The client is back on board. Rather than continue to press his client to articulate the relationship between these vague concepts, the tutor takes a different approach and encourages her to move from the general to the particular:

CLIENT. So like the interstices of lace. The actual lace is something and the interstices are nothing, but the interstices are what make lace look like lace. So the interstices have a profound implication on the lace. The speaker's identity, which is held together by the interstices of her father's absence, makes her look the way that she does.

By focusing on an example, she has now arrived at a much more coherent and interesting claim.

Conclusion

Our survey of the Platonic dialogues has demonstrated that there are aspects of the Socratic Method that can help us guide our clients to reason systematically. Capdevielle and North are right to describe writing center methods as being Socratic. Our survey, however, has also shown us that we should qualify that description to avoid those aggressive aspects of Socratic practice that could overwhelm or undermine our clients. While we should encourage our clients to rigorously think through their arguments, we need to be heed Viehman's warning, and be more sensitive to our clients than Socrates is to his interlocutors.

In order to do this, we can selectively turn to the dialogues to learn how to model and engage our clients in systematic reasoning. This might include showing our clients how academic arguments often begin by destabilizing commonplaces. When appropriate, this might even include destabilizing our clients' own unfounded beliefs and positions. In so far as our clients are already making arguments, we can charitably rehearse them before pointing out inconsistencies, as Socrates does, but always with the sympathetic aim of building our clients up. If we offer our questions and promptings with the aim of helping

our clients see the best versions of their own arguments, then it will be less likely that we undermine or overwhelm them, and it will be more likely that we enable them to improve their writing on their own terms.

With this richer notion of Socratic practice at our disposal, we might also be better able to attend to the concern that led North to invoke Socrates in the first place: the concern that many university administrators and instructors think that, "what writing centers actually do—talking to writers—is not enough" (46). If administrators and instructors could see all the ways in which these Socratic tools can transform writers, surely their own misconceptions about writing centers would be as destabilized as those held by Socrates' own interlocutors.

Works Cited

Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *When a Writer Can't Write: Writer's Block and Other Composing-Process Problems*. Ed. Mike Rose. New York: Guilford, 1985. 134-65. Print.

Brooks, Jeff. "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Students do all the Work." *St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* third edition. Eds. Christina Murphy and Steven Sherwood. Boston: Bedford St. Martins, 2008. 168-72. Print.

Capdevielle, Matthew. "'Why Do You Ask?' Questioning the Question in the Writing Center." *Another Word*. University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center, March 26, 2012. Web. June 19, 2013.

Cooper, John M. Introduction. *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. Print.

Grano, Daniel A. "Wise Ignorance and Socratic Interiority: Recovering a Dialogic Rhetoric. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 37.1 (2007): 118. Print.

North, Stephen. "The Idea of a Writing Center." *St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* 3rd ed. Christina Murphy and Steven Sherwood. Boston: Bedford St. Martins, 2008. 32-46. Print.

Plato. *Apology*. Tran. G. M. A. Grube. *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. 17-36. Print.

----. *Euthyphro*. Tran. G. M. A. Grube. *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. 1-16. Print.

----. *Meno*. Tran. G. M. A. Grube. *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. 870-97. Print.

----. *Protagoras*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell. *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. 746-91. Print.

Viehman, Sarah. *Socrates in Chains: Questioning the Socratic Method in the Writing Center*. MA thesis. Missouri State University, 2010. Web.