

## THE SOCRATIC METHOD AS A MEANS TO REMEMBER

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the challenge of employing the Socratic Method to help students answer questions posed in the classroom. Twenty-first-century distractions tend to impede this time-honored form of instruction. Cell phones have all but shown Socrates the door, as their lightening quick ability to unearth an answer makes pondering appear passé. This short-term solution, however, has long term effects on learning.

**Keywords:** Socratic Method, cell phone, distraction, thinking, memory, AI.

### INTRODUCTION

As a freshman college student, my favorite course was An Introduction to Philosophy, in which we read works by great thinkers ranging from Plato to Dostoevsky. One lesson that stuck with me was a dialogue that exemplified what is known as the Socratic Method, in which Socrates poses a question and, step by step, leads a befuddled student to the answer.

I embraced that practice and came to apply it with regularity in my two major professions – first, as a newspaper reporter, when I occasioned upon a situation in which witnesses to an accident or a crime proved unable to provide a detail that might reveal their proximity to the incident, thereby lending greater credibility to their account. If I asked how far away they had been when the incident occurred and they answered, “I don’t know. I couldn’t tell you,” I would point out a building and ask, “Say, from here to that building?” Not uncommonly, they would say something along the lines of “No, no, not even half that far,” showing they knew more than they suspected.

When I began teaching, I applied the same approach upon trying to guide a student to the answer of a question, especially when we had already covered the topic a week or so before and students only needed to jog their memory to recall. However, 21<sup>st</sup>-century students have developed the seemingly irresistible habit of responding to such queries not by pondering but by pulling out their cell phones – the same ones they gaze at while walking to class in the morning, even on a campus as blessed by nature as is the Uzbek State World Languages University, with its towering trees and countless birds.

I have long discouraged the practice and another disturbing tendency of classmates who know the answer and whisper it to the forgetful student. The practice is ubiquitous in Uzbek universities. I used to think it stemmed from the whisperer’s need to show off but came to learn, and appreciate, that it grew out of a communal instinct to help one another. With due respect for that noble sentiment, I, nonetheless, discourage the practice, since it obviates the questioned student’s need to think to find the answer, which would encourage retaining it, since thinking is linked to memory. This internal reality reflects the practical one outlined in the adage “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” (2)

The cell phone has come to replace that whispering sidekick. Students hide them behind their pocketbooks, inside their notebooks, and, even, up their sleeves. Best is to sit in the back of the classroom, where two or three classmates block the teacher’s view. The critical

thinking that students would, otherwise, apply to the topic at hand is devoted, instead, to finding ways to finagle a glimpse of the cell phone.

International scholar Pablo Muñoz Iturrieta has examined the effects of such dependence: “It’s a fact that the internet . . . has come to signify the final coup de grace to a cerebral function characteristic of ancient times: memory. We stand before a breakdown in our intellectual and cultural history, a moment of crucial and dangerous transition due to the fact that we aren’t merely facing two different forms of expressing our thoughts (think of oral and written cultures, as in ancient times) but technologies that seek to replace human beings. Turning on the cell phone is often the same as turning off the brain, and the effects have already been empirically proven.” (1)

I have only recently come to realize that my computer’s quick-draw response to queries regarding any topic under – and, even, beyond – the sun is the gift of AI, so dismissing the use of that feature altogether would be hypocritical. It’s merely the modern-day encyclopaedia without the fine print and unwieldy volumes. However, using AI or a similar resource to write a paper for a course, or, worse yet, having it write the paper for you, goes beyond the pale, academically speaking. Aside from the lack of integrity such a practice reflects, you learn very little about the challenge, method, and satisfaction of writing by letting some machine do it for you.

This 21<sup>st</sup>-century pastime bodes poorly for a future in which academic integrity has any meaning. It bodes even more poorly for those individuals who embrace it as a way to “get by” without lifting a finger or to graduate without lifting a pen. No effort deserves no credit and eventually will receive it. Such a lackadaisical attitude portends trouble down the road. Just imagine: Where will you be ten years from now when the lights go out, you can’t charge your phone or access the internet, and you haven’t learned how to think?

AI may be a powerful addition to the academic arsenal, but, without HI – human intelligence – we’re lost.

#### REFERENCES

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