

The Socratic Method *by John W. Neumayr, Ph.D **

*John Neumayr is one of the founders of Thomas Aquinas College, the *alma mater* of The Lyceum's Headmaster and Dean of Academics, both of whom participated in tutorials and seminars lead by Neumayr. The Lyceum uses the Socratic Method of learning extensively and its students have a first-hand encounter with many of The Great Books. This article, although about Thomas Aquinas College, is also apropos to the curriculum of The Lyceum.



One of the distinguishing features of Thomas Aquinas College **[and of The Lyceum]** is its discussion method of teaching. Though the technique is as old as Socrates, it has never been in vogue. Nor is it today. The vast majority of colleges here and abroad use the lecture method. Yet what Socrates saw in it over two thousand years ago is still valid. There is a vital aspect of teaching that can never be implemented so well by lectures as by dialogue. Each one of us brings certain fundamental ideas to education which must be made explicit before learning can advance. Discussion is the optimum means to bring them forth. The student must, as it were, give them birth; the teacher, as a good midwife, only assists the labor.

Tradition calls this the Socratic maieutic, from the Greek word for obstetrics, because the basic ideas we use in education come forth from our own minds, not from the teacher's.

The Great Books as Great Lectures

To highlight the Socratic pedagogy, the College will often state flatly that there are no lectures; all teaching takes place through tutorial and seminar discussions. This claim, however, is not entirely precise. There are lectures. I am not referring to those occasions when a tutor may discourse at length uninterruptedly. Rather, I have in mind the Great Books themselves, which make up the material for classroom discussions. Each book is a major lecture: each is an uninterrupted exposition of an intellectually important issue. Reading for class is equivalent to hearing an extended lecture to be discussed later. And, of course, it is of these later classroom discussions that the College says there are no lectures.



'The Blind Leading the Blind?'



Sometimes the criticism is made that if it is better to read Aristotle, Newton, or Einstein on physics instead of merely puzzling it out on one's own or with friends, why is it not better also to listen to a scholar expound the thought of Aristotle, Newton, or Einstein? These are not easy texts. Common sense tells us that amateurs are no match for experts. Is not a student discussion, even with tutorial supervision, a case of "the blind leading the blind?" Wouldn't an accomplished scholar be both more efficient and penetrating than any student discussion could hope to be? Moreover, every tutor at this College has probably decided to cut through the confusion of a particularly chaotic discussion and to lead the class to clarity on the strength of his own advanced understanding. After all, many points should not be left hanging nor error left to prevail - for there are no guarantees that students will make the most of every discussion. Why not let the tutor's light suffuse the whole? Why not, in short, let the teacher lecture?

Developing the Intellectual Virtues

Several answers can be given. Discussion, because it is an activity, engages the student's mind more than do lectures. Instead of passively hearing the professor's thoughts, the student engaged in dialogue is required to work his own mind, to form and express his own thoughts. And the challenge of discussion pushes him to ever higher efforts. He reads more carefully knowing he will soon be explaining and debating his own understanding of the text. If he does this on a daily basis, this heightened intensity leads to intellectual habits that last a lifetime.



Lectures are less likely to produce the intellectual virtues. At best one might remember certain ideas from a lecture, but they have probably not become part of him. But the ideas he has worked out himself are likely to stay. And not only to stay but to become part of his mental makeup.

Or again, the flow of concepts presented in a lecture is often too much to assimilate. Sensing this, a good lecturer will repeat key points and connections and even invite interruptions when the audience has lost the drift. Discussion, on the other hand, is essentially a series of interruptions. If all in the group are involved, none need be left behind. Discussion almost intrinsically guarantees understanding; lectures do not. It seems a happy combination, therefore, to select the Great Books, the world's best lectures, to be first read carefully and then discussed point by point - where interruptions are the rule, not the exception. This offers the prospect of the best thought being the best understood.

But how far can one go? Discussion is intrinsically inefficient. One can hardly expect mastery of a subject. At most, one can expect only to make a beginning. Quite so. But as the adage goes, a good beginning makes all the difference; and here at the beginning of inquiry, discussion is at its best. St. Thomas likens the teacher to a doctor treating the body. No doctor puts health into a sick body; rather, by his ministrations he allows the body to cure itself by the life it has in it. Likewise, the teacher only guides the student to see for himself by a light already in him. I do not mean merely that the disciple sees by his intellect, but rather that he sees in the light of those basic notions mentioned earlier - certain first principles, already formed, without which neither communication nor education could take place. Unless these primary notions of reality that all men share are made explicit and brought to bear, no lecture, however brilliant, will lead to learning. The very inefficiency of dialogue makes room to consider the ideas of ordinary experience as we take up the great questions that make up the corpus of learning.



Put the Common Ideas to Work

Book learning, great or otherwise, never starts in the book or in the school. Its origin is in the mind that comes to school. Nature sees to it that we all grasp certain fundamental concepts and distinctions about reality - ideas we are hardly aware we have - that allow us to judge all other ideas put forth about reality. Genuine education leads the mind forth to see these seminal ideas openly before it applies them to further notions. Every science and every discipline is rooted in these basic ideas. No matter how far we may advance in a subject, whatever we find to be true and sound resolves back into the first notions. Those Great Books are truly great which harmonize with these ideas - that is, which harmonize with human nature. The chief work of liberal education is to put the common ideas of the "man on the street" to work.



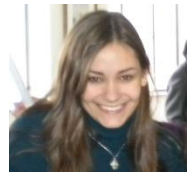
No one can talk us into these common, primary ideas. No lecture can plant these into our minds. They are already there. The task is to bring them out. Here discussion is vital. Speech is a sign of

man's social nature, for we have tongues to communicate. But we also use words to make our own thoughts clear to ourselves. Without words we would be hard pressed to understand anything. Thinking is often characterized as an internal dialogue because we make use of words even in our private reflections. Dialogue with another often helps us to clarify further to ourselves just what we really do mean especially when the other has asked the right questions. A good teacher is able through the right questions to make us aware of our most basic ideas in the light of which we are able to make judgments about other things.

Knowledge: It's All in Your Mind

There are two ways to come to knowledge; through discovery and by being taught. To be taught presupposes that someone has discovered the science already which he later may communicate to another. When a student learns a science from another, he is in effect led to relive the discoverer's experience - he may indeed avoid the many "blind alleys" the discoverer undoubtedly followed, but he must necessarily see just as originally as did the founder of the first truths. And these he can see only by himself. In this sense, the point of all education is to get learning out of the books and schools and back into the mind where knowledge properly belongs, so one can say, "I see."

It may be a truism that the student is the primary actor in his own education, but nowhere is it truer than at the beginning. Lectures hardly help. Something more is required; something that turns awareness back on itself. This is why Socrates searched the souls of his disciples with questions. If any responded saying "I have heard such and such..." he would invariably reply: "But what do you think?" He was not asking for their opinion; he was asking just what they really thought and knew about things. It is not easy to say accurately just what we really think. Often upon hearing a response, Socrates would ask, "But don't you also think such and such about it? How do these two ideas fit together?" And so the discussion would go until the disciple began to harmonize his own thoughts. Socrates was not ready to quit until the disciple delivered his own brain child by his own labor, for until the disciple could bring his own concept out and into the "light of day," he would never know what he really knew.



No Short Cuts



Neither computers, calculators, audio visual techniques, nor even lectures can make us see these all-important truths that are in our souls. A student may be able to take up technology in its latest form without having to go back to the first inventions and repeat all the labors of his ancestors. But this is not so in liberal education. In this way it is more like moral formation. Our parents may be courageous and just, but we cannot take up where they left off; rather we must go through the whole experience of acquiring virtue as they did. No short-cuts. So too in genuine education. We ourselves must do it from the bottom up. It is as basic and unchanging as human nature. There may be short cuts to "know how" and technical skills, but not to wisdom.

Over two thousand years ago Socrates saw what was crucial to human learning. Nothing here has changed. If Thomas Aquinas College **[and The Lyceum]** has adopted Socrates' manner, it is only because men are still men and learning is still learning.