

Socratic Method

When people think about mentoring and coaching they normally do not think back as far as Socrates and Plato. However, these men are two of the first well-documented teachers and mentors. Socrates was a very well known teacher in Athens, Greece, who used an active learning method which used questions asked of the students to learn (Dowling, 2004). This method of asking questions and engaging the learner is known as the Socratic Method (Payne, 2009). Socrates would engage in casual conversation with anyone he crossed on the street (Beavers & Planeaux, 2004). Interestingly, he never took the time to write books because he felt that more was learned through conversation or “arguing” than from reading a textbook (Dowling, 2004).

Since Socrates did not write any books, a majority of information that we have about him comes from his most well known student Plato. Plato is known for calling Socrates “the best of all men I have ever known.” (Dowling², 2004). After Socrates’ death Plato began the “Academy” based on the teaching styles of Socrates; this school operated for more than 900 years (Dowling², 2004). “The Academy served as the model for institutions of higher learning until it was closed by the Emperor Justinian in 529 CE, almost one thousand years later.” (Beavers & Planeaux, 2004). This is proof that the Socratic method of teaching, mentoring and coaching, is a valid and time proven method used to share and pass on knowledge and skills to others.

The Socratic Method is described as saying “*There is no single, generally agreed upon, answer. There is no answer. All answers are equally correct.*” (Stevenson, 2001). Socrates was searching for conceptual knowledge and found that conversation and arguing was a reasonable way to get this knowledge (Payne, 2009). Maxwell (2008) stated,

“To cultivate the Socratic Temperament in the students is to lay the ultimate foundation for the development of superior critical thinking later in life. Deep curiosity, fearless questioning, productive critical thinking, and a lifelong quest for self-improvement are the fruits of the Socratic Temperament. The opportunity to develop their own Socratic Temperament is the finest gift you can give to your students.”

The use of the Socratic Method allowed a person or group of people to determine if a person’s position on a subject is fact or opinion (Stevenson, 2001).

In classrooms today there are two types of learning methods used, the Rote model and the Platonic model, which is based on the Socratic Method. The Rote model is used in a majority of kindergarten through high school classrooms. Young students are told that there is a right answer and they must repeat it word for word when asked to do so (Stevenson, 2001). The second is the Platonic Model, based on the Socratic Method, which allows for many correct answers as long as the person can explain why it is right; “this is truth by dialogue and reasoning (Stevenson, 2001).” The Socratic Method has also been referred to as “the central kernel of all rational inquiry including that we call the scientific method (Payne, 2009).”

The Socratic Method also placed strong value on diversity. The diversity of a person’s thoughts and opinions, and the thoughts and opinions of others is a strong point for conversation and arguing, which is the basis for the Socratic Method. Payne (2009) has said, “... intellectual progress using rational methods requires a community of inquirers working from different points of view.” Therefore, “like-mindedness tends to ossify into dogmatism” and “... diversity of mind within a community provides a constant renewal of intellectual vitality in the form of new points of view and new critiques of existing views (Payne, 2009).” The basis for Socrates as a teacher and philosopher was not to make people change their minds about what they thought was right. Instead, he thought that people were on a life-long journey of self-improvement, which could not be achieved without the attainment of knowledge (Maxwell, 2008).