

## Lesson Plans 11: The fate of Socrates; making bad arguments

### The Civic Knowledge Project: Winning Words

Time: 1 hour

Abstract: Students will read excerpts from Plato's *Apology* and learn about his death; they will learn also of the role of the Sophists in Plato's writing and in the Athenian democracy.

#### Many Socrateses (20 minutes)

Show students a few renderings of Socrates's face. Remind them that he was said to be a short and pot-bellied man, described by Plato as having a "snub-nose and eyes that stick out." Often dressed in ragged clothes, he walked about the streets of Athens, said to be accompanied by a mangy dog. Of course, these are mostly attempts at describing a man of whom there is no reliable physical description. Instruct students to take artistic license, and walk around as though they were Socrates, carrying around their Socrates quote sheets. Call upon students to read sentences from the *Apology*<sup>1</sup>, in their chosen Socratic timbre.

*"A person who is wise will admit that his wisdom is in fact nothing."*

*"I must fulfill the philosopher's mission of searching for wisdom in myself, and in everybody else."*

*"My searching has led to my having many enemies of the most dangerous kind. I am called wise, for many say that I myself possess the wisdom that I seek in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that only God is wise. I go my way, obedient to the God, asking everyone questions, citizens and strangers, and I show all of those who think that they are wise that they are in fact not wise."*

*"If you kill me, you will not find many others like me. This sounds ridiculous, but I think of myself as an annoying fly, given to Athens by the God. Athens, our country, is like a giant and noble horse, who is so big that he must move very slowly. Because I am the fly, I sting the giant horse, and by stinging him, help get him to move quickly"*

*"I have a prediction for those who vote to sentence me to death. Right after my death, you will find that you have really punished yourself. You will have killed me in order to get rid of someone who accused you of not being wise. But if you think that by killing the accusing man, you can avoid the need to be accused. There is no honorable way to escape being accused of being unwise. The noblest way is not to crush others, but to improve yourself. This is what I say to those who want to kill me."*

*"The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being."*

Discuss, in particular focusing on Socrates's presumed political role in the state. Why is a democracy, in which all of the citizens vote on all decisions, slow-moving? In what does Socrates's "sting" consist, and why does it get the horse moving? Relate to students the details of Socrates's death, and stress in particular his willingness to accept the punishment, and his claim that his death in fact punished the very people who voted for it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Jowett, trans., *The Apology by Plato*, 1994. Adapted by Samuel Cohn.

### Good and bad arguments (15-20 minutes)

Much like agree/disagree, except with arguments—post Good/Bad/Don't Know signs on the ends and center of the room, read off arguments, and have students run to the sign they agree with. There are two questions for each argument. The first is “is this a good argument?” and the second is “would this argument convince you to do what it advocates, even if the argument is not good?” Make up arguments, or use the ones below.

1. *You should brush your teeth, because it might help you prevent cavities.*
2. *You should brush your teeth, because if you don't, you will definitely get many cavities.*
3. *You should give me your money, because if you don't, I will attack you.*
4. *You should eat broccoli, because broccoli is the best food in the world.*
5. *You should do your homework, because if you do, your grades will likely improve.*
6. *You should do your homework, because I have a friend who does all of his homework.*

What makes some of these arguments good arguments and some of them bad? What makes some reasonable? Why would we ever choose to listen to an unreasonable argument (like #2)? With younger students, don't focus on pointing out formal fallacies, but rather that some arguments overwhelm us (those with threats, or those that scare us) and make it impossible to actually think about the argument. Instead, we are occupied with fear for our safety, or whatever other supervening concern (including the desire to be popular—a subject about which my students had much to say.)

### Word of the day: *sophist* (20 minutes)

Tell students that Plato described as a sophist someone who “makes the weaker argument the stronger.” Ask students if they can explain this. Explain that in Athens, the best way to get what you wanted was to sue someone or accuse them of something bad. Doing this allowed one to go before all of the citizens of the city and publicly make arguments against another, before the citizens would cast votes and decide the fate of the accused. This was what sophists were said to do, traveling from place to place suing people, training others to make bad arguments, and charging a fee. Connect this to Socrates's accusation, and his resultant execution.

Have the students play sophist, and “make the weaker argument the stronger.” Pair students up, and have them accuse one another falsely. Have the students take turns standing before the class attempting to incriminate their partner. Remind them that an important part of the sophist's work was using powerful *rhetoric* to persuade the other citizens that the accused was guilty. Return to this theme, and ask students to reflect on “effective” language use—again, what is effective language use for Socrates, given the quotes read above, and what is effective language use for the sophists? Why would Plato, the man who recorded all of Socrates's conversations, devote a lot of his writing to making fun of sophists?

### Closing

Tell students that next week, they'll be reading more from Socrates, and looking carefully at his arguments.