

Lesson Plan 5: Socrates and the elenchus

The Civic Knowledge Project: Winning Words

Time: 1 hour

Abstract: Recall the matter of justice, recall the character of Socrates, and continue an inquiry into the nature of Socratic dialogue by continuing with a reading from the *Republic*.

Recapitulation of *Socrates* and last week's dialogue (5-10 minutes)¹

Have a few students share what they remember from their initial encounter with a Socratic dialogue. Remind them that this is the name for dialogues in which Socrates is a discussant. Ask if students shared a fact about Socrates with their parents—what did they share, and what were parents' responses? Review briefly Socrates's questions about justice, and the result of the dialogue. How do we know that "justice" was the main point of the dialogue?

Socrates as an Athenian (20 minutes +)

Show the students a picture of Socrates, and urge them to imagine him in Athens, a poor and shabby looking man, wandering about in the streets, asking other citizens questions, and saying "*the only thing that I know is that I do not know anything.*"² The class goal is to discover why he says this, and make sense of his claim. Inform the students that once, Socrates was accused of very serious crimes, and that as a result, he was imprisoned and brought to court. Call on students sentence-by-sentence to read this explanation from the *Apology*.

Once, I went to the Oracle at Delphi, who can receive messages from the gods, and reveal great truths. When I went to this oracle, I was told that I was the wisest man of all. Why do I mention this? Because it helps explain why I am being accused of a crime. When I heard what the god thought about me, I thought that it must be a riddle. I know that I have no wisdom at all, so what could the god mean when he says that I am the wisest of all men? But, of course, a god does not tell lies, so he must be telling the truth. I thought for a long time about this, and decided that there was an easy way of discovering whether what the god said was true or false. I decided to go around looking for a man who was wiser than me, so that I could take him to the god, and say "here is a man who is wiser than I am, but you said that I was the wisest!" So, I spent all my time going through the streets of Athens, and searching for men who everybody thought was very wise. The first one I found was a politician, and this is what happened: when I began to talk to him, I realized that he was not really wise, even though many people thought that he was wise, and he thought that he was very wise. I tried to explain to him that he was not very wise, and because of this he hated me, and many people nearby also started to hate me. So, I left him and went home, thinking to myself: "Even though neither the politician nor I knows anything true, I am better off

¹ My class required constant review, and did not benefit from a great deal of new content in one class period. Sometimes, it took a half-hour to fully recall the previous week's lesson such that we could move on. For this reason, review time will likely vary class-to-class.

² If the students find the personal character of Socrates compelling, embellish your description with further biographical details. One of this curriculum's goals is to use the accessibility of Socrates's life-story to interest students in his task of philosophy.

*than he is, because he knows nothing and thinks that he knows everything, while I admit that I know nothing.*³

Discuss, and be sure that students understand Socrates's dilemma and proposed solution. Focus on the last sentence, and ask students to explain it and record it in their notebooks.

Ask students if they know of any people that think themselves wise but are in fact not wise. What makes these people like or unlike Socrates? Further, how can Socrates be “better off” than *anybody at all* if he knows that he knows nothing? Inform students that Socrates was often seen smiling, in a good mood, and going to parties with his friends. How could a man who knows nothing be so cheerful?

Losing one's temper (15 minutes)⁴

Having spoken about “good conversation,” have students brainstorm conversation topics and stage brief dialogues between sets of students on those topics. Instruct one student to show a temper and get riled up by the argument, and the other to maintain calmness and cheerfulness. Play this out, and see how the conversations go. What happens to the conversation, and who enjoys the conversation more? Also talk about the “point” of a conversation: which person focuses more on the topic at hand, and why? What effect does the angry person's demeanor have on the conversation overall, and in particular its “point”? Ask students if they can think of any examples of people who lose their temper during communication, and other people who speak calmly. What do these two methods of communication say about the people who practice them? Why do some questions demand a less emotional attitude when they are being discussed?

Word of the day: *Elenchus* (10 minutes)

Elenchus. Students have so far only read one Socratic dialogue, and one explanation from Socrates as to why Socrates engages people this way. In ancient Greek, the Socratic dialogue was called the elenchus, which means literally “examination through argument or asking questions” Be sure students can pronounce the word, and understand that when Socrates is “examining” a person, it sounds a lot like an argument. However, when people examine something, it is generally for the reason of discovering something or learning something. Discuss...

Closing

Ask students to try using the elenchus in their life. What happens if they “examine” their parents or siblings using argument?

³ Benjamin Jowett, trans. *Plato's Apology of Socrates*. Adapted for young readers by Samuel Cohn.

⁴ This is a game, and so intended for younger students. Of course, if you sense that students would be bored by the game, simply discuss the matter with them instead.