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SOCRATIC APPROACH AS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN THE CONTEXT OF POST-GRADUATE LITERATURE CLASSROOM IN NAGALAND

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Abstract: In the realm of postgraduate education, the cultivation of advanced analytical and interpretive skills is highly significant. At this level, students are expected to gain profound insights into literary texts, theories, and the cultural contexts shaping them, emphasizing critical engagement with literature. Thus, pedagogical strategies at the postgraduate level must prioritize the development of critical thinking. The Socratic Method emerges as an effective pedagogical tool to nurture meta-cognition and critical thinking. The paper explores the multifaceted integration of the Socratic approach in postgraduate literature pedagogy. It presents a case example of integrating the Socrates approach in a postgraduate literature classroom in Nagaland to further augment the case.

Key Words: *Socrates questioning, cognitive development, meta-cognition and collaborative learning*

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of postgraduate education, the need to foster advanced analytical and interpretive skills become paramount. At the Post-graduate level, students are expected to delve into complex themes, engage in original research, and contribute to the scholarly discourse. They are expected to develop a deeper understanding of literary texts, literary theory, and the cultural contexts that shape them. The emphasis shifts from rote learning to critical engagement with literature. According to Scott (2008), one of the most important purposes of higher education system is to train learners to think critically. This calls for the need and importance for pedagogy at the post-graduate level to focus on developing critical thinking of students.

Critical thinking not only sharpens students' analytical abilities but also encourages them to question assumptions, explore multiple perspectives, and build well-reasoned arguments. Engaging deeply with literature equips students to connect themes across genres and time periods, thus contributing to the evolution of literary scholarship. In this light, the paper presents a discourse on Socratic Method as a dynamic pedagogical tool that can impact profound intellectual growth in postgraduate literature students. Rooted in the philosophical tradition of Socrates, this approach promotes learning through dialogue, inquiry, and active engagement (Knezic, et al, 2010). Socratic Method creates a structured yet open environment where students collectively explore the complexities of literary texts, and in doing so, cultivate critical thinking and deeper understanding. The primary objective of this paper is to delve into the multifaceted aspects of using the Socratic approach in postgraduate literature pedagogy.

SOCRATIC DIALOGUE IN EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW

The Socratic Method, named after the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, is an inquiry-based teaching approach that involves posing thought-provoking questions to stimulate critical thinking, elicit insights, and encourage rigorous examination of ideas. Originating in the philosophical dialogues of Plato, this method has traversed time and disciplinary boundaries, becoming a cornerstone of modern pedagogical practices (Knox, 1998). Central to the Socratic Method is the art of guided questioning. Paul & Elder (2008) while stating that the Socratic Method is a tool used in classroom instruction and evaluation based on questions and discussions led by the learners, explains that there are three types of questions used in Socratic Questioning: spontaneous, exploratory, and focused. According to them, the spontaneous questions are not planned ahead of time but emerge during instructions and are aimed at exploring the deeper meanings of a response given by students. The exploratory questions involve activating prior knowledge and are planned ahead of time by the teacher. Through such questions, teachers can pose targeted inquiries aimed at assessing the connections students have established between content objectives and various concepts. Focused form of questioning involves a deliberate examination of a particular concept or subject, delving into its intricacies. Such questions are meticulously prepared by the teacher and are designed to prompt students to engage with the concept on a deeper level. The purpose of these focused questions extends beyond mere comprehension; they encourage students to apply, investigate, and experiment with the concept.

Chang, Lin, and Chan (1998) (as cited in Delic & Becirovic, 2011) stated that the Socratic Method encompasses several aspects when applied to learning. Firstly, its primary learning objective is rooted in “inquiry”. Secondly, it functions as a dialogue between the student and the teacher. The teacher assumes the role of the questioner, while the student’s responsibility lies in organizing their past experiences and knowledge to respond to these questions. Thirdly, the method extends beyond interactive discourse between teachers and students; it also embraces an inductive approach. The Socratic Method requires the instructors to give up their job as a conventional teacher who delivers the contents of the course but try to get the learners involved with the materials (Zare & Mukundan, 2015).

In the realm of literature studies, the Socratic approach transcends mere question-and-answer sessions. It serves as a catalyst for uncovering layers of meaning within literary texts. An advantage of the Socratic method is its ability to foster an intimate connection between the student and the teacher, a dynamic that cannot be attained through traditional lecturing. This approach transforms both individuals into active participants within the teaching and learning endeavor (Knox, 1998). The dialectical nature of the Socratic approach nurtures a learning environment where interpretations are refined, challenged, and expanded through collaborative exploration. It compels students to contemplate and articulate their thoughts, assumptions, and interpretations, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of subject matter. It is the art of asking open-ended questions that challenge conventional wisdom, encouraging students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information before forming conclusions.

SOCRATES APPROACH AS A MULTIFACETED APPROACH

Socratic Approach offers a multifaceted approach to postgraduate literature pedagogy, fostering cognitive engagement, collaborative learning, and meta-cognition. These dimensions intertwine to create a vibrant learning environment that nurtures both individual growth and collective exploration. In the first place, it allows for cognitive engagement by encouraging close reading and textual analysis. It compels students to meticulously dissect literary works, examining language, imagery, and narrative structures. By engaging in in-depth textual analysis, students develop an acute awareness of literary techniques and their impact on meaning. The students are also encouraged to confront their pre-conceived notions about literature through thought provoking questions. This challenges them to reevaluate their assumptions, fostering a more open-minded and adaptable approach to interpretation. Sigel (1979) asserted that the implementation of Socratic Questioning enhances cognitive abilities by prompting abstract thinking. In a separate study, Chorzempa and Lapidus (2009) found that when incorporating the Socratic Method with their students, they observed that students develop skills in identifying textual evidence, utilizing questioning to dissect the content, and composing responses that encapsulate the core elements of the narrative. They concluded that these abilities effectively prepare learners to formulate responses to document-based questions.

Secondly, the Socratic approach allows for the transformation of the classroom into a vibrant community of scholars where collaborative learning happens in an optimum manner. As students collectively explore texts and contribute diverse perspectives and interpretations, the learning experience is enriched and the students learn from each other's insights and thought processes. In the Socratic Method, students take on roles as both questioners and respondents. This peer-to-peer interaction stimulates deeper engagement which is essential for a vibrant learning environment. Chorzempa & Lapidus (2009), in their study involving Socrates questioning and discussions found that the students "*felt more comfortable sharing their ideas, encouraging one another to think out of the box*" (p.58). The willingness of students to reply to each other's points and discussions according to them was one of the most important outcomes of the study.

Thirdly, Socratic Method encourages meta-cognition and reflection. It helps students develop self-awareness of interpretive processes by encouraging them to articulate their thought processes aloud. This reflective practice prompts them to become more conscious of the strategies they employ when interpreting literature, leading to heightened meta-cognitive skills. As students engage in meaningful discourse, they are prompted to substantiate their interpretations with evidence from the text. This instills a habit of critical self-assessment and a deeper understanding of the rationale underlying their interpretations. According to Lam (2011), one benefit that Socrates Method gives is the opportunity for students to monitor their own learning. Kuhn (1999) in support of the Socrates Method stated that as the practice of self-monitoring one's own learning is inherently metacognitive, and metacognition is closely intertwined with critical thinking the choice of utilizing the Socratic Method (SM) as an instructional approach to foster metacognition is a logical one. The Socrates method not only strives to evoke metacognitive processes but also aligns with constructivist principles, acknowledging the distinctiveness of each individual. Furthermore, it embraces creativity by its very nature.

The integration of these dimensions results in a dynamic learning environment that not only enhances students' analytical abilities but also fosters a deeper appreciation for the complexities of literature. By embracing the cognitive, collaborative, and reflective aspects of Socratic dialogue, postgraduate literature pedagogy becomes a rich arena for intellectual growth and scholarly exploration. Hindle (2007) emphasizes that Socrates' historical influence has highlighted a key insight: a student's critical imagination is intrinsically rooted within their own mental faculties, rather than being solely determined by curriculum designs that claim to enhance creativity and innovation. Further, Carrier (2007) makes a call to educators to adopt an instructional approach closely aligned with Socrates' methodology stating that such an approach not only fosters the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student but also facilitates the process of knowledge acquisition by the students through the teacher's guidance.

CASE EXAMPLE OF IMPLEMENTING SOCRATIC APPROACH IN A POST GRADUATE LITERATURE CLASS IN NAGALAND

This section of the paper provides a comprehensive overview of a case example of how Socratic Method was applied in a Post Graduate Literature Class in Nagaland. The literature class was centered on Shakespearean Tragedies, particularly, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *King Lear*. This case example seeks to highlight how the method deepens students' engagement with complex moral dilemmas within these classic works.

The class size was limited to 36 students and the students were divided into four groups to encourage and facilitate active participation. Each group was assigned a tragedy and a set of guiding questions that were open-ended and probing in nature to allow and promote analytical thinking and elicit multifaceted interpretations of moral dilemmas. Below are the guiding questions that were provided to the students;

Hamlet:

1. How does Hamlet's contemplation of life and death reflect his moral struggles? How do his philosophical inquiries influence his decisions and actions?
2. Is Hamlet's pursuit of revenge morally justifiable? How do cultural norms and his personal ethics clash or align?
3. How does the theme of madness intersect with the moral dilemmas faced by various characters in the play?
4. What role does the ghost play in shaping Hamlet's moral trajectory? How does the supernatural element influence his choices?

Macbeth:

1. To what extent is Macbeth's ambition responsible for his moral downfall? How does unchecked ambition affect the moral compass of other characters?
2. How do the witches' prophecies manipulate Macbeth's sense of right and wrong? What does this reveal about the blurred lines between fate and individual choice?
3. How does Lady Macbeth's influence on Macbeth's decisions complicate the ethical dimensions of their actions?
4. Discuss the moral implications of Macbeth's internal struggle between his ambition and his sense of morality.

Othello:

1. How do racial biases and cultural prejudices influence the moral judgments of characters in "Othello"?
2. What role does jealousy play in driving the moral dilemmas within the play? How do characters' perceptions of each other shape their decisions?
3. Is Othello's eventual tragic outcome primarily the result of his own choices, or are there external factors that contribute to his downfall?
4. How does Iago manipulate the moral values of other characters? What insights does this provide into the nature of evil and deception?

King Lear:

1. Discuss the moral consequences of King Lear's decision to divide his kingdom among his daughters. How does this decision impact the family dynamic and the unfolding tragedy?
2. How do the moral failings of various characters, such as Edmund and Goneril, contribute to the overall tragedy of the play?
3. Explore the theme of loyalty and betrayal in "King Lear" How do characters' loyalties shape their moral decisions?
4. How does the storm on the heath symbolize the internal moral turmoil experienced by characters in the play?

The second session was held in the form of a summary discussion. After the initial group discussions, the whole class was brought together for a summary discussion. Each group was required to briefly present their key insights, thought-provoking questions, and notable interpretations that emerged during their discussions. Based on their summary presentation, the class was then asked to synthesize the most compelling aspects of their discussion. Following the summary presentation the students were asked to write a concise reflection on the key takeaways from their group's discussion. The written reflections were then shared with the class to allow students to examine the differing perspectives and encourage them to learn from each other. Below are some responses that the students shared based on their group discussions;

STUDENT REFLECTIONS

"We debated whether Hamlet's hesitation to take revenge was a sign of moral weakness or strength. Some saw it as a reflection of his moral complexity, while others argued that it demonstrated his ethical integrity"

"Our group explored the tension between Hamlet's internal moral compass and the external pressures of revenge. The diverse viewpoints enriched our understanding of Hamlet's character". (Group Hamlet)

"We delved into the concept of moral corruption and its gradual progression in Macbeth. Some argued that his initial moral conflict was overshadowed by his ambition, while others suggested that his actions were influenced by supernatural forces."

"Our dialogue illuminated the relationship between ambition and morality. The discussion made us ponder how Macbeth's actions could be seen as a warning about the corrosive nature of unchecked ambition." (Group Macbeth)

"We examined the role of jealousy as a driving force in the play. There was a consensus that jealousy amplified the moral dilemmas faced by characters, particularly Othello. Some questioned whether Iago's manipulation was solely to blame for Othello's downfall"

“Our group recognized that the themes of jealousy and manipulation are intertwined with larger ethical considerations. Discussing how cultural prejudices influenced characters' actions brought depth to our interpretations”. (Group Othello)

“We explored the idea of moral blindness and the tragic consequences of flawed judgments. Lear's division of his kingdom and Gloucester's misplaced trust were seen as pivotal examples of characters' moral shortcomings”.

“Our dialogue unveiled the tragic outcomes of characters' moral misjudgments. We found ourselves discussing the complex interplay between personal and societal ethics and how they shape the characters' fates”. (Group King Lear)

CONCLUSION

Based on the reflections above, it may be stated that the Socratic dialogue enabled students to navigate the complexities of moral dilemmas and recognize the layers of motivations that drive characters' decisions. Engaging with their peers' diverse interpretations broadened students' perspectives, highlighting the subjectivity of ethical judgments. The method encouraged students to consider the socio-historical context of Shakespearean tragedies, fostering a nuanced understanding of moral values across time periods. The application of the Socratic dialogue in this case study demonstrates its efficacy in unraveling the intricate moral dilemmas woven into Shakespeare's tragedies. Through collaborative inquiry and guided discussion, students gained a deeper appreciation for the multifaceted nature of moral decision-making in literature.

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