Teaching with Questions: The Socratic Method

The oldest, and still the most powerful, teaching tactic for fostering critical thinking is Socratic teaching. In Socratic teaching we focus on giving students questions, not answers. We model an inquiring mind by continually probing into the subject with open ended questions for feedback to evaluate progress.

This method of using questions to teach and evaluate performance is called the Socratic Method because it came from Socrates, the famous Greek philosopher and teacher. Socrates taught his students in a manner that was beyond some of the conventions of the time. The method involved questioning. Questioning students not only allows the tutor to evaluate the level of understanding but also provides for feedback, fine tuning the levels of tutoring, dealing with misconceptions early, as well as improving the educational material presented.

The Socratic method of instruction is sometimes called the inquiry method. It is based upon a student's current level of understanding on a subject. Questions progress from what the student knows, and progress towards new material and ideas that the tutor guides the student into with their directed questioning.

A Socratic questioner should:

a) keep the discussion focused

b) keep the discussion intellectually responsible

c) stimulate the discussion with probing questions

d) periodically summarize what has and what has not been dealt with and/or resolved