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### Reflections on the Socratic Method

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# Reflections on the Socratic Method

## Rachel Smith Althof

### Abstract

I have noticed the *Socratic method* is a term often used in academic circles in a variety of syntactical contexts. I began to wonder how the nature of the Socratic method has changed over time. Would Socrates approve of the various meanings associated with his name today?

I conducted a detailed analysis of the historical text *Alcibiades*, seeking contemporary relevance. There is evidence that Socrates did not actually have a method, as it may appear. An analysis of the text shows that Socrates' genius lies in his openness to adapt to the changing landscape of dialogue. In doing so, he and his student, Alcibiades, participate in the process of *askesis*, or self-cultivation. As Socrates demonstrates, engaging in *askesis* is equally important for the teacher and students.

### Article

Historically, Socrates is one of the most well known scholars in dialogue-based pedagogy. Gadamer (1980), while arguing the complexities of the Socratic method, describes Socrates's pedagogical genius as the ability to choose and adapt a variety of dialogical approaches to the audience, context, and topic under consideration (as cited in Burbules, 1993). The term Socratic teaching method is used quite often in academic circles, and I have noticed in different syntactical contexts. I have noticed in my own experiences that the Socratic method is often thought to be a narrow line of challenging questions that lead the "responder" to the answer in which the "questioner" had in mind from the beginning. Although Socrates is known for participating in such an interaction, it is not illuminative of Socrates's significance. This type of interaction is actually not a dialogue—a dialogue would not include such rigid roles for participants—although this type of interaction could be included in a larger dialogue if the roles were to reverse and/or reflex. Once again, Socrates's contribution to pedagogy lies within his ability to transform an interaction into a dialogue base on the audience, topic and context. For

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Socrates and his fellow dialogue participants, dialogue was a journey in which they traveled together.

One of the texts most well known for demonstrating the Socratic pedagogical strength is *Alcibiades*. Although Socrates focused solely on verbal dialogue in his methods, Plato has written extensively on his accounts of Socrates' verbal dialogues. *Alcibiades* is one such account. Socrates approaches Alcibiades after a long period of observation. It is Socrates intention to prove to Alcibiades that he must engage in the practice of askesis, or self-cultivation, if he wishes to fulfill his ambitions of becoming a great state leader. Socrates also wishes to prove to Alcibiades that Socrates is the only teacher who can provide the pedagogical and psychagogical structure for Alcibiades to do this successfully. Although this particular dialogue is focused on the topic of civic leadership, the implications for art education are found within the analysis of Socrates's pedagogy.

Socrates employs an array of strategies in his pedagogy and psychagogy, but does all of it with much patience. It is this patience in which allows for deep learning on the part of Alcibiades. Socrates does not rush to his point, nor does he even state his point. Rather, he waits for a very long time before evening approaching Alcibiades about this and then patiently uses his very specific type of dialogue to lead Alcibiades to his own conclusion.

Teaching is very much about building a bridge between students and content, all with the context in mind. Pedagogically speaking, Socrates waited to get to know his student, and uses that to engage his student in the content. Alcibiades is hungry for

power, and is looking to become a state leader. Socrates very much knows this, as he has  
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been observing Alcibiades for a long time. He uses this knowledge to hook Alcibiades into learning how cultivate his own self.

While waiting to approach Alcibiades, Socrates was carefully observing him. He tells Alcibiades that he was prevented from engaging in conversation with him by some divine being, the effect of which he will hear about later on. Through this lengthy time of observation, Socrates has gotten to know Alcibiades well. So well, that he is able to describe Alcibiades's background with detail to begin. What better way to grab someone's attention than flattery of keen observation of his or her life? And what better way to persuade a power-hungry person to engage in conversation with you than flattery? Socrates uses this platform wisely, as he know Alcibiades could not refute a conversation formed with detail from the beginning about himself.

At this point, Alcibiades is interested in engaging in conversation but hasn't yet fully entered into dialogue with Socrates. He demonstrates willingness, yet is still a bit guarded. Socrates continues to engage Alcibiades by demonstrating his own vulnerability through exposing his intentions. He tells Alcibiades, "I'm hoping the same thing from you as you are from the Athenians: I hope to exert great influence over you by showing you that I'm worth the world to you and that nobody is capable of providing you with the influence you crave, neither your guardian nor your relatives, nor anybody else except me – with god's help, of course" (Cooper, 1997, p. 560). He is clearly stating his intentions to build trust, and also overtly stating the shared vision of them both. By doing so, he is broadening the explicit common ground between the two, which continues to help ease Alcibiades into entering the dialogue. This is the point within the conversation that the psychagogy of Socrates begins to become evident.

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Socrates continues on to patiently question Alcibiades about how people learn, how we determine what is better, what one would need to be a civic leader, and how we learn about those things. Once again, Socrates does not state his point directly, nor does he rush to the point. He begins with small, illustrative questions pertaining to particular situations. Once Alcibiades establishes what he knows about these particular situations, Socrates then asks Alcibiades to confirm a comparison to another situation which Alcibiades may not have recognized from the onset. This slippery way of building logic – almost linear, but including side-step comparisons – is how Socrates restrains himself from rushing to his main objective.

These logical side steps, the slippage, that Socrates so patiently weaves throughout the discussion acts as an element of surprise for Alcibiades. Alcibiades could not possibly expect the twists and turns the dialogue takes. Alcibiades is playing an inferior role in the dialogue, Socrates is clearly in charge, and Socrates uses these twists and turns to keep Alcibiades on his toes, so to speak. The function is two-fold: to wind the dialogue in an entanglement of logical steps and to continue to engage Alcibiades through the use of novelty.

Socrates is able to lead Alcibiades into logical traps: Alcibiades makes claims that he then must renege. For example, Socrates has directed the dialogue into exploring the definitions of admirable, good and bad (Cooper, 1997, p.571). He leads Alcibiades into a trap, and then states the paradox bluntly: "Then when you say that rescuing one's friends in battle is admirable but bad, you mean exactly the same as if you'd called it good but bad" (Cooper, 1997, p. 572). This must be frustrating for a promising young leader such

as Alcibiades, leading to feelings of insecurity. He tells Socrates, "I swear by the gods, *This is a pre-peer review preprint © [Rachel Smith Althof, 2015]. The definitive, peer reviewed 4 and edited version of this article is published in [Visual Inquiry, Volume 4, Issue 2, pp. 89-96, 2015, DOI: [10.1386/vi.4.2.89\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/vi.4.2.89_1)].*

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Socrates, I have no idea what I mean – I must be in some absolutely bizarre condition! When you ask me questions, first I think one thing, and then I think something else” (Cooper, 1997, p. 573). Socrates further amplifies his insecurities, as he converses with Alcibiades. He even tells him at one point, “Good god, Alcibiades, what a sorry state you’re in! I hesitate to call it by name, but still, since we’re alone, it must be said. You are wedded to stupidity, my good fellow, stupidity in the highest degree – our discussion and your own words convict you of it” (Cooper, 1997, p. 575). This is probably the low point in the discussion for Alcibiades, a point where he feels most insecure.

Alas, Socrates happens to be right there, when Alcibiades is fully shaken from the realization of his own incompetency, with solutions in mind. He asks Alcibiades, “Do you intend on remaining in your present condition, or practice some form of self-cultivation?” (Cooper, 1997, p. 576). Alcibiades responds, “Let’s discuss it together, Socrates. You know, I do see what you’re saying and actually I agree...” (Cooper, 1997, p.576). Alcibiades is now seeking discussion with Socrates. The psychagogy is very clear; Alcibiades has changed his demeanor and attitude towards Socrates, which is the beginning of his change of self.

Socrates once again opens a space of common ground between he and Alcibiades. Alcibiades asks Socrates what kind of self-cultivation he should practice. Now Socrates is the one who states, “...let’s discuss this together how we can become as good as possible. You know, what I’ve said about education applies to me as well as you – we’re in the same condition, except in one respect” (Cooper, 1997, p.581). (The one respect in which they differ is their guardians – Socrates’ guardian is God, the divine being who prevented him from talking with Alcibiades before today.) He continues on and states, *This is a pre-peer review preprint © [Rachel Smith Althof, 2015]. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in [Visual Inquiry, Volume 4, Issue 2, pp. 89-96, 2015, DOI: [10.1386/vi.4.2.89\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/vi.4.2.89_1)].*

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“So let’s work it out together. Tell me – we say that we want to be as good as possible, don’t we?” (Cooper, 1997, p. 581). Socrates is continuing to build a relationship with Alcibiades, and as demonstrated previously, Alcibiades is trying to build that relationship with him. Relationships aren’t constructed instantaneously; they require time, and cultivation as well.

Socrates is demonstrating his main objective of self-cultivation throughout the entire dialogue. His patience, or restraint in dialogue, is part of his own self-cultivation. As Socrates and Alcibiades have this conversation, he is not merely stating his case, nor is he merely leading Alcibiades to the conclusion that he must participate in self-cultivation. Socrates is demonstrating and engaging in an aspect of self-cultivation with Alcibiades.

I doubt Socrates ever would have imagined his own relevance in twenty first century art education. *Askesis* is an important process for both students and teachers—the educative process is collaboration between people. When educators and students alike are invested in their individual journeys of self-cultivation, the dialogue is enriched. It is rich dialogue that brings an art studio to life.

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