

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING AND THE SOCRATIC ELENCHUS IN THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

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Historically, PBL has been deemed a functional method for the instruction of the sciences. Hence, its pedagogical strategy has been used by more than 80% of medical schools. In the teaching of the humanities, however, the method has taken a longer time to be assimilated. This paper then explores the application of PBL in the teaching of the humanities particularly in the field of literature. It begins its analysis by reverting to Southern Illinois University's [SIU] multifarious notion of a "problem" whereby artistic creativity, analysis, synthesis, judgment, and the logical process harmoniously interact. For SIU, "understanding a puzzling phenomenon" is just as much a problem as thinking about "how to create an artistic work." Naturally, the general description encompasses the kind of problem that is often introduced in literary discussions. This paper, however, focuses on the Socratic elenchus as the means to incorporate PBL in literature. It cites the Great Books inquiry method, Mortimer Adler's Paideia program, and the University of Asia and the Pacific's class discussions as ramifications of PBL and the Socratic elenchus in literary instruction. It also discusses strategies for an effective PBL approach in the teaching of literature as viewed from the university's experience.

INTRODUCTION

For the past few years, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has been deemed a functional method for the instruction of the sciences. Hence, its pedagogical strategy has been used by more than 80% of medical schools (Jones, 1996). Among the esteemed medical schools that have actively used the PBL approach in clinical instruction are Harvard University, Southern Illinois University and McMaster University. Such esteemed medical schools have greatly benefited from PBL in making their students employ a holistic approach to the solution of clinical cases. In contrast, humanistic schools of learning have taken a longer time to adopt PBL as a pedagogical strategy. It is PBL's nascent association with the sciences that distances the humanities from it. It is also the overriding emphasis of PBL practitioners on the scientific and professional application of PBL that gives the illusion of PBL as a non-humanistic method of instruction. However, PBL is not a teaching device reserved for the sciences alone. It is a workable method in the humanities, particularly in the field of literature.

In the PBL approach, the problem is central to any learning process. PBL thus seems to be most appropriate in the instruction of the scientific and professional disciplines where problems are studied to arrive at a particular solution. In math, the very rigor of the quantitative discipline calls for repeated problem-solving exercises. In sociology, the ubiquitous presence of societal problems draws analysts to curb a sociological mayhem. Similarly, the problem-solving approach is apropos of the fields of medicine, politics, business, economics, architecture, physics and the like. In the mentioned areas of knowledge, a practical solution to an imminent problem is often the thrust of education. In this respect, it is difficult to immediately ascertain the usefulness of PBL in literature. This is because some people view literature as an artistic effusion of words replete with fixed meanings. For them, the literary text is a complete manuscript in itself. It provides no problem to be uncovered because a written work is a finished publication that requires no solution. However, if we revert to the Platonic notion of literature as a mimesis, we are reminded of literature as a reflection of reality. Hence, the conflict that arises in a literary plot oftentimes mirrors the internal and external conflicts experienced by persons and societies in the real world. A piece of literature can then be viewed as a case in itself for readers to reflect on. A text may serve as a reveille to awaken the conscience of a people for them to subvert, if necessary, a given culture, philosophy, traditional norm or political problem. The problem posed in a literature class can then be a powerful medium to address multi-disciplinary aspects of reality.

PBL AS A LITERARY PEDAGOGY

However, if literature is to use the PBL scheme, the problem posed in classrooms has to embrace the myriad colors of a creative and literary learning experience. Southern Illinois University's [SIU] notion of a "problem" addresses this concern. For SIU, "understanding a puzzling phenomenon" is just as much a problem as thinking about "how to create an artistic work." SIU reckons that confining a problem to "something that is wrong or not working correctly and needs to be fixed such as a patient with an illness, a social or economic problem, a car or a computer that won't operate" is to narrow down the pith of learning opportunities (Southern Illinois University, 2000). SIU expands the definition of a problem to one whereby artistic creativity, analysis, synthesis, judgment, and the logical process harmoniously interact. Naturally, its definition encompasses the kind of problem that is often introduced in literary discussions for, in essence, a literary problem embraces varied issues covering the verbal pyrotechnics of the writer, the recurring motifs, metaphors, images and other stylistic devices that pervade a certain work; the historical background in which the literature was written; the social milieu comprising the plot's setting; the motives that drive heroes and villains into action; and a host of other details that may be unearthed in an academic dialogue.

PBL AND THE SOCRATIC *ELENCHUS*

Historically, the non-humanistic impression of PBL is illusory. In fact, humanists of the ancient Grecian period relied heavily on the notion of a problem as a pedagogical strategy. Foremost among them was Socrates who explored the method of *elenchus* as a pedagogical technique. According to the chronicles of Plato, the Socratic method transpired during informal discussions, often in the form of a *tete-a-tete*. The lessons derived during such exchange of ideas were subtle and indirect. Socrates traditionally began an investigation together with the persons he endeavored to teach. For him, learning was a social activity that

drew both teacher and student to a simultaneous task of discovery. In *Protagoras*, for instance, he consulted Protagoras, a bastion of wisdom, from which he sought knowledge. He was skeptical of Protagoras's belief that excellence can be taught. And yet, he opened himself to Protagoras' explanation and showed a willingness to change his opinion should the explanation be logical. He told Protagoras: ". . . I don't consider that *excellence* can be taught. But when I hear the suggestion coming from you, I begin to have second thoughts and to think that you must have a point" (Plato, 1986). Socrates listened to any participant of a dialogue. In *Protagoras*, he assumed the role of a student vis-a-vis Protagoras, the teacher. As student, he challenged the ideas of Protagoras by asking him crucial questions. And although a student, he likewise acted as teacher by enlightening Protagoras on their basic points of disagreement. The dialogue of Socrates allowed the ideas of students and teachers to clash. The student was not compelled to blindly accept the reasoning of the teacher. On the other hand, the teacher endeavored to learn from his students as he challenged them with questions that either strengthened or expunged their arguments.

In the book *Dialogue and Discovery. A Study in Socratic Method*, Seeskin (1987) defines *elenchus* as a "means to examine, refute, or put to shame." Hall in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* elaborates on the Socratic *elenchus* as "a prolonged cross-examination which refutes the opponent's original thesis by getting him to draw from it, by means of a series of questions and answers, a consequence that contradicts it" (Vlastos, 1994). A result of the *elenchus* is then the leisurely fashion by which participants spontaneously express their thoughts in a conversation. The method of questioning aids the participants to ponder deeply on a problem at hand while leading them to freely articulate their views on the matter. It is through a series of questions that the Socratic method allows students to undergo some form of ideological metamorphosis. The first step of the intellectual transformation starts when a student ponders on a particular idea. In the course of the discussion, he expresses his raw ideas but re-examines them after considering the questions posed by the teacher. He listens to the inputs of his classmates and integrates the others' ideas with his own. At the end of the class session, he arrives at a conclusion and analysis that is either contrapuntal or similar to his inchoate thoughts at the time that he started the discussion. As a result, he ends up formulating theories that are certainly richer than those he began with. In fact, in the *Protagoras* episode, the reciprocal process of cross-examination that both Socrates and Protagoras submitted to each other eventually led them to embrace the argument that they initially eschewed. At the beginning of their conversation, Socrates held that excellence could not be taught. As the discussion progressed, however, he arrived at the idea that everything was a kind of knowledge. This kind of reasoning, of course, only led Socrates to reinvent his original thesis and to deduce that excellence could, after all, be taught. Protagoras, on the other hand, maintained that excellence was capable of being taught. However, he also resolutely argued that excellence was not knowledge. Hence, by asserting excellence as such, he contradicted his initial notion of excellence as capable of being taught.

Problem-based learning via Socratic questioning can be applied as a contemporary method of literary education. The problem consists of a question that the students confront during a literature class. The question is the pivotal quandary around which other ideas and questions spring from. Its aim is to derive a logical comprehension of a given text. However, since the teacher may want to begin with the fundamental issues of the setting, the general plot, and the characters, it is not necessarily the first question posed to the students. The Socratic question is a problem that makes both students and teachers ponder about the subliminal undertones of a piece of writing. It extracts image symbolism, character motives, author's intent as well as

the historic relevance of the text. It synthesizes language, style, and subject matter to develop a coherent interpretation. It is the question that produces a domino effect as it unveils a series of other questions and insights as soon as it is posed. The Socratic problem uncovers other problems. Paradoxically, it is by doing so that a quandary is oftentimes resolved and an interpretation is firmly established.

During the time of Socrates, pupils solicited the teaching advice of learned individuals. Many of the teachers were sophists who asserted themselves as masters of knowledge. Socrates, on the other hand, began his dialogues from the standpoint of a humble learner who explored answers to the questions he himself posed. As a teacher, he refrained from providing his students with ready-made answers. Instead, he underwent the process of discovery just like his apprentices through the questions he asked. He was consistent in this method even in his imprisonment and imminent death. When Socrates explained to Crito his decision not to escape his death sentence, he did it through the rhetoric of *elenchus*. He examined his option of leaving or staying and refuted Crito's offer to pay someone who could remove him from prison. He said: "Let us examine this question together, my friend, and if you can contradict anything that I say, do so, and I shall be persuaded" (Plato, 1986). Even at the proximity of death, he opened himself to refutation while going through the process of refuting someone else. His main intent was to arrive at the truth regardless of its cost. To Crito, he evinced: ". . . I am still what I always have been --- a man who will accept no argument but that which on reflection I find to be truest" (Plato, 1986). In his case, the truth had cost his life. For by rejecting Crito's suggestion of paying certain officials so that he could escape his punishment, he maintained his principle that an injustice should not be countervailed by another injustice. As he examined his arguments with Crito, Crito was compelled to submit to the wisdom of Socrates.

In literature, the Socratic *elenchus* allows teachers to reflect on their students' learning process as well as their own. By being open to learning via discussions, teachers transmit the responsibility of learning to the participants of a discussion. They shift people's attention away from themselves as the centrifugal point of learning. Instead, they direct the focus of learning to the student himself. In the process, the teacher becomes a mere moderator who draws out insights from his students. By dwelling on a problem, he transfers the responsibility of searching for a solution to the students who undertake the learning activity. His role is crucial when he notices a deviation in the flow of the conversation. His aim is to help the students resolve the questions and problems that they encounter as they exchange their ideas with each other. The art of questioning elicits a vibrant mental activity in the minds of students who analyze a literary text via the questions that are posed to them. While pondering on a problem, students learn to think on their own and deduce their own conclusions.

THE GREAT BOOKS FOUNDATION'S SHARED INQUIRY METHOD

In present-day experience, the Socratic *elenchus* manifests itself in protean forms. Whether or not the method was conceptualized with Socrates in mind, the Great Books Foundation's shared inquiry method uses the Socratic technique. It applies the same principle of using questions as a pedagogical device. Its germane mission is to immerse discussants in the critical analysis of a given piece of literature. Students confront the many dimensions of a short story, a poem, a novel or a play by mulling over questions that connect dispersed narrative issues together. The Great Books Foundation [GBF] is a nonprofit educational

institution designed to reinforce the cognitive objectives of liberal education. Its aim is to train students to think independently as well as communicate their ideas competently. It was established in 1947 under the leadership of Robert Maynard Hutchins who was then the chancellor of the University of Chicago. In 1962, the Foundation created a program of education that addressed the learning needs of children. Since then, the Junior Great Books curriculum was introduced and implemented in various institutions within and without the United States. Every year, the Foundation gathers more than 12,000 moderators who desire to implement the method in their teaching. The Junior Great Books program is interesting as it trains students to read and write critically in their epistemological journey. Students, from kindergarten to grade 12, learn to reflect on the pertinent issues in a text by pondering on the questions addressed by the teacher and by daring to ask questions that shed light on an interpretation (The Great Books Foundation, 1999.)

The discussion does not always start with a question. Sometimes, it begins with the teacher drawing the students' attention to a passage. At other times, it familiarizes the students with the basic plot and characters of a given narrative. The prologue of any class session may vary according to the creativity of the teacher. However, if a teacher decides to use the shared inquiry method, the series of questions and answers dominate the discussion. The shared inquiry method aims to develop the reading, thinking, writing, speaking, and listening skills of the participants. Reading is fostered, as each participant is encouraged to read the selection at least twice. Thinking is facilitated as students are asked analytical questions that engage the mind in reflection. Listening is crucial to the whole activity since the discussion progresses in reaction to the counter-arguments derived from preceding comments. Speaking is exercised as the intellectual ideas are articulated in oral communication. Finally, writing is developed, as students are required to articulate basic arguments of a discussion in written form.

There are three kinds of questions that the shared inquiry method employs. The factual question is geared to familiarize students with the literal details of a narrative. For instance, a teacher may use a factual question to identify pertinent data necessary for a coherent textual analysis. For a Shakespearean play like *Hamlet*, questions that point out Hamlet's social stature and grief over his recently deceased father may be factual in nature. A factual question answers the question "what" in reference to the narrative details in a literary text. Another type of question is the interpretive question. The interpretive question strives for a deeper analysis of character, setting, style and plot as it searches for meaning in all or any of the narrative elements. It answers the question "why" as it probes into the *raison d'être* of a specific narrative content or form. It probes into character motivation, stylistic and linguistic devices, the author's aims, connections among the narrative elements, and other striking details that may contain symbolism or meaning. The evaluative question, on the other hand, challenges students to assess a writer's views and determine either flaws or truths that may be inherent in a piece of literature. It spurs students to make a judgment on the verity of the ideas presented by a particular writer (The Great Books Foundation, 1999).

MORTIMER ADLER AND THE PAIDEIA PROGRAM

In the 1980's, Mortimer Adler of the University of Chicago developed an education plan known as the paideia program. In his book *Paideia Problems and Possibilities. A Consideration of Questions Raised by the Paideia Proposal*, Adler (1983) reiterates the Socratic method of questioning as a function of the paideia proposal. He explains the paideia

as a pedagogical approach that exposes students of all levels to a basic curriculum in the classics. The paideia approach does not then limit discussions to only a select group of students. Adler argues that “humanitas” is a Latin word that is actually synonymous with the Greek word “paideia.” Both concepts of the “humanitas” and the “paideia” hinge on the educational principle that general education should be accessible to every person. Hence, the classics are taught to students of all ages. The classics, however, are not identical to the votary of literature that surfaced during the Greco-Roman era. Instead, they simply refer to works of literature that transcend cultures, peoples, and time regardless of whether or not they were written before, during or after the Greco-Roman empires. They are literary upshots of a particular age. And yet, they are relevant to any contemporary period for their universal themes and reflections on the human condition (Adler, 1983).

What is interesting is Adler’s three-pronged teaching method. Adler proposes the application of three kinds of methods to achieve an instructional objective. He cites didactic teaching as a method for the teaching of a discipline or specialization, coaching as a strategy to mold certain intellectual skills, and the Socratic [also known as maieutic] teaching which is the relevant method for seminar discussion (Adler, 1983). With respect to the Socratic technique, Adler clarifies that Socrates as such did not exemplify the modern-day moderator of a seminar discussion. Socrates did not critique literary genres with his students. He did not assign a particular text as a prerequisite for any discussion. As far as his followers were concerned, he did not even write at all. We know Socrates through Plato who chronicled his teachings. Plato was the writer who encapsulated Socrates’ wisdom into dramatic form. But Socrates was neither a creative writer nor a teacher of literature. He was primarily a philosopher who was enamored of the transcendental ideals of the true, the good and the beautiful. In any case, Adler (1984) maintains that the procedure of questioning students on a particular text as a method of instruction is basically Socratic in nature. The process of questioning is a method that can be applied in literature. However, the Socratic teacher must be adept at the art of conversation. He does not monopolize the discussions. He elicits responses from his students precisely through the questions he poses.

THE QUESTION METHOD IN THE UNIVERSITY OF ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

In the Philippines, the University of Asia and the Pacific [UA&P] has adopted the question method of the GBF’s shared inquiry since the early 1990’s. The question method, which was introduced by Manuel Escasa who was then the head of the literature program, was mainly used in literature classes. Literature classes consisted of small groups at that time. For the first few years, classes were allowed to reach the maximum limit of only 25 students. As the university expanded, however, the scarcity of teachers in relation to the increasing student population led the literature department to have 35 to 40 students per class. However, the increase in class size did not facilitate the discussion method. It did not reap the desired effects of critical thinking, verbal reasoning, and a free-flowing discussion. Hence, in 1999, the literature department of UA&P decided to revert to the small class size set-up of literature sections. The department began to hire more teachers to allow smaller class discussions of 17 to 18 students.

Apart from holding small classes, there are various techniques that the literature department has adopted since 1992 to ensure the successful use of a problem or a question in class. One strategy consists of assigning group projects to the students. Depending on the nature of the project, students may be divided into three to five groups. Each group is assigned to present

a particular chapter, passage, scene or act of a literary piece in whatever creative fashion. From experience, students venture to present an assigned text by staging a play; by visually interpreting the text on a poster using collage or realistic drawing; by producing a magazine or a newsletter; by making a video presentation; by creating three-dimensional art pieces; by concocting games and puzzles or by simply employing the discussion method with themselves acting as moderators. There are times, however, when a class need not be divided into groups. This happens when the class as a whole undertakes one project. A class project is useful with respect to big projects that are meant for the observation of invited guests or outsiders. Another strategy employed by literature teachers in UA&P is to assign student moderators for each class session. This is a good technique to ensure a lively discussion. By assigning student moderators, teachers share the responsibility of moderatorship with their students. A student may be tasked to moderate a class discussion depending on his analytical skills in inquiry. At other times, students may be given moderating tasks simply as an additional requirement of the course. Students may also be given the prerogative to moderate a discussion simply by volunteering to do it. Finally, a good strategy to facilitate the success of PBL or the Socratic *elenchus* is for teachers to simulate a small class scenario whenever a small class size is not possible. To create the impression of a small class, teachers may divide students into two discussion groups. One group is assigned to comprise the inner circle of the discussion set-up. The other group is positioned to comprise the outer circle. Students belonging to the inner circle actively participate in the discussion by answering the questions of the teacher and by sharing their insights on the text. Those belonging to the outer circle are tasked to record the main points of the discussion and to submit them at the end of the class session. The student composition of the inner circle and outer circle varies from week to week. Hence, students alternate tasks as they shift from being in the inner circle to being in the outer circle throughout the semester. In that way, everyone has an equal opportunity to exercise one's verbal and writing skills in class.

The question method has undergone a series of stages in the University of Asia and the Pacific. During the first few years, teachers sought to employ the shared inquiry method in its pure form. This meant that teachers used the technique of asking questions without resorting to the lecture method of instruction at all. Nowadays, the literature department allows for more flexibility. The lecture method, together with other kinds of teaching methods, is sometimes being alternated with the question method. A lecture is useful to introduce basic facts about the writer or the historical setting of the text to enrich the discussion. For the most part, however, the technique of questioning is still the method that the department encourages its teachers to do. Hence, questions are occasionally raised even during a lecture to stimulate thinking. The discussion method, however, remains the predominant means of teaching in the literature classes of the University of Asia and the Pacific. Thus, the university allots a special budget to help teachers undergo some form of training in the art of questioning. Newly hired instructors are given fewer classes to handle on their own compared to teachers of non-literary disciplines precisely to allow them the time and the leisure to study the discussion method via observation in their apprenticeship with senior faculty.

CONCLUSION

The problem-based approach to literature is replete with many opportunities for learning. The experience of the Great Books Foundation, Mortimer Adler's Paideia Program, and the University of Asia and the Pacific shows how PBL is an effective method in the teaching of

literature. Whenever a student is forwarded a problem in the form of a question, he is given the chance to exercise his thinking and speaking skills at the very least. He is stimulated and challenged to search for possible solutions to a given problem in the literary sense. Thus, he searches for symbolic words and images, analyses characterization, deconstructs language, relates fiction with historical reality, and bridges narrative elements like setting and plot to each other. In the process, he takes mastery over his own learning process. The teacher simply triggers his learning by asking questions. However, it is always the student who thinks on his own and arrives at a personal interpretation of a piece of literature. Strang, McCullough and Traxler (1967) reinforce the importance of a problem-based learning approach in literature in the book *The Improvement of Reading*. They assert:

Learning occurs when there is a need to know, a problem to be solved. The student's need to read often arises in connection with a goal, a project, a problem, or an activity that is important to him. . . . When the student runs into trouble in reading for the answers, it is the psychological moment to give him instruction in the required skill. . . . The teacher must be skillful in analyzing the reading task involved in a problem or project and in teaching the students how to accomplish it.

However, the Socratic *elenchus* is a crucial methodology to infuse a problem-based learning approach in a literature class. The process of inquiry, examination and refutation helps students achieve the contextual and formal objectives of a literature subject. It is through the use of problems and questions that students develop the skills of analysis, synthesis, and rhetoric. In turn, it is through the exercise of such skills that they adroitly unfold the beauty of literature as a repository of manifold meaning.

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