

Socratic Method of Teaching in Law School

Contributed by Norton Gappy

Socrates was a Greek philosopher who is well known for his critical thinking abilities.Â Â Â

Socratic teaching focuses on asking students questions, not by giving the student the answers. The object is for the professor to probe the mind of the student by continually asking questions and the student responding with a disciplined thought process, which focuses on logical relationships and critical reasoning.

It was Socratesâ€™ belief that the most effective way of teaching a student to argue logically was to engage the individual in a philosophic dialogue, in which he would attempt to argue a point.

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First year law professors often use the Socratic Method as a teaching tool.Â Usually, the Professor will call on an individual student, ask him/her to stand at his/her seat and engage the professor in a discussion about the cases in the case book, which usually are in conflict with each other.Â If the student is not careful, the professor will get the student to draw inconsistent conclusions.Â Professors use this method to train students to actively think on their feet, while in front of an audience.Â

Hopefully, after answering a series of questions, students will learn to develop arguments, defend their positions, and arrive at the right conclusion, or learn from their mistakes.Â Â Â

Even though the Socratic Method of teaching is useful, do not be surprised if in your second or third year of law school the professors use this technique less often than in your first year courses.Â Sometimes second and third year courses tend to resemble the same teaching techniques used by undergraduate professors (i.e. lectures).Â

Tips On learning From the Socratic Method:

Donâ€™t be nervous (â€œOk donâ€™t be too nervous).Â If you want to be an attorney, you cannot be afraid of speaking in public among your peers.Â If you become nervous, donâ€™t worry, your nerves will settle within minutes.Â Just think of it as arguing with your parents, but in a professional and rational manner.Â You must concentrate, think clearly, and focus on the adversarial process.Â Arguments rooted in emotion are usually not logical.Â Â Â Â

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Focus on the argument.Â People often stray from the main argument and argue derivative issues.Â Itâ€™s okay to pause before responding.Â Stay focused on the main issues and develop your arguments!

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Donâ€™t talk too much.Â Being an attorney does not mean that you are required to talk all the time.Â Rather, itâ€™s expected with practice, your arguments will become more focused, direct, and will require fewer words to convey your thoughts.Â Think of it as â€œspeaking efficiently.â€•Â Talking too much leads you to digress, makes your audience forget your main point and will give the law professor a prime opportunity to embarrass you.Â And trust me, they will try.