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Dog Bite Reflections—Socratic Questioning Revisited

Cheri A. Toledo
Walden University

In the online environment, the asynchronous discussion is an important tool for creating community, developing critical thinking skills, and checking for understanding. As students learn how to use Socratic questions for effective interactions, the discussion boards can become the most exciting part of the course. This sequel to the article "Does Your Dog Bite? Creating Good Questions for Online Discussions," applies sound communication principles and the prior question of trust to show online instructors how to phrase probing questions to increase comfort for learners' use. Based on the questions from the original "Does Your Dog Bite?" article, a variety of prompts are provided for asking probing questions in a non-threatening way.

Eight years have passed since the publication of "Does Your Dog Bite? Creating Good Questions for Online Discussions" (Toledo, 2006) in the *International Journal for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (IJTLHE). I wrote that article, which I affectionately refer to as "Dog Bite," in an attempt to provide my online students with an understanding of how Socratic questions can create a robust and synergistic learning environment. The article has been well accepted as evidenced by over 7,000 downloads and a consistent ranking on IJTLHE's list of "Top 20 Downloads of All Time" (International Journal for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, n.d.). This popularity signals that practitioners are looking for instructional techniques to enhance their learners' interactions.

In the original "Dog Bite" article, it was presented that "a lack of questions results in a lack of understanding, and shallow questions produce shallow understanding" (Toledo, 2006, p. 151). By utilizing Socratic questioning, instructors can guide students through the critical thinking processes by providing them with well-written questions that lead to more questions. According to Muilenburg and Berge (2000), "… when facilitating online discussion, *asking the right questions* is almost always more important than giving the right answers (Conclusions, para. 1). Using the Socratic approach, as outlined in the original "Dog Bite" article, provides a model "in which questions are used to guide students through the desired learning route" (Toledo, 2006, p. 151).

After employing the Socratic questioning style for several years, I have observed some interesting uses of these questions in online discussions (see Table 1 for a list of the questions from "Dog Bite"). The most important observation was seen in how students gravitated toward the clarifying questions, and, most interestingly, were reluctant to ask the probing questions in order to avoid conflict. Many of the question prompts presented in "Dog Bite" are straightforward and might be considered confrontational by some students and instructors. In fact, several of my students shared that they felt they were being rude by asking these types of straightforward questions. This article will take a fresh look at the Socratic questioning approach for asynchronous online discussions. The questions from the "Dog Bite" article will be rephrased to help students feel more comfortable using them as they demonstrate their critical thinking and content knowledge in online discussions.

According to Berko, Aitken, and Wolvin (2010), "The power of language in human communication is profound. To understand a person's verbal [as opposed to non-verbal] communication is to understand how that person sees the world, how that person thinks" (p. 107). In online courses, the written word is used heavily to communicate ideas. As presented in "Dog Bite," one approach that can help extend online discussions is the use of Socratic questioning. In this method, students and instructors ask questions that take the conversation to a deeper level. Many times the interactions can challenge common assumptions, beliefs, and ideas (Pang, 2008). This process necessitates the creation of an environment where participants feel safe to ask and answer challenging questions within their learning community. When utilized well, Socratic questions can help students produce deeper and broader understandings of the target content and processes. Maxwell (2013) stated, "The idea is that by participating in the active sharing of dialogue, students can develop and refine their critical thinking and problem solving skills" (Socratic Methods section, para. 1).

At the same time that we are focusing on content and processes, we must ensure that students feel safe sharing their thoughts and feelings. "One of the most 'Socratic' aspects of Socrates' method. . .is all about a genuine attitude of humility and service towards the person being questioned" (Maxwell, 2013, The Deconstructive Phase section, para. 7). Many years ago, while working on a masters degree at Biola University, I took a course in the School of Intercultural Studies, which was taught by Dr. Marvin Mayers. In

Table 1
Probing Questions

Questions that probe for:	Example Questions
Clarification	Let me see if I understand you; do you mean __ or __? What do you think Mike means by his remark, Dee? How does this relate to our problem/discussion/issue? Jane, can you summarize in your own words what Richard said? Richard, is this what you meant? Would this be an example? Would you say more about that? How does __ relate to __?
Assumptions	What are you assuming? What is Jenny assuming? What could we assume instead? You seem to be assuming __. Do I understand you correctly? All of your reasoning depends on the idea that __. Could you have based your reasoning on __ instead of __? Is that always the case? Why do you think the assumption holds here? Why would someone make that assumption?
Reasons and evidence	What would be an example? Do you have any evidence for that? What other information do you need? What led you to that belief? How does that apply to this case? What would change your mind? Is there a reason to doubt that evidence? Who is in a position to know that is true? What would you say to someone who said that __? What other evidence can support that view?
Viewpoints or perspectives	When you say __, are you implying __? But, if that happened, what else would happen as a result? Why? What effect would that have? Would that necessarily happen or only possibly/probably happen? What is an alternative? If __ and __ are the case, then what might also be true?
Implications and consequences	How can we find out? Can we break this question down at all? Is this question clear? Do we understand it? To answer this question, what other questions must we answer first? Why is this issue important? Is this the most important question, or is there an underlying question that is really the issue?

Note. Adapted from Stepien (as cited in Toledo, 2006).

the first week of class, he talked about the prior question of trust (PQT) and the importance of developing trust bonds with others. The PQT asks, "Is what I am doing, thinking, or saying, building trust or undermining trust?" (Mayers, 1987, p. 7). Mayers calls the PQT a tool of empathy that can increase emotional and interpersonal empathy when it is used sincerely. We can use the PQT in our learning environments to raise the level of intellectual empathy.

The following is an example of applying the PQT in a learning setting. When an instructor has an attitude that she knows everything, is the final authority on a

topic or discipline, and has total control over that content knowledge, she is less likely to have intellectual empathy for others who do not have the same depth and breadth of knowledge. In fact, she may even put up walls and cut off discussions that are less articulate or accurate than those she would present. Ultimately, this attitude is judgmental and most likely will be received as a rejection of what others have to say about *our* (emphasis intended) intellectual area. The PQT can help us open up the conversation and empower students to experiment and play with the information. Modeling openness and sensitivity in this way can create an environment of trust where students feel free to express their questions and be more willing to answer questions posed to them. This approach also requires the instructor to be (or learn to be) open to being questioned—it can be difficult, but has the potential to be very rewarding. The bottom line is that education is all about relationships, and relationships are built on trust. Applying the PQT to our intellectual and interpersonal interactions will jettison our students' learning beyond content mastery by helping them learn how to think more deeply and be able to teach themselves after they are finished with our courses in a safe environment. We must always remember that the best learning is more about asking effective questions than about memorizing and regurgitating content.

Taking into account the PQT and the heart of Socratic questioning, I suggest rewording the "Dog Bite" questions to make them softer and more user-friendly. For instance, one of the questions asks, "What are you assuming?" I suggest asking, "I'm wondering what assumptions might be involved in. . .?" Notice that I've rewritten this phrase using two principles of good interpersonal communication: (a) I've taken out the word *you* and (b) I've added the phrases *I'm wondering* and *might be*. By avoiding *you messages,* we people are less likely to be defensive. Maxwell (2013) put it this way: "When people are placed in a situation where they are questioned in a way that is friendly, respectful and useful, [they] are empowered to experience the value of good questions" (Socratic Questioning and Critical Thinking section, para. 1). We have all participated in conversations where *you always*, *you think*, or even *you should* were directed toward us. These *you messages* can create tension and stop the conversation in an instant – even in the online environment. Instead of accusatory *you-messages*, *I-messages* can set the tone of the conversation by creating a non-judgmental dialogue where people feel safe to share their thoughts and feelings.

In the early 1960's, Thomas Gordon, a student of Carl Rogers, the father of non-directive psychotherapy, began using *non-blameful* language with children during play therapy. Gordon coined the phrase *I-message* and added the model to his first parent effectiveness training book in 1970 with the belief that those in authority could use these same principles to communicate in a non-coercive and non-threatening manner (Gordon, 2011, I-Messages section). For educators, "I-messages are presented as an effective and positive means for inviting communication and establishing good rapport with students" (Ming-tak & Wai-shing, 2008, p. 126).

Second, adding phrases such as *might be* or *I'm wondering* demonstrates the author's curiosity and reveals that he or she does not have all the answers. Remember, the purpose of Socratic questioning is to create an exploratory conversation; it is not to determine the correct answer as quickly as possible. Look again at the probing questions from "Dog Bite" (Table 1). Which of these questions would you feel comfortable asking? Which would you avoid asking? Try using these two techniques to rewrite some of these questions as I've done in Table 2.

Again, it is very important that students know they are in a safe environment where they can ask and answer these probing questions. Many students will still need our permission or a gentle nudge even after we've softened the questions, so we must model the Socratic process as we extend the discussion. Their security in the process will develop most effectively when we help them build authentic connections with their peers and with us. Berko et al. (2010) suggest three additional guidelines for good communication that apply directly to online settings: (a) respond to what the other person has said, (b) give the other person freedom of speech, and (c) do not put labels on either yourself or the other person. I would add the following to these three principles:

- Respond to the person by name, respond directly to what the person has said, ask a PQT probing question, and sign your post.
- Ask PQT probing questions in order to take the discussion to a deeper level and learn more about the other person's thoughts and feelings (if applicable).
- Avoid generalizations, name-calling, and flaming. When emotions rise, create a response offline (in Word or handwritten), and then walk away. Come back later and revisit the post and your response – adjust the post so that it is objective and enables further understanding and discussion. Double-check using the PQT.

As we all know, the instructor sets the stage for the tone of the class, and this is especially true for online courses. Without the visual and verbal input of face-to-face learning environments, online instructors must be skilled at effectively communicating who they are and

Table 2
PQT Probing Questions

Questions that probe for:	Example Questions
Clarification	Let me see if I understand what you are saying ... [restate in your own words]. Dee, how would you interpret Mike's statement? Mike, how was that? In what ways does this relate to our problem/discussion/issue? Jane, how would you summarize in your own words what Richard said? Richard, is that accurate? Tom, am I getting this right? When you said ___, did you mean ___ or something else? Would this be an example? What might be added to your statement? I'm wondering how you see ___ relating to ___?
Assumptions	What might some assumptions be? If you had a guess, what assumptions might Jenny be making? Jenny, what do you think about that guess? What might we assume instead of ___? I think I'm hearing these assumptions ___. Am I understanding correctly? It seems that your reasoning depends on the idea that __. What do you think? How might it be possible to base your reasoning on __ instead of __? Might that always be the case? Why do you think that assumption is applicable here? Why might someone make that assumption?
Reasons and evidence	It would help to have an example. What might that look like? What evidence is there for that thought/idea? What other information might be needed? It would help to hear your description of how you came to that belief? How might that apply to this case? What might change your mind? What might be some reasons to doubt that evidence? Who might be in a position to know that is true? What might you say to someone who said that? What other evidence might support that view?
Viewpoints or perspectives	I wondering if this might be what is being implied? If that happened, what else might happen as a result? Share your insights. What effect might that have? Describe your view on whether or not that might happen. What might be an alternative? If __ and __ are the case, then what might also be true?
Implications and consequences	How can we find out? Is there a way to break this question down? Is this question clear? Do we understand it? Explain. To answer this question, what other questions must we answer first? Why is this issue important? What might be some underlying question that identify the issue?

Note. Adapted from Stepien (as cited in Toledo, 2006).

how the class will be conducted. If instructors are merely going through the motions, the students will do the same. Palmer (1998) stated it this way, ". . .good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). I find that as I let my students get to know me, rather than the academic persona I have been encouraged to project, they are more likely to share who they are. To do this I make my learning transparent and share the teaching and learning

processes that I go through as an instructor. As I become more approachable, demonstrate my comfort with being asked probing questions, and show my students that I don't know all the answers, they learn that they don't have to either, and the learning environment becomes an expression of openness and exploration. It is then that my students have come to see Socratic questioning as safe and exciting. Try this approach and watch your students grow in their knowledge, insights and relationships.

When used in online discussions, the softened Socratic questions regularly produced robust student interactions – thus meeting my goal of a synergistic learning environment. Students experienced many *ah-ha* moments when they saw the connections in content and processes that once went over their heads. As they began asking questions, they opened up to a wider array of possible answers, extended their thinking, and grew in their abilities to interact effectively.

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DR. CHERI TOLEDO, an educator for over 30 years, has taught and coached on the university and K12 levels and served as an Academic Dean and academic counselor. The recipient of the 2015 Faculty Excellence Award from the Riley College of Education at Walden University, Cheri is currently the Academic Program Coordinator for the PhD and EdS programs in Educational Technology and Learning, Instruction, and Innovation. Her research and publications revolve around strategic uses of current and emerging technologies to increase effective teaching and learning practices in online learning environments.