

In *Theaetetus*, Socrates talks about his maieutic method. He tells Theaetetus, his interlocutor: "... my skill of midwifery is, in general, similar in character to theirs [midwives]... the greatest thing about my skill is that it is able to test, in every respect, whether the mind of the young man is bringing forth an image and a lie, or something genuine and true. Now, I do have this in common with the female midwives: I bring to birth no wisdom. And many people reproach me for this, since I ask questions of others while I myself proclaim nothing about anything..."

The Socratic method is based on the metaphor of a 'midwife' who does not deliver anything, but ably assists in the delivery of the child.

Socrates compares himself to a midwife who, by asking probing questions, enables the youth of Athens 'deliver' the right answers. All he did was to ask his interlocutors a series of inter-connected questions that elicited the right response from them.

Bedrock of education

Questioning is an art and a skill. To motivate the students to ask the right questions and, more importantly, to help them cultivate a questioning mind coupled with a sceptical temperament are the bedrock of any educational system. In classrooms where there are no questions, there is only passivity and information is consumed mechanically. In such a docile envi-

The art and skill of questioning

Why students should be encouraged to not take anything for granted and think critically

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ronment, hardly any learning takes place.

Both the temperament and the culture to question are sorely missing in our institutions. As a result, the teacher goes unchallenged and what he/she puts across is rarely critiqued. What is prescribed in the curricula and presented in textbooks is consumed implicitly by naive minds. In the final analysis, our students acquire degrees and diplomas but can hardly think and sift facts from opinions, and look at the world critically.

The key mandate of higher educational institutions is to train students to think critically. They should be able to analyse and interpret data and ar-

rive at evidence-based conclusions. Put differently, colleges and universities should encourage their students to question just about everything so that they do not take anything for granted.

Problems and solutions

What factors impede questioning in our classrooms? First, teachers do not encourage their students to raise questions, as they are in a hurry to 'complete' the syllabus. Questions are considered a digression and waste of time. Second, students are afraid of raising questions for fear of failure. The spectre of raising a silly, inane or wrong question leads to shame and this fear and diffidence

holds them back from raising questions inside classrooms. Third, our culture and traditions demand an implicit obedience to gurus and this, indirectly, forbids all of us, from challenging teachers and their authority. Fourth, in many institutions students are not competent to raise questions in English, which is the medium of instruction. Last, some teachers are intimidated by those who raise questions and see them as an affront to their authority.

What can be done to encourage students to ask question? First, teachers should be friends and mentors rather than authoritarian figures to encourage students open up. Second,

teachers should offer prompts and cues. For instance, while teaching a short story, the teacher can ask, "How do you think the story will end?" In a Maths class, students can be encouraged to guess the sequence of a formula. Third, a climate of debate should be created so that students are not reduced to docile consumers of information dished out to them, and are trained to become 'interrogators' who will be endowed with critical thinking skills.

A questioning mind should not be interpreted as challenging the teachers' authority. Nor should it be seen as being excessively argumentative indulging in empty rhetoric. In other words, a questioning individual should not be looked upon as a negative person who gets on the nerves of people.

The rote system of learning, which reduces students to passive consumers, should be thrown out. In its place, a robust system founded on the Socratic maieutic system that revolves around questions should be welcomed. Ultimately, there should be a transition from raising questions inside classrooms to transforming students into sceptics and dissenters who will not only raise questions but will have a questioning mind as well. Similar to the Cartesian pronouncement, students should be able to declare *interrogo, ergo sum* ("I question, therefore, I am").

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