

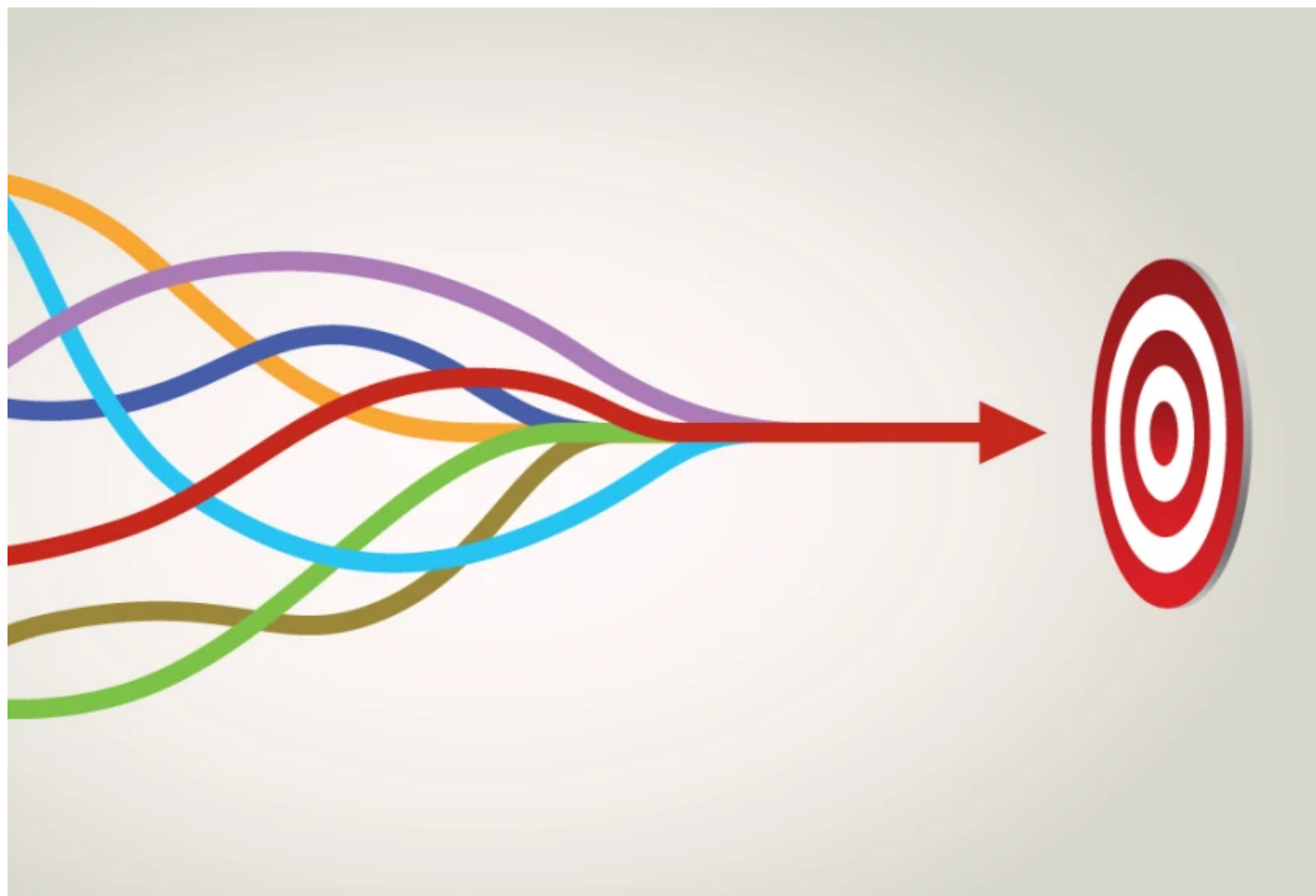
What Socrates Can Teach Us About K-12 Instruction Today

Done well, the method is a powerful way to promote engagement and deep understanding



By Rick Hess — October 30, 2023

2 min read



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Teaching hasn't always been organized the way it currently is in American schools. Back when Socrates was doing his thing in ancient Greece, teaching was a simple proposition. Students sat and listened. Teachers

talked and asked questions. That was it. It was pretty darn limited. It also meant that teachers had a chance to get very good at talking and asking questions.

From this setting, the Socratic method was born—with its reliance on questioning, student response, and teacher feedback. It's the most basic approach imaginable for cultivating understanding and gauging what students know.

By asking questions, the teacher challenges students in ways that upend assumptions and illuminate ideas. The technique is often used to lead a student into contradictory statements, so as to surface complexities. Indeed, Socrates was skeptical about teaching via the written word precisely because he feared it would undermine this active student-teacher dynamic.

The Socratic method is intensely personalized. Done well, it involves constantly adjusting to the interests, limitations, and needs of each student at a given moment. In the hands of a skilled instructor, it's the most powerful model I've ever seen for promoting student engagement and deep understanding.

So, if we've got such an effective tool, why don't we see it used more often in classrooms? And why does so much "Socratic" instruction wind up looking rote or ineffectual?

It's not complicated: The Socratic method is *really* hard to do well. Lots of teachers may attempt it but miss the mark—engaging in something that's more akin to a stilted question-and-answer session. The Socratic method requires that a teacher have deep knowledge of the specific topic, a library of relevant analogies, a mastery of the avenues the dialogue may take, and the ability to play devil's advocate. (This last one can be extraordinarily challenging, or even career-threatening, when it comes to sensitive, emotional topics.)

Doing all of this well requires time and practice, both of which are in short supply for teachers racing to cover the curriculum. This is one of those instances where professional development—if properly designed, delivered, and targeted—can make a big difference. Today, of course, hardly any teachers have received even a smidge of such training.

That's why few teachers are equipped to make good use of Socratic dialogue, even though it may be the best way to explore some of the crucial topics that schools struggle to address today. In fact, trying to employ the Socratic method without training or practice can yield dismal results and can prove harmful when it comes to sensitive subjects. I've observed well-meaning teachers trying to make it up on the fly wind up caricaturing the very views they mean to probe or make groan-inducing assertions that they sorely regret.

Ultimately, the Socratic method, *like every "learning strategy,"* depends on the skill with which it's employed. This is the problem with asking every teacher to be a harried jack-of-all-trades. It means that even potentially powerful instructional practices are destined to disappoint—not because of intrinsic flaws but rather the burdens on the educators trying to apply them.