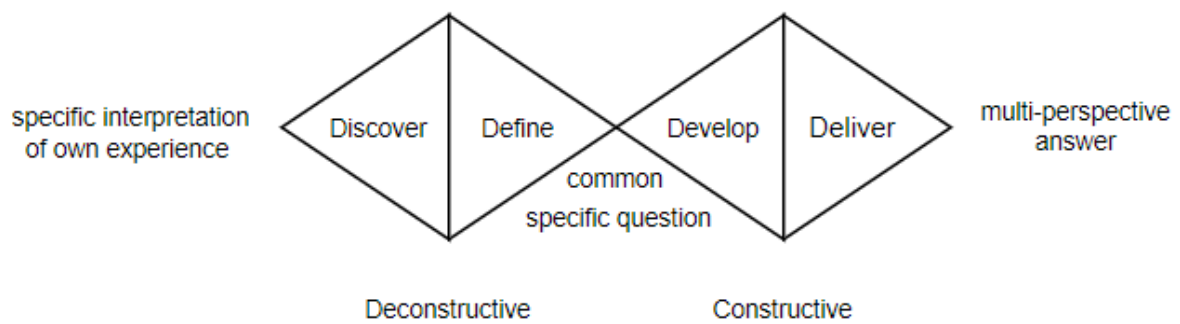


A Step-by-step guide to the Socratic Dialogue based on the Double Diamond model

by Paul Hartog
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‘Dialogue grows out of silence’

Sira Abenzoa, Founder of the Institute of Socratic Dialogue

This article is mainly Inspired by;

Book ; Nieuw Denken met Oude Grieken¹ (in Dutch)

Article; Design methods for developing services²

Book ; Socratic Dialogue Voicing Values³

Article; Guidelines for a constructive Dialogue⁴

Table of contents

Introduction.....	4
1 What is Dialogue and why do we need it?.....	5
2 What is the Socratic Dialogue and why do we need it?	6
3 Deconstruct, the first diamond	7
4 Construct, the second diamond	8
5 Conclusion	9
References	10

Introduction

I bumped into the Socratic Dialogue months ago and it was love at first sight. After reading the first book I read another one and another one and joined a couple of Socratic Dialogues. One of my readings contained a clear and concise step-by-step instruction in Dutch. Next, I was looking for one in English since that is the language I speak with my students. Because I could not find anything that suited me I decided to have a go at it myself. Please know my wife says that my searching skills are below par.

I am eager to explore because dialogue plays a huge role in my minor on Critical Thinking and we did not have a satisfactory structure for it yet. I also see the Socratic Dialogue as a strong multi-purpose agent for many design-related issues in education, e.g. curriculum development, and business.

I hope you enjoy reading this. Comments and feedback are very welcome!

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1 What is Dialogue and why do we need it? Largely based on ³

The word *dialogue* finds its two roots in Latin and Greek; **dia** "across, between" + **legein** "to speak"

When asked a question that delves into values and beliefs, many people initially fail to respond to the complexity, the layers and nuances of the question given that these only become evident after further reflection.

Engaging in dialogue allows us to discover, test, reflect and refine values and beliefs that lie behind the participants' positions on an issue. As Mill⁵ suggests, opening our minds to criticism and practicing the challenging skill of listening to those who question our views is essential to gaining a thorough understanding of any subject. In other words, dialogue with others and the expression of our values and beliefs will help us compare the views of others with our own and to see aspects that we have not been able to perceive from our own perspective.

Following Senge⁶ there are several requirements for a constructive Dialogue;

- Recognising abstractions
- Seeing one another as equals
- Suspending judgment of others
- Slowing down the thought process
- Balancing inquiry and defense of an idea
- Clarifying hidden assumptions and emotions
- Differentiating between what is aspirational and what is based on actual experience

Listening is very important, because; ⁴

- It's respectful
- It's beneficial to the other
- It allows us to see things differently
- It facilitates relationships / helps with trust
- It avoids thinking traps caused by ego-centricity; over-confidence, self-serving bias, confirmation bias

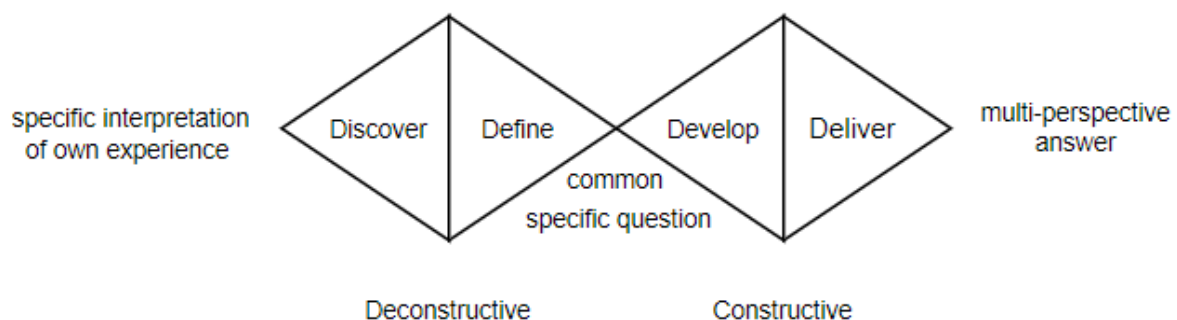
In short, listening is fundamental for communication and wellbeing.

2 What is the Socratic Dialogue and why do we need it? Partly based on ²

The Socratic Dialogue is a joint inquiring and sharpening conversation where all participants are on an equal level. It is a conversation in which an issue is seen from multiple different perspectives. It aims to reveal the assumptions (factual beliefs and values) that lie behind the participants' positions on an issue.

The Socratic Dialogue facilitates intensive (self)exploration carried out in a collective setting and is a tested method for evaluating and developing vision and policy.

Executing a Socratic Dialogue provides insights into both the issues at hand, and the thoughts of participants on the issues. Participants facilitate constructive communication and the possibility of agreement through an open exploration of the beliefs and reasoning used to justify your own position and that of others.



The Double Diamond-model ² seems very suitable to explain the different phases of the Socratic Dialogue as coined by Leonard Nelson, see picture above.

- Discover; diverging from one specific interpretation (question or theme) of own concrete personal experience to multiple specific interpretations
- Define; converging from multiple specific interpretations to one common specific question
- Develop; diverging from the common specific question to multiple specific common questions
- Deliver; converging from multiple specific common questions to one summary vetoed by the original owner of the question.

General rules

- Participants aim for consensus (not a compromise!)
- Participants cannot make appeals to authority
- Participants think and speak on their own account
- Participants let all real doubts come to the surface
- Participants make an effort to avoid long monologues
- Participants make an effort to speak clearly and concisely
- Participants make an effort to understand what others are saying

Some examples of own specific interpretations of own experiences;

- What is our pedagogical task?
- In which situations can we deviate from the exam regulation?
- How can we involve students in such a way that they attend lectures?
- How far does our responsibility reach for the wellbeing of our students?
- How to deal with lecturers complaining about the intellectual level of the students?

3 Deconstruct, the first diamond

Step 1

Every participant coins a question (or theme). It needs to be about a concrete, personal experience which carries a moment where emotions were felt or a physical reaction happened. From here on that moment will be referred to as the *combustion moment*. Note; the question cannot concern anything that can be clarified delving into literature or archives or setting up an experiment.

Step 2

Participants take time to write the answer to their own question down on a piece of paper. When everyone has finished turns are taken in reading their answer out loud. After a participant has spoken the other participants take one minute of silence to let it 'sink in'. Next, questions are asked with the sole purpose of clearing up the given answer.

Step 3

Participants together make a choice for one question that is on offer. This will be the one-and-only question that travels to the next round. The rest of the questions are layed-off for now. IMPORTANT NOTE The chosen question needs to be a one that everyone can answer as if it was their own experience.

Step 4

Participants ask factual questions to clarify the question even further. What happened exactly? Where did it happen? Who was there? Etc. The goal is that everyone can deeply feel/taste or, even better, 'live' the experience. If there is any participant that cannot feel/taste/live the experience the chosen question needs to be replaced.

Step 5

Ask fertilising questions to move to a common research question. Fertilising questions help to get towards a common research question. Participants should not ask any questions they already know the answer to. The result is a common research question that is supported by all participants. The original owner of the question holds the veto power.

4 Construct, the second diamond

Step 6

Answering the questions; What is this about? What does it mean to me? What is the essence of it? Here you are invited to elevate yourself high above the research question. As if you lift off in a helicopter to a height where you can only see the big picture. What do I stand for? What is my opinion? *Why* do you give this answer? *Why* do *you* give this answer? *Why* do you give *this* answer?

Step 7

Answering the questions that are linked to the centre of motivation; heart, head, guts and the virtues that are connected.

- Which courage do I need? This needs to be about an action or a lack of action.
- What are the consequences? What do you find hard to see or accept?
- What do I need to sacrifice? Where does it hurt? What is the cost? (non-monetary)
- What is right for the community or maybe even for the world?

Step 8

Participants take turns in reading out their answers to the questions put forward in steps 6 and 7. After a participant has spoken the other participants take one minute of silence to let it 'sink in'. After the silence questions are asked strictly to clear up the given answer.

Step 9

The original owner of the question (or theme) has been listening carefully and has taken notes. The Dialogue finishes with his or her reaction to what was said by all.

Step 10

The facilitator investigates if the process and outcome was satisfactory for all and rounds off.

5 Conclusion

I recently got involved in Socratic Dialogues that involved

- both the Deconstructive and the Constructive phases, and
- 'just' the Constructive phase

Here and now I see value in both and can also imagine Socratic Dialogues that 'just' involves the Deconstructive phase. Each has its own purpose and value.

After doing more reading I understand that following a structure for guidance is seen as something for beginners. The structure is not seen as the essence of the Socratic Dialogue.

In the next run of 'my' minor (fall 2024) we will use the structure as put down here since most of the students are absolute beginners. We will start with step 6 in our first weekly meeting and we will take steps 8 - 10 (with a modified step 9) in our second meeting.

References

1 *Nieuw Denken met Oude Grieken* book by Anne-Marie Gunnink and Paulien 't Hoen, 2023, ISBN 9789464710465. Website <https://www.radius-svp.nl/>

2 Double Diamond model² by the British Design Council.
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3 Socratic Dialogue Voicing Values³. 2024 by Sira Abenzoza and Josep M. Lozano

4 Guidelines for a constructive Dialogue, article by Stuart Hanscomb, author of *Critical Thinking: The Basics*, 2023, ISBN 9781032162997

5 *On liberty*, 2001, J.S. Mill , Batoche books

6 *The Fifth discipline; the art and practice of the learning organization*, 2006, Broadway business