My Socratic Method (Imtiaz Moosa)

I subscribe to a radical teaching pedagogy, which I title the Socratic Method. I am neither suggesting that all instructors make use of it, nor that any instructor use it exclusively. It serves students well to have many kinds of instructors, exercising a variety of teaching styles. Furthermore, this method has less applicability for theoretical sciences. In addition, it is rather onerous for an instructor to exploit only this method. Given that this teaching style is very demanding on the instructor, while having something experimental, risky and unpredictable about it, what compels me to adopt this teaching strategy? While there are many reasons for this, I mention here only the especial relevance today of my Socratic method in this digital world. It works both by adapting to and by being an antidote to the contemporary trends. Consider how modern technology has affected our responses to these three questions:

1. The first issue is to decide what role we play in the class as instructors. Is it important for students to appreciate that I as an instructor am an important resource for the material that they have to learn? Well, the digital revolution is undermining the belief in the indispensability of the instructor. Other resources are now easily accessible, such as varied lectures and academies on line. The relevance of instructors even today is to facilitate, to inspire and to challenge, rather than to provide information.

2. The second issue we have to consider is the sort of training we hope students to get in our classes, as a by-product of attending classes to learn their respective disciplines. Is the ability to imbibe knowledge the great result we expect students to gain as a result of attending classes? Digital technologies are interactive, and are a source of quick and ready-made information. Hence, students see less value in passively gathering information from professors in classrooms. It would be going against the grain to instill in students the value of receptive learning; classrooms must be place of activity.

3. The third issue is on the manner of approaching content of the course. Is my first priority, as an instructor, to make sure that students get the most important or most significant points on a subject, and this in a manner that is most rigorous? Access to the content is much less an issue for students. What digital technology cannot do, while it provides easy access to vast information, is to make students think critically. Not providing information in a rigorous way, but how to think, organize and evaluate is the key.

Ten points on my teaching style:

1. Ideally, every point I make and every argument I discuss, is a response to questions students themselves have, and clarifications demanded by students themselves. My job is not to tell them what is important, and convey material, which they are required to learn in the most logical manner, but first to arouse questions, and then to guide them to coming to responses or resolutions of problems they want to see resolved.

2. Only from initial chaos can order and logic later emerge. The key is to not provide the clearest and most nuanced answer ready-made right up front. This has to slowly emerge from a host of questions and arguments.
3. The responses to question and the resolutions to problems must not be seen as emanating from me. Now of course I will be slyly hinting at those resolutions, but without taking credit for them. It would be ideal if the students took possession of my suggestions and ran with them, by developing and expanding upon them. Even while I am making key clarifications and suggestions, I remain in the background, and let my suggestions sound like ideas that emanate from students themselves, as a joint class effort.

4. The students must themselves see through the flaws and inadequacies of facile responses to important issues. Now, again, I raise questions and give hints; but students have to actively do something with these hints. This method only works if there is active participation from students. Students see me less as an instructor, and more as a facilitator.

5. If I just cannot avoid having to make a long and elaborate point, it would be best if I can somehow give credit to the students themselves. Groups of students come up with something unclear and only vaguely relevant, but I pretend that an important clue is hidden in their answer. I make use of their points to explain key ideas or theories. The key rule here is, students must take possession of the material.

6. I teach nothing that I myself find to be inane or insignificant, no matter how important it is regarded by other scholars; and I find ways to incorporate material that fascinates me, even if others regard as insignificant. I avoid topics that cannot have relevance to students, in some way or form. Two rules apply here: first, what fascinates a person will interest another and what bores one will bore the audience; and secondly, we learn and remember only what we ourselves find relevant and interesting.

7. When a class is hot on a topic, the discussion is intense; I will pursue this topic, even if there is other material that was planned for that class. In addition, I will let myself be swayed by students to discuss aspects or vistas of a topic that I never initially intended to explore, because these aspects are not regarded as particularly significant by the scholarly world. The key rule here is, grab the moment for intense classroom experience.

8. The classes should be fun, but not by instructor making the material easy and entertaining. The point is not for students to sit back, relax, and enjoy. Rather the point is to energize and make active; and this cannot happen without arousing interest. In addition, for these elements of game must be introduced, namely, giving puzzles to be resolved, and, setting traps and obstacles to be avoided and overcome.

9. The dynamics in the class should be such that, far from students and the instructor being in agreement and students being in awe of the instructor, there is a friendly antagonism and respectful combativeness between them. Each is ready to challenge the other; and yet with good will and in a positive spirit.

10. It is better for a class to be a bit too hard than easy. It is better to fail to attract and entice students who do not like to be challenged than to bore and turn off enterprising students. The point is not to provide solutions and answers but to facilitate students to come to resolutions of problems.