Socratic Questioning: A Critical Component of OG Instruction

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A core principle when implementing the Orton-Gillingham Approach is the use of Socratic questioning throughout the lesson. This is frequently not emphasized enough when we describe our OG Approach to others. However, Socratic questioning is the essence of what engages the student and teacher in a rich, ongoing dialogue that keeps the learner and the teacher in that "zone of proximal development" that is productive. It is a critical piece of the diagnostic-prescriptive process that takes place every minute of every lesson. It is highly effective for learning, and not only do our students become actively engaged and motivated as they develop skills, but our teachers so often find a renewed deep joy of teaching when combining their OG knowledge with this lively, interactive process.

In *Proust and the Squid*, Maryanne Wolf's review of concepts from Socrates and Vygotstky clearly reinforces the power of Socratic questioning used in our Orton-Gillingham Approach. Wolf wrote that Socrates actually expressed resistance to the reading process as a valid way to learn. As the master of oral dialogue to generate higher-level thinking, Socrates described written language as "dead discourse" that freezes thought in time. He stressed the critical process of oral inquiry and dialogue between teacher and student as "living speech" that guides the student to deeper level thinking. She also noted that the famous Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotstky, "held that the social interaction between teacher and learner plays a pivotal role in developing a child's ever deepening relationships between words and concepts." In Orton-Gillingham tutoring, the knowledgeable inquiry process and warm and lively interaction between the tutor and student forms a strong basis for success.

The following list of principles from the Role of Socratic Questioning in Thinking Teachers and Learning applies to OG tutoring when engaging in Socratic dialogue:

- Respond to answers and errors with a further question (that calls upon the respondent to develop his/her thinking in a fuller and deeper way)
- Seek to understand the ultimate foundations for what is said and follow the implications of those foundations through further questions
- Treat all assertions as a connecting point to further thoughts
- Treat all thoughts as in need of development
- Recognize that any thought can only exist fully in a network of connected thoughts. Stimulate students — through your questions — to pursue those connections
- Recognize that all questions presuppose prior questions and all thinking presupposes prior thinking.

What types of skills must our tutors have to be able to think with, and ahead of, our students and generate the necessary questions to drive this Socratic questioning and diagnostic-prescriptive teaching process? In keeping with the theme of classical thought in this article, I submit that our tutors must develop a broad and deep foundation of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

First, Orton-Gillingham tutors/therapists need to complete the Academy coursework to arm themselves with a solid foundation of *knowledge*. This is the foundational content knowledge that we acquire through the rigorous process of mastering concepts in these subject areas: principles and methods for applying the Orton-Gillingham Approach for reading and written language intervention, the structure of language at all levels, how students learn to read and what disrupts this process, assessment of dyslexia and learning, what research is telling us about brain function and learning, which types of intervention do and do not work, the emotional and social impact of dyslexia and learning disorders, and how other disorders can interact with dyslexia.

Second, we apply our knowledge to develop deeper *understanding*. This is the role of the practicum experience. Moving from course to practicum is like the difference between reading a book on surgery and actually performing surgery. Many of us became educators because we are usually good or great book learners. However, no one can take the next step into synthesizing all of the above content and applying it consistently without ongoing mentoring and support from knowledgeable mentors, such as our Academy teaching Fellows.

While practicing the basics of formulating, implementing, and pacing lessons, it is during the practicum that we learn how to weave thoughtful, Socratic questioning techniques into each step of our lessons. To introduce new learning, we lead off with discovery of a concept through a combination of crafting careful examples and by asking well thought-out questions. Perhaps the most critical and difficult to learn (and what makes OG tutoring so very distinctive compared to other approaches), is the ability to observe student responses at each step of the lesson and make error corrections by asking a question each time. What we sometimes refer to as "error correction techniques" or "error repair" is actually where some of the deepest tutor knowledge must be employed. We must internally analyze the student's error, understand the likely reason behind it, and know which question to ask to move the student another step forward.

Third, mature understanding requires *wisdom*. "Wisdom implies a blending of knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense, and insight. It also calls one to perform an action with the highest degree of adequacy and to avoid wrongdoing. It often requires control of one's emotional reactions so that the universal principle of reason prevails to determine one's action." (Wikipedia)

Wisdom is the ultimate goal of the OG tutor training process. It implies using good judgment in all decisions. It does not emerge fully formed at the end of training, but wisdom is encouraged from the beginning and continues to develop over time. By developing wisdom, tutors/therapists learn to understand and judge how to instruct each student at each age and ability level within the scope and sequence that we cover. It requires us, as teaching Fellows, to ask those questions that guide our trainees to integrate their broader experiences and understanding as they progress through training. At this level, tutors apply the judgment needed for the pacing of each lesson, correcting weak areas, and moving to new concepts. We learn how to maintain a positive, supportive attitude when faced with an emotional, frustrated, or inattentive student. We learn what not to say as much as what to say. And this, like all areas of learning in this field, is a life-long process.

As one of my college instructors once said, "Just remember that, for our dyslexic students, there are no cookbooks or bandwagons." So, when we are asked this question about OG tutoring — "Is there an app, a workbook, or a manual for that?" The answer is a resounding no. The core of success for our students is to receive lively, active OG instruction from our tutors/therapists who have acquired deep knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

Sources:

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