

Socratic Self-examination and Its Application to Academic Advising

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Nussbaum (1998) proposed that Socratic activity is a worthwhile pursuit with regard to academic advising relationships. While it offers the promise of certain benefits, such as the development of critical thinking skills, Socratic activity arguably cannot be universally applied to all advising relationships. In presenting and analyzing issues related to the Socratic method, I offer support for a model of quasi-Socratic activity in advising as first identified by Hagen (1994). Referred to as "beneficial dialectic," it can function from a more contextual standpoint than the traditional Socratic questioning method because through it advisors can consider factors such as level of student development, learning environments, and individual proclivities.

KEY WORDS: advising approaches, advising profession, communication, tools for advising

In her work, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Nussbaum (1998) described several programs of academic advising that have a Socratic bent and employ methods that help students to take control of their lives through reasoning. She proposed that the student's process of choosing curriculum could "itself [be] a setting for Socratic activity as, in dialogue with a faculty adviser, students reflect about their goals and the courses that might promote them" (p. 47). She offered that Socratic activity in advising works best where faculty devotion to teaching, well-supported and well-organized systems of advising, and well-prepared students are found.

Nussbaum (1998) presented various characteristics that delineate her idea of Socratic activity, which focuses on logical analysis (p. 18), or the reasoning of beliefs, to get students to think for themselves (p. 17). With regard to advising, Nussbaum's ideas reflect advisees' need to have an inherent desire to make their beliefs (i.e., about their educational goals and the best method to pursue them) their own by investigating them. Therefore, advisees should pose questions and challenge the status quo, for instance, in deliberating their choices of major or career path. However, advisors should not give advisees too much freedom to question without also asking them to support their choices with evidence and rational argument (p. 18). Advisors also need to have an adaptable approach to this process

of rational argument so that they can adjust to student circumstances, and thus, provide advisees with the necessary support they particularly need to make their beliefs their own. In addition, for both advisors and advisees, resulting decisions must be "consistent and evenhanded" (p. 25) with regard to the students' beliefs and inferences.

Under a Socratic approach, advisors and advisees must also be willing to give up arguments that they cannot rationally defend and be sure to only make arguments that are free from biases and prejudices. They aspire toward truth and objectivity (Nussbaum, 1998, p. 40) by recognizing the influence of human experience, and thus, the need to sort legitimate from illegitimate interests. According to Nussbaum (1998), advising by the Socratic method would not be a passive activity in which advisee and advisor simply trade ideas and beliefs.

Nussbaum (1998) stressed that academic advising seems a legitimate setting for Socratic activity. However, certain considerations should be made in determining whether or not Socratic self-examination, as Nussbaum (1998) conceives it to be, can be used in academic advising. Hagen (1994) initiated a discussion about these considerations in his article on the applicability of dialectic in advising. Furthermore, those interested in the Socratic method should consider if the constraints that Nussbaum outlined are relevant to Socratic activity in advising. To investigate these concerns, I present a definition of the Socratic method as well as critiques of it. Also, I offer some consideration of the role of faculty members and professionals in advising systems as well as students and their development. Through such an investigation, implications for the applicability of the Socratic method to the practice of advising are uncovered.

The Socratic Method

The Socratic method reflects a process of logical argumentation in which a line of questioning is followed via reason to the truth. Specifically, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* the Socratic method is defined as "the method of teaching in which the master imparts no information, but asks a sequence of questions, through answering which the pupil eventually comes to the desired knowledge" (Blackburn, 1994, p. 356). For example, in Plato's *Gorgias* (trans. 1979), Socrates and Gorgias discuss the nature of rhetoric. At one point, through

questioning, Socrates brings Gorgias to the understanding that rhetoric produces conviction but does not impart information about the just and unjust. The following is an abbreviated version of their conversation about knowledge and rhetoric (Plato, trans. 1979, 454c–455a):

Socrates: “Gorgias, is there such a thing as conviction?”

Gorgias: “Yes.”

Socrates: “Is there such a thing as teaching?”

Gorgias: “Yes.”

Socrates: “Is there both true and false conviction and knowledge?”

Gorgias: “There is true and false conviction but not knowledge.”

Socrates: “So they are not the same?”

Gorgias: “It would seem not.”

Socrates: “But, are those who have learned and those who have been convinced both persuaded?”

Gorgias: “Yes.”

Socrates: “So, it seems there are two types of persuasion: one producing conviction and one producing knowledge?”

Gorgias: “That would seem so.”

Socrates: “Which type of persuasion does rhetoric produce?”

Gorgias: “Conviction, clearly.”

Socrates: “Then rhetoric cannot teach about the just and unjust but only offer conviction?”

Gorgias: “Yes, it seems.”

Socrates explained to Gorgias that he asks “questions so that the discussion will proceed to its conclusion in good order . . . and so that you can proceed to your conclusion as you want to on your assumption” (Plato, trans. 1979, 454c).

This method of questioning would seem to hold great promise for academic advising. However, to determine its appropriateness for advising, further examination is necessary.

Socratic Education

Nussbaum (1998) asserted the following claims about Socratic education, which are relevant to the Socratic method as it applies to academic advising:

1. Socratic education is for every human being.
2. Socratic education should be suited to the pupil’s circumstances and context.
3. Socratic education should be pluralistic; that is, concerned with a variety of different norms and traditions.

Nussbaum (1998) stressed that the development of practical reasoning abilities is essential to the self-

actualization of human beings as citizens in a democracy; therefore, she concluded a Socratic education is necessary for every person. Likewise, Rorty (1999) purported a hope that colleges not just encourage vocational training but should also encourage *Socratic scepticism* [*sic*] or skepticism of the current consensus. He emphasized that this type of activity, which might occur in the free and open exchange of ideas between teacher and student, are “the principal occasions of the erotic relationships between teacher and student that Socrates . . . celebrate[d]. . . . Such erotic relationships are occasions of growth” (p. 125). Rorty further explained that through fostering the conditions for growth, Socratic scepticism [*sic*] leads to societal progress. Similar to Rorty, Too (2000) suggested that Socratic notions, such as the rethinking of assumed patterns, can work to spur individuals to examine the world and change it for the better. Fishman (1985) pointed out that some fear that the Socratic method, if used by tyrants working to further their own interests, could be used to change the world for the worse. However, he also explained that some of the worst tyrannies of the 20th century used totalitarianism rather than Socratic activity because the despotic leaders rejected the notion of universal truth.

Nussbaum (1998) also claimed that Socratic education must be suited to the pupil’s circumstances and context. Her notion is consistent with Socrates’s statements as rendered by Plato in *Phaedrus* when he talks about coordinating “each kind of soul with the kind of speech appropriate to it” (Plato, 1997 version, line 271b). While recognizing that Socrates emphasized truth as universal, Fishman (1985, p. 188) supported the claim that, under the Socratic method, one still strive to consider students’ backgrounds: “Despite its profession that ideas have consequences and in its dedication to universal truth, the Socratic Method recognizes that thinking human beings can never completely avoid the influence of circumstance.” In particular, Fishman suggested that those using the Socratic method should recognize the subjective aspects of characteristics such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. As Socrates is quoted, “Men of a given sort under speeches of a given nature, and through that cause, are readily brought to such and such convictions” (Plato, 1938 version, line 271). Specifically, Socrates only purported the idea of universal good because he believed that when individuals of disparate backgrounds are brought together they should work toward “a level of knowledge which varied circumstances will permit” (Fishman, 1985, p. 188).

This claim attributed to Socrates is consistent with Nussbaum's contention that Socratic education should be pluralistic; that is, a concern with a variety of different norms and traditions is inherent in the Socratic method.

In addition to Nussbaum (1998), others have written about Socratic education. For instance, Fishman (1985, p. 187) argued against the claim that Socratic education is unidirectional: "A teacher who uses the Socratic Method plays an active role in the search for truth." Likewise, Too (2000, p. 65) remarked:

Socrates rejects the common understanding of the teacher as the individual who gives the answers and so, implicitly, of the student as the individual who is lacking, in need of teaching as remedial therapy. This metaphor implicitly questions a hierarchical relationship between teacher and pupil.

Fishman and Too seem to agree, albeit within certain limits, that the Socratic method does not favor a unidirectional form of education. Specifically, under the Socratic notion of universal truth, the teacher and student are equally capable to lead educational dialogue. However, as Fishman underscored, the teacher should not necessarily remain neutral; if he or she disagrees with the students, the teacher should respect the students while "disagreeing with emphasis" (p. 187).

In contrast, Hagen (1994) indicated that Socrates would have viewed one of the partners in a dialectic as the leader of the relationship. However, he would have also viewed both as equal in the relationship due to their eagerness "to discover the truth and to question assumptions, and . . . from that process to determine what right action is and then to do that which is best" (Hagen, p. 87). Hagen's view of the Socratic relationship makes more intuitive sense because an equality of leadership seems inconsistent with a model in which one of the participants has powers of emphatic disagreement. Regardless of whether she or he is the leader, the teacher still appears to regain some authority by being the possessor of the ultimate truth and allows students to take equal part in the process to uncover, but not create, truth.

Bolten (2001) remarked that the practice of Socratic dialogue produces a feeling of confusion among its participants. This experience may not be pleasant but often serves to force those involved to develop an attitude of open mindedness; to reexamine goals, beliefs, and opinions; and to question whether or not their conclusions are valid. Likewise,

Too (2000) discussed how Socrates sparked desire for knowledge in students by leading them to an awareness of their own deficiencies through the use of various techniques of discourse. For example, a particular technique that Socrates employed was known as *elenchus*, which encompasses cross-examination and refutation, or the revelation of inconsistencies (Cooper, 2004). Too (2000) implied that with such a technique the student can be reduced to a "stony silence" (p. 87) through a process of rigorous questioning that confounds him or her in facing "the inconsistencies, the cracks, the gaps in their convictions" (p. 69). According to Too (2000), such silence may be pedagogically resourceful because it calls for "dialogic" (p. 87) teaching in which the teacher would rethink her or his position to reengage with the student.

Critiques of the Socratic Method

Nussbaum (1998, p. 19) remarked, "It is not Socratic education, but its absence, that would be fatal to the health of our society." She explained that Socratic education is essential to a strong democracy because it fosters deliberate and reflective thought for common good. However, she recognized several enemies of logic and Socratic reasoning. For instance, she asserted that some left-wing opponents

charge that the central forms of logical argumentation don't suit the minds of women, or minorities, or non-Western people. . . . As if we cannot help disadvantaged groups to make progress unless we recognize the "fact" that logic itself is patriarchal or a tool of colonial oppression. (Nussbaum, p. 38)

Nussbaum dismissed claims that the Socratic reasoning is not suited to the minds of some people, but an investigation of the critics' claims should be conducted before conclusions about their value are made.

Feminist scholarship. Williams (1993, p. 1,573) described the Socratic method as "a teacher asking a series of questions, ideally to a single student, in an attempt to lead the student down a chain of reasoning either forward, to its conclusions, or backward, to its assumptions." O'Dea (1997, p. 269) clarified why Socratic method questioning might be unsuited to the thinking styles of some women:

Socrates said the unexamined life was not worth living. But woman's long experience of being perceived as "other", [*sic*] together with her now valorized concern for maintaining relationships, has made her . . . prone to an

excessive, unrelenting, often guilt-suffused self-examination that I hardly think Socrates had in mind. Far from promoting clarification and strength of purpose, such obsessive questioning, nay agonizing, robs us of our strength.

Aside from the potent disempowerment of women, Williams (1993) lamented that Socratic questions are not individualized to a selected student. However, this particular claim may not be valid because, as aforementioned, Plato and others purported that when one properly applies the Socratic method, he or she takes into account the individual circumstances and context of a student. However, if Williams (1993) meant to indicate that the questions do not seek to establish a form of truth that is individualized to a given student, then the claim becomes more defensible. For instance, Fishman (1985) offered that the Socratic method is used to establish a level of knowledge suitable to various backgrounds rather than knowledge narrowly tailored to each individual's background. Consideration of specific backgrounds is necessary for the Socratic method to be used to lead some participants to the argument's conclusion or the assumptions on which it was made. For instance, as Martin (1994, p. 83) asserted, "There may well be sex differences in the way people think and learn and view the world." Code (1991) argued against an objective truth and stressed that the concept of knowledge be recast along a continuum that is both subjective and objective.

O'Dea (1997) indicated that an emphasis on reason is problematic for other feminist writers as well (Code, 1991; Gilligan, 1977; Martin, 1994; Williams, 1993). The level to which the Socratic method is consistent to women's minds may be irrelevant; Code (1991, p. 29) asserted that because their ways of knowing are traditionally viewed as "hopelessly subjective," women are often viewed as "unfit for the abstract life of pure reason in which true knowers must engage." Martin (1994) noted that the ideal of an educated person tends to be primarily based on so-called male cognitive processes of the objective, analytic, and rational.

Meanwhile, Gilligan (1977) asserted that women's thinking is contextual and not based on the principles of reason alone. Moreover, according to Williams (1993, p. 1,574), "Knowledge is socially created, not individually discovered, and it is created through a process that involves emotion as well as reason"; thus, a recasting of knowledge as both objective and subjective should benefit men as well as women. For instance, with regard to legal education, Williams (1993) believes that incor-

porating the interpersonal and emotional aspects of cases would increase students' relevant knowledge because they would get at the context and personal impact of depicted situations. Indeed, Martin (1994) asserted that if knowledge is viewed as void of context then an "ivory-tower person," who can reason but who will not be concerned with society's fate and the welfare of others, will be created. According to Martin, knowledge without context creates "a person who can reason yet has no desire to solve real problems in the real world; . . . a person who can reach flawless moral conclusions but feels no care or concern for others" (p. 78).

Aside from the preceding claims, feminist scholars, such as Williams (1993), have also contended that the Socratic method does not address knowledge seeking as a communal activity. The Socratic method is primarily for individuals' creation of knowledge, and so the significance of group communication and the way in which women may learn is not valued nor accommodated. Martin (2000, p. 154) highlighted the value of communication among individuals in education by noting, "Some of the most interesting and significant theories of female education may have been authored not by single individuals but by groups of individuals." Group authorship was also evident in the work of Freire whose pedagogy of the oppressed emerged through his work with the dispossessed of his own country and was not fully developed from his own mind (Reed & Johnson, 2000). Gilligan proposed that women tend to "view the world differently than men and emphasize relationships between people in a specific context rather than abide by an abstract universal justice" (Gilligan as cited in Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 187). Gilligan's (1997) assertion that women see themselves in relation to others implies that knowledge seeking is not an individual activity.

According to these feminist authors, women tend to see themselves in relation to others and prefer communal learning, and therefore, educational situations that can be alienating and competitive will not be conducive to them. For instance, Sadker and Sadker (1994, p. 189) stated that the exchanges in a Yale Law School classroom alienated female students, who viewed them as "'nonconversation' where people did not talk *to* one another but rather *at* one another, as if performing before an audience." In addition, they pointed out that these classrooms were highly competitive environments where students often tried to upstage each other. According to Bolton (2001) and Too (2000), such one-upmanship is a component of the Socratic method, which may stifle the participation of women.

Sadker and Sadker (1994) in fact found that women were twice as likely as men to be silent in class discussions. Indeed, Gilligan (1977, p. 490) asserted that women often have a “reluctance to speak publicly in their own voice, given the constraints imposed on them by the politics of differential power between the sexes.” These findings suggest that the application of the Socratic method in competitive classrooms can lead to the silencing of women, who may come to the situation feeling less certain or powerful than the men in class. As noted by the authors cited, women who have been conditioned into being silent may have difficulty discovering the legitimacy of their own opinions.

This notion has not always been recognized. For instance, the cognitive and ethical development theory of Perry, which was validated largely on the basis of interviews he conducted with Harvard men, entails moving from a dichotomous orientation (e.g., right versus wrong) to one honoring diverse views and ultimately to one recognizing the significance of using evidence to support those diverse views (Evans et al., 1998). However, in his theory, Perry does not recognize the tendency of women toward silence. Unlike development theories, such as that of Bronfenbrenner (1993), in which the relationships between environmental conditions and the individual are taken into account, Perry’s theory does not address the impact of the environment upon an individual (and vice versa). Environmental power differentials may mean that under Perry’s scheme women may be perceived to struggle with, or not advance as quickly as men, in their cognitive development.

Postcolonial scholarship. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002, p. 2) explained that postcolonial literature is distinguishable by the depiction of tension with the imperial power, as defined by the effect of European colonialism, and “by emphasizing [its] differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre.” In particular, postcolonial scholarship may be viewed as a broader context for the types of issues addressed through feminist scholarship. For instance, Childs and Williams (1997, p. 22) explained, “Feminism is interested in power relations in the academy, and obviously in their gendered nature; post-colonialism introduces racial and cultural dimensions into the analysis.”

As also evidenced in feminist scholarship, postcolonial literature illustrates a questioning of universal truth. According to Ashcroft et al. (2002, p. 11), “Assumptions about the universal features of language, epistemologies and value systems are all radically questioned by the practices of post-colonial writing.”

They pointed out that English studies, which were linked to 19th-century forms of colonial imperialism, reflect the search for universal meaning and denied the value of the peripheral or marginal. Like feminist scholarship, topics of postcolonial literature are used to refute the notion of universal truth, which is purported by the Socratic method, and to argue that forms of truth be established by the individual. For instance, Said (1994) discussed how knowledge in the Western construct is prized for its nonpolitical nature; that is, in its ideal form, it is considered impartial or pure. However, Said asserted that in practice such an approach is problematic because

no one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of a society. (p. 136)

The notion of the universality of truth is also tied to notions of expertness and how it can foster oppression. In discussing imperialism, Williams and Chrisman (1994) explained that the masses had understanding thrust upon them from a hierarchical, dominant regime of truth. Bassnet and Trivedi (1999) offered an example that bolsters Williams and Chrisman’s argument. They stressed that colonization and translation went hand in hand and cited instances of texts that were translated for centuries into “European languages for European consumption” (Bassnet & Trivedi, p. 5). Thus, much like authors of feminist scholarship who contend that knowledge construction is devoid of context due to the idealization of so-called masculine models of learning, postcolonial literature offers examples of how knowledge transmission is a one-way process that is the result of the historical influences of colonization.

The cited authors have suggested that objective learning leads to dominant regimes of truth and expertness that, as in the Socratic method, place authority upon the transmitter of knowledge, who is considered the possessor of the ultimate truth. Childs and Williams (1997) argued that the adoption of the expert introduces the element of tyranny because power positions are rooted in racial, gendered, and imperialist superiority. As illustrated by Ashby and Anderson (1966), expertness and universal learning have been embraced by the oppressed because of the power influence of the knowledge disseminator. For instance, prior to independence from British rule, African students at Fourah Bay College prized studies emphasizing theology and the classics

because they believed these topics have an association with “white man’s power” (Ashby & Anderson, 1966, p. 169). Rather than a policy supporting the consideration of local needs via educational adaptation, British ideals of education were emphasized in colonial West African schools of higher education.

America’s institutions of higher education may reflect some of the tyrannical elements that post-colonial scholars lament. For instance, according to Hill (1996, p. 471), “The truth is that the university oozes with uncoded messages about centrality and marginality.” Hill explained that universities follow a hierarchical framework in which messages of marginality and centrality, such as the value judgments inherent in distinctions between the hard and soft sciences, graduate and undergraduate students, required and optional courses, are encouraged. Such a hierarchical model that ranks or sorts according to a historical or developmental scheme results in the depreciation of the experiences associated with whole epochs and entire peoples (e.g., women, Native Americans, the physically challenged, underdeveloped nations) because they have been and continue to be marginalized.

Constraints Regarding Socratic Activity

To make robust conclusions regarding the utility of the Socratic method to advising, one must address issues beyond those identified in the critiques of the method. For instance, as noted, Nussbaum (1998) proposed that Socratic activity in advising works best when the faculty is devoted to teaching, advising systems are well supported and well organized, and students are well prepared. One could sensibly argue that any type of advising, not just that in which the Socratic method is employed, would work best when it occurs within a well-supported and well-managed system. However, aside from the issues presented by feminists and postcolonialists, the specifics of applying the Socratic method in higher education must be addressed by those considering its use. I will address the following questions regarding the use of the Socratic method in the American higher-education institution: Are only faculty members capable of utilizing Socratic activity in advising such that only they should employ it? Should only well-prepared students be the recipients of Socratic activity in advising?

Faculty Advisors, Professional Advisors, and Socratic Activity

In addition to Nussbaum (1998), others have made similar general arguments for the necessity of faculty devotion to teaching in this era of grow-

ing emphasis on research. For instance, Kennedy (1997) noted that the public and students of higher education seem to feel that the work of the faculty should be related to teaching, mentoring, and counseling whereas the faculty members oftentimes expect their work to revolve around scholarly pursuits. Boyer (1990) discussed how faculty members have had to answer to various mandates related to their work. He explained that to be viewed as a scholar, a faculty member is now called upon to teach and provide service as well conduct research and publish. Kennedy (1997, p. 64) explained that “what it means to be a scholar has varied not only with time but with place.” However, Boyer (1990, p. 15) remarked that research is the priority for faculty and that teaching and conveying knowledge to students are functions that “grow out of scholarship, [but] they are not to be considered a part of it.” He argued that the notion of scholarship should be more dynamic and that teaching, research, and service should be viewed as more flexible and interdependent categories. Kennedy (1997, p. 95) urged stakeholders “to talk about teaching more and to respect and reward those who do it well, making it a labor of love and the *personal* responsibility of each of us.”

Regarding the faculty’s devotion to teaching, mentoring, and counseling, Reinartz (2000) specifically recognized that faculty involvement in advising is important because it encourages faculty mentoring relationships with students outside of the classroom. However, while scholars have said that faculty devotion to teaching and advising is desirable, such a recommendation is offered with certain caveats. For instance, Too (2000, p. 71) warned that “a pedagogy that regards the teacher as the authoritative container and dispenser of knowledge and wisdom has the inevitable effect of averting pedagogical desire.” Kennedy (1997, p. 68) noted that passion for a particular subject is a source of the resonance between teacher and student but also warned that some restraint is necessary:

If the intellectual enterprise is to be made attractive to students—if they are to regard the life of the mind as a life worth living—they must respect those who have chosen that life as vocation. The professor who appears overly eager to transmit his own influence . . . is bound to sacrifice some of that respect.

According to Boyer (1990), teachers should not only avoid being overly prescriptive, but teaching should also not be overly routine. He urged that teaching should be viewed as “not only transmitting

knowledge, but *transforming* and *extending* it as well. Through reading, through classroom discussion, and surely through comments and questions posed by students, professors themselves will be pushed in creative new directions” (p. 24).

While arguments for greater faculty devotion to teaching and advising have been made, one can question whether only faculty members should (or moreover can) be involved in Socratic activity in advising in particular. Habley and Morales (1998) noted that institutions are increasingly opting to use shared models of academic advising. According to data from the fourth and fifth surveys on academic advising conducted by ACT in 1992 and 1997, the use of the faculty-only model across all institution types (i.e., both 2-year and 4-year private and public institutions) declined from 35 to 28% (Habley & Morales, 1998, p. 13). By 2003, the use of the faculty-only model had declined to 25% (Habley, 2004, p. 20). Frost (1991) pointed out that despite the high numbers of faculty advisors, professional advisors, who may be involved in shared models of advising, are increasing in number. Thus, especially because the use of the faculty-only model is declining, one can argue that professional advisors should be considered as potential resources for Socratic activity in advising.

Despite being in decline, the faculty-only model of advising is still widely utilized at small institutions (Habley & McCauley, 1987) thus indicating greater potential for faculty members to be those primarily engaged in Socratic activity in the advising conducted therein. However, at other types of institutions, such as research universities in particular, professional advisors may be considered as other potential resources for Socratic activity in advising. Reinartz (2000) pointed out that large, research institutions frequently utilize, in addition to faculty advisors, nonfaculty advisors, such as full-time professional advisors, for specific cohorts of students. Faculty members’ scholarly responsibilities at research institutions may not leave much room for devotion to advising. Also, Reinartz (2000) concluded that the large undergraduate population at many research universities may require that a variety of advisor types be used.

With the faculty-only model of advising waning, the numbers of professional advisors increasing, and the necessity of aiding faculty in the advising function at particular types of institutions established, perhaps professional advisors should share in the pursuit of Socratic activity in advising. The qualifications of professional advisors further indicate that they can be involved in such a pursuit.

According to King (1988), professional advisors tend to have a heightened knowledge of student development. This training would make them particularly well suited to tailoring Socratic education to a student’s circumstances and context, which was one of the distinguishing characteristics of the activity as identified by Nussbaum (1998). While some have noted that a lack of teaching experience and involvement in the disciplines can be a weakness of professional advisors (Reinartz, 2000), others have argued that advising of any type can be successful as long as advisors are trained to address students’ academic planning and developmental needs (Frost, 1991). To be trained in the method, no matter what their background, both faculty and professional advisors will need to be specifically familiarized with concepts of Socratic dialogue, such as outlined by Bolten (2001), and know how they might be applicable to academic advising. The necessity of such training for advising would likely conflict with the mindset of those faculty members who work within the current notions of scholarship; thus, they make a strong case for involving professional advisors, who are dedicated to the advising task, with Socratic activity in advising.

Students and Their Development

Nussbaum (1998) suggested that Socratic dialogue works best with well-prepared students. However, rather than fostering a democratic sense of community, such a performance-based qualification could result in an exclusionary community that serves to exacerbate marginalization of certain groups. For instance, Carlson (2004) indicated that U.S. Education Department statistics show that 10% of students in 2000 (up from 3% in 1973) identified themselves as having a disability. Layton and Lock (2003) have found that students with learning disabilities can have intermittent difficulties with reasoning. Under Nussbaum’s (1998) scenario, students with learning disabilities might be excluded from Socratic dialogue instead of receiving additional assistance with how to participate in it; however, based on Layton and Lock’s work, one might argue that such training in Socratic dialogue may be both necessary and worthwhile in helping students with learning disabilities to choose a major and career path. Nussbaum (1998) suggested adapting Socratic education to student circumstances; therefore, supporting students who are not perceived as well prepared, instead of excluding them from the Socratic activity, seems to be in line with her recommendations.

Furthermore, students at all levels of development

could arguably benefit from honing of the critical-thinking skills, or Socratic scepticism [*sic*] as Rorty (1999) labeled it, that the Socratic method fosters. Student development of critical thinking, or the process of questioning the prevailing consensus, is a main aim of higher education because critical thinking fosters individual growth, and in turn, societal progress (Dewey, 1998; Martínez-Alemán, 2001; Rorty, 1999). The development of critical-thinking skills could be encouraged through plus-one reasoning or staging as developed by Kohlberg (as cited in Evans et al., 1998, p. 178). Through plus-one staging, students are aided in their cognitive development via exposure to ways of making meaning that are one step beyond their current level.

Interaction with faculty members can help students in the development of their critical-thinking skills. Perry (1981, p. 109) offered that faculty members can aid students' cognitive development by "teach[ing] *dialectically* [italics added] – that is, [introducing] . . . students . . . not only to the orderly certainties of . . . subject matter but to its unresolved dilemmas." Chickering and Reisser (1993, p. 318) likewise offered that "the faculty member who speaks with passion and invites active learning . . . does much to awaken dormant cognitive skills." Furthermore, Baxter Magolda (as cited in Chickering & Reisser, 1993, pp. 317–18) explained that faculty interaction can help students dissolve any notion of authority as omnipotent, refute the idea that knowledge is absolute, and realize that learning is more than just the mere collection of authorities' ideas. Referring to the work of Kegan, Baxter Magolda (1992) remarked that faculty members who confirm students' abilities and also expose them to contradicting views and experiences will not only help them to "recognize themselves as makers of meaning" (p. 294) but will also teach them that knowledge is not absolute, and thus, that learning can go beyond the mere collection of authorities' ideas. Faculty members must then offer continuity by supporting students who are in a transitional stage in meaning making and by balancing confirmation and contradiction. Baxter Magolda (1992) offered that continuity can be achieved by connecting to students' experiences during the teaching function. Confirmation, contradiction, and continuity could be reflected in the advising function as well.

While interaction with faculty members is undoubtedly beneficial to students and Socratic activity in advising could be a part of such interaction, arguments in favor of supplementing faculty advising can be found. Professional advisors may be

particularly suited to attending to student development through Socratic activity in advising because, as King (1988) asserted, they tend to have a heightened knowledge of student development. As Perry (1981, p. 109) pointed out, dialectic "requires timing, learned only by paying close attention to students' ways of making meaning." The need for highly trained professional advisors to step in and assist faculty advisors may be greater with students who are predominantly first generation, underprepared, nontraditional, exploratory, socioeconomically diverse, or commuters because these types of students may require a more intrusive type of advising (King, 2003). For instance, the results of the study by Layton and Lock (2003) seem to indicate the need for professional advisors who are well versed in the different resources available to advise students with learning disabilities, especially those who may have intermittent reasoning difficulties.

Discussion

Regarding the relevance and suitability of Socratic activity to advising, several summary points and recommendations can be made based on the presented information and viewpoints. For instance, critics of the Socratic method identify the aspects of it that may or may not be beneficial to some students. Among their arguments is that a focus on truth and objectivity, as well as on the concept of truth as universal and predetermined, is undesirable. Others have concerns that notions of expertness, or the teacher as an authoritative transmitter of knowledge, are counterproductive because they can foster oppression and suppress the voice of some students. Similarly, while practical-reasoning abilities and critical-thinking skills may be useful, some consideration of the context of the students' specific situations must be made in the pursuit of teaching them via the Socratic method. Also, critics are concerned of the devaluing of marginal groups, and therefore, may only advocate the use of Socratic advising if it used in the pluralistic way as described by Nussbaum (1998). Also, the strategy of reducing students to a stony silence, which is associated with the Socratic method, is objectionable. Still others contend that the emphasis on individualistic forms of communication, as used in the Socratic method, should give way to also include more relational or communal ways of knowing.

The relevance and suitability of Socratic activity to advising is further informed by the investigation of Nussbaum's (1998) propositions that Socratic activity in advising works best when the faculty is devoted to teaching, within a well-sup-

ported and well-organized system of advising, and with students who are well prepared. However, faculty members are not the only individuals who can and should be involved in Socratic activity in advising. Pluralism is also important for student participation: All types of students can and should be involved in the Socratic method because it furthers the cause of higher education, and when appropriately tailored, it can aid students' development.

Practical Implications

As engaged by both faculty and professional advisors, what might a revised conception of Nussbaum's (1998) Socratic activity in advising be like? Hagen (1994, p. 88) has urged the use of beneficial dialectic in advising:

Academic advising is, or should be, more like ideal or abstract dialectic between two equals, both intelligent, both seeking but not yet knowing the true and the just, and both eschewing the merely expedient unless there is no better guide for action.

While Hagen (1994) described his model as "non-Socratic" it may actually be perceived as *quasi*-Socratic because it aims to achieve so-called benefits of the Socratic method (e.g., critical-thinking skills) without some of its perceived drawbacks (e.g., silencing, oppression). In contrast to Nussbaum (1998), who placed a great deal of emphasis on advisees posing questions and leading discussion, and others who might believe that questioning is primarily the advisors' role (Blackburn, 1996; Too, 2000; Williams, 1993), Hagen hails students and advisors as equal partners in the pursuit of truth and shuns notions of the advisor as the wiser leader who might reduce students to a stony silence to encourage their skepticism. His suggestions seem to reflect the notions of feminist scholars, such as Sadker and Sadker (1994) and Gilligan (1977), who argued against environments that can be alienating. They also tie to the ideas of post-colonial scholars, such as Childs and Williams (1997), who emphasized that notions of dominant regimes of truth and expertness are oppressive. For instance, Hagen's beneficial dialectic might be one type of the "new structures of dialogue and invention and cooperative discovery" that Hill (1996, p. 475) indicated was needed to eradicate the hierarchical nature of higher education so that "there may emerge a new world order . . . that empowers hitherto excluded peoples of our and other nations to contribute their experience on an equal footing to our collective understanding of ourselves, soci-

ety, and the world" (p. 475). Hagen's suggestions also reflect the notion that knowledge is not absolute and is both objective and subjective (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Code, 1991; Gilligan, 1977; Martin, 1994; Said, 1994; Williams, 1993). Moreover, they tie to the notion that individual growth occurs in the pursuit of self-realization rather than in heeding the prevailing consensus or status quo (Dewey, 1998; Martínez-Alemán, 2001; Rorty, 1999).

Hagen (1994, p. 87) also pointed out that beneficial dialectic in advising would not involve upstaging the student: "We do not seek to trap our students into revealing to themselves and admitting to us that they are ignorant." Instead, consideration of the student's feelings fosters student development. For instance, as Evans et al. (1998, p. 139) related, faculty members who are "approachable, available, and encouraging of participation rather than demanding of it" may help students who are doubtful of the legitimacy of their own opinions see the worth of their views.

Other aspects of beneficial dialectic, besides those explicitly outlined by Hagen (1994), should be reflected in advisor-advisee dialogue. First, advisors must also take into account the level of a student's cognitive development. Nussbaum (1998) warned against giving students new to the advising relationship too much freedom to question because they may never learn habits of rigorous inquiry. As Kohlberg noted, one should take care not to engage the student too far beyond her or his current level of development. Perry (1981) also specifically suggested that when engaged in dialectic one must pay close attention to students' ways of making meaning.

Also, because some students, such as women, might desire more communal and relational forms of communication, advisors may want to practice beneficial dialectic with groups of student advisees in addition to one-on-one interactions with students. In this fashion, student-to-student as well as advisor-to-student and student-to-advisor learning and advising can take place. In such advising situations, students should be encouraged to engage in a dialogue rather than to talk at one another. The context of the situation, such as the emotional climate, should also be considered.

Bolten (2001) outlined the characteristics that partners in a Socratic dialogue might reflect; some of these qualities could be applicable to quasi-Socratic, beneficial dialectic as well. The characteristics are as follows: foster desire to investigate a matter, provide opportunity for each to speak, pose questions to facilitate mutual understanding, reflect

each other's words, say only what is really meant, make viewpoints as clear as possible, be willing to give up arguments, investigate differences of opinion, and strive for consensus. However, regarding beneficial dialectic, Hagen (1994) remarked that advisors and students can strive for agreement, or consensus, but it is not always achieved because through beneficial dialectic the advisee and advisor discover, but not dictate, the right course of action for a student. Moreover, Hagen warned that beneficial dialectic is not perfect and the supposed right course of action may not turn out to be the best choice.

The following characteristics of partners in a discussion, rather than a dialectic, as outlined by Bolten (2001), might help to highlight the elements that participants in quasi-Socratic dialogue or beneficial dialectic should not do: harbor a desire to convince one another that they are right, demand speaking time, strive to undermine each other's standpoints and arguments, and attempt to make each other's viewpoints seem unintelligible. Overall, beneficial dialectic would move away from the focus on reason and the preoccupation with the pursuit of truth and objectivity (p. 40) that was suggested by Nussbaum (1998) to reflect Socratic activity. Advisor training should provide edification on the characteristics that do and do not constitute beneficial dialectic.

Conclusion

The Socratic method may be useful in theory but not suitable for universal application in advising practice. For instance, Nussbaum's (1998) emphasis on reason, truth, and objectivity is inappropriate. Rather, advisors should see knowledge as both objective and subjective. However, lack of universal applicability does not mean that a Socratic approach to advising is unsuited for all students. Rather, the Socratic method can be beneficial to all students because it provides a useful underpinning for their critical thinking, the development of which is a main goal of higher education. Thus, Nussbaum's proposal that well-prepared students reflect the best candidates for Socratic activity in advising must be abandoned because the undemocratic consequences associated with excluding all other students from the conversation mean that they may forego opportunities to develop critical-thinking skills.

I propose that a quasi-Socratic model for advising, such as beneficial dialectic, might be most useful because through it the benefits of the Socratic method are recognized but also its limitations and means of dealing with them to benefit the advising

relationship are acknowledged. Under such a model, advisors must consider certain contexts like gender and level of student development.

The nature of the advising relationship in specific institutional cultures is also important with beneficial dialectic. The significance that Nussbaum (1998) placed on the faculty's role in Socratic activity in advising should be embraced yet broadened to include professional advisors. Professional advisors may have more relevant training and also more time to dedicate to beneficial dialectic than do the faculty in institutions where faculty commitments are ever expanding and research is gaining or has taken precedent. Therefore, on some campuses, a quasi-Socratic approach to advising might best reside with professional rather than faculty advisors.

In brief, Hagen (1994) indicated that beneficial dialectic stresses a considerate and cooperative dialogue in the advising relationship. I also suggest that participants should take into account context and the level of a student's cognitive development. In addition, as indicated by student needs, beneficial dialectic might be best integrated into the advising relationship via communal and relational forms of communication.

How might beneficial dialectic work in an advising interaction? Here is a possible illustration of the method in academic advising:

Advisor: "So, I see here on your degree audit that you want to major in computer science. Is that correct?"

Advisee: "Yes."

Advisor: "But didn't you tell me earlier that you really enjoyed that writing seminar you took first semester?"

Advisee: "I did, very much."

Advisor: "Then might it not be useful to take some more writing classes and explore that interest further?"

Advisee: "Maybe, but I don't think that I would make much money with that sort of major."

Advisor: "Employers actually look for strong writing skills, but tell me more about your concerns. How much of an issue is it for you to make a salary?"

Advisee: "Well, I need to support my two kids. We had to move in with my parents when my husband and I separated, but I'd really like to get us our own place one day soon."

Advisor: "Okay, I see. Do you think that there may be something that you can pursue that you enjoy but can also support your family?"

Advisee: "Maybe. I'm not sure."

Advisor: "Why don't we figure out a time soon for the two of us to sit down with someone from the career center and talk more about all of this?"

Advisee: "Thanks. That sounds good."

As the example indicates, the advisor began with a traditional question-and-answer dialogue characteristic of the Socratic method, but then she adapted the conversation to accommodate the context in which advising was taking place and to recognize the advisee's needs. Socratic activity in advising should not be abandoned but rather adapted to the beneficial dialectic, as illustrated by the example, so that it can be of the utmost value to students.

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Author's Note

The author thanks Dr. Ana M. Martínez-Alemán from the Higher Education Administration Department at Boston College for her guidance. Peter Hagen also provided exceptional guidance in his role as the guest editor on the issue.

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