

A Critique of the Sophists' and Socrates' Positions on Teaching

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Abstract. One can justifiably with little or no problem say that in Western civilization, there are two lines of teachers from whom modern teaching originates: These are the Greek philosophers and the Hebrew prophets. Outside the Jewish community, the influence of the Greeks is far wider, stronger and more varied with the exception of the teaching of Jesus Himself. The Sophists claimed to possess all knowledge and questioned the foundations of most things that were previously taken for granted. While Socrates being a simple man believed that nobody on earth is intelligently empty, the ideas, according to Socrates are in every individual that these only required to be brought to consciousness in individual by the competent teachers. It is on this note that this paper examines the positions of the Sophists and Socrates on teaching. In this paper, we are not concerned with what is taught, but with how teaching should be done and finally make a critique of their positions on teaching.

Keywords: Critique, The Sophists, Socrates and Teaching.

1. Introduction

The Sophists were among the first professional teachers that provided instructions in several higher levels of learning. Men like Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias of Elis, Thracymacus of Abdera and Prodicus of Ceos became popular in Greece during the 5th Century BC. Most of them were not Greeks but aliens from Asia Minor. We are today heirs of the many of the ideas, which the sophists worked out. For instance, it was they who first discussed whether

there were any absolute standards of morality, or merely conventions, either justice is constant, or simply the means of the will of the ruling class. As critics – they were dazzling, even overwhelming as teachers. The Sophists claimed to be following the movement of Reason and enlightenment. They went on public lecture to enlighten their students through the use of logic and oral presentation of facts and ideas.

Socrates in his own case was a Greek philosopher and teacher who profoundly affected western thought through the influence on his pupil called Plato. He is believed to be among the greatest teachers down the ages. Socrates believed in the superiority of argument over writing and therefore spent the greater part of the adult life in the marketplace and public places of Athens, engaging in dialogue and arguments with anyone who would listen or who would submit to interrogation.

2. The Sophists and Teaching

The Sophists were exclusively lecturers (Gibert,1963). All that we heard of them showed them as strikingly graceful and subtle talkers, who were highly sought by students. They said they could lecture on any subject. Often they were challenged to speak on odd and difficult topics, and they accepted the challenges. However, they did not usually pretend to know more facts than others. They went on public lecture from one place to place. The practice of the sophists can be likened to the modern days experience of the conferences or lectures in which we have a group of tutors often refer to as lecturers who teach through rhetoric and oral presentation of ideas. They argued

systematically and fairly, but painted over the gaps in their reasoning with glossy rhetoric. The sophists were known for constructive ideas and this they did through the use of logic (Ntui,2009). They believed that traditional notions were based on convention rather than logic. They demonstrated that a smooth talker – could prove almost anything sometimes, as a stunt, they made a powerful speech on one side of a question in the morning and an equally powerful speech on the opposite side in the afternoon.

The sophists’ method of teaching could be seen as carrying positive and negative dimension in the sense that they could argue for and against a certain issue at the same time. They were a strong disruptive force in civilization, for they helped to blow up many sound traditional values, and often blinded their pupils by the temporary brilliance of the explosion, leaving them no help in rebuilding their individual and social lives. Yet they taught the Greeks what no other Mediterranean nation ever learnt, that, *thought alone is one of the strongest forces in human life*. The respect for the critical thinking, which they created, has lasted, even till the present days. The researcher may say that the sophists did not have an organised educational institution in their time but they qualified in their time to be seen as higher education teachers because their students were mostly matured or young adults like the ones in present day universities, who sought after them because of their desire for specialised knowledge. They claimed to know “*the science of life and living*” and concluded in their teaching that truth and morality were essentially matters of opinion. Thus, in their teaching, they tended to emphasise forms of persuasive expression, such as the art of rhetoric, which provided their students with skills useful for achieving success in life, particularly public life. This is seen in today’s practice of law, political discussions among others.

Although they were the ones that blazed the trail in teaching for a fee as it is done today and The Sophists were of minor importance in the development of western philosophical thought. According to Redmond (2008) the sophists were accused by the state of lacking in morality.

They were seen as radicals and revolutionaries who questioned the foundations of most things, that were previously taken for granted. They cast serious doubts on things previously believed, and raised a number of problems. They demolished the sanctity of tradition with their severe criticism and instilled the spirit of criticism and skepticism in the minds of the youths and adults whom they instructed. It was not surprising that they soon became unpopular among the Greeks. The fact that they demanded money from those they taught added to their unpopularity. As a result, the word sophist acquired a derogatory meaning, as does the modern term *sophistry*, which can be defined as deceptive or false argumentation or reasoning. One can say that the sophists prepared the ground for the modern days lecture method of teaching in our universities. The lecture method is good since through it, information is passed from the lecturers to the students. However, the method is deficient because it does not give room for students to freely contribute their ideas to the teaching and learning process. It is teacher centred.

The students merely take down note. In some instances, students’ note may not be the same. Teacher’s delivery of message through lecture method could be likened to the experience of rain falling from the sky whereby people run around to collect water but the people may not collect the same quality and quantity of water. In the sense that, some may collect water at the early hours of the rainfall when the water is dirty and some may collect at the middle of the rainfall or much later. This marks the quality of the water they collect and could even determine quantity. In the same matter, when students attend lectures, some take down irrelevant information from the lecturers while some take down some useful information during the lectures. Also, some students may take down enough information while some may not take down enough. Irregularities that accomplished the lecture method make it insufficient method of teaching.

3. Socrates (469 – 399 BC) and Teaching

Socrates, the Great Greek Philosopher and Educationist is said to have written nothing.

Some of his works and personal history could be retrieved from the works of Plato and Xenophon. His contributions to knowledge were at once metaphysical, epistemological and ethical. Belief in a purely objective understanding of such concepts as justice, love, and virtue and the self-knowledge that he inculcated, were the core of his teachings.

Socrates believed that all vice is the result of ignorance, and that no person is willingly bad. It appears that Socrates thought that every person had full knowledge of ultimate truth contained within the soul and needs only to be spurred to conscious reflection in order to become aware of it. Correspondingly, virtue is knowledge, and those who know the right will act rightly. His logic placed particular emphasis on rational argument and the quest for general definitions, as evidenced in the writings of his pupil, Plato. Through the writings of these philosophers, Socrates profoundly affected the entire subsequent course of western speculative thought and teaching. Socrates to very many appeared as the very embodiment and guide of the higher life. Cicero once said that Socrates was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and to place it in cities, and even to introduce it into homes and compel it to enquire about life, standards, good and ill.

Gutek (1974) contended that Socrates' method has been described as a kind of 'shock treatment' since it jolts the learners into anxiety about his on condition as human being. Socrates compared the acquisition of knowledge to 'healing' since it cured one of the sicknesses of ignorance thus restoring one to order and form. Through the process of education, Socrates felt that an intense human relationship is built between the teacher and the learner. Education should also assist the mind in building a set of value predilections and moral dispositions. When man is governed by reason, Socrates conjectured, he would subordinate appetite of reason (Aladejana 2009). Apart from Plato, another philosopher that was taught by Socrates was *Antisthenes*. He was the founder of the Syndic school of Aristippus who founded the Cyrenaic philosophy of experience and pleasure

Socrates appeared as the greatest teacher of all times.

As a teacher, Socrates was greatly concerned with the problem of getting competent men into positions of power. He would ask such questions as; "*If I wanted a shoe mended, whom should I employ*"? To which some ingenious youths would answer: "*A shoemaker, O Socrates*". He would go on to carpenters, coppersmiths, among others, and finally ask some such question as "who should mend the ship of state"? He taught his students that a moral life leads to tranquility and that moderation and acceptance improve the quality of one's life. Socrates' method of teaching according to Reich (2003) was dialectic, the method of seeking knowledge by questions and answers. Socrates' scope of teaching was fraught with underlying emphasis on moral philosophy. His *Apology* gives a clear picture of a just man as one who is sure of himself, high-minded, indifferent to worldly success, believing that he is guided by a divine voice, and persuaded that clear thinking is the most important requirement for right living. In the final passage, where he considers what happens after death, it is impossible not to think that he firmly believes in immortality. He is not troubled, like the Christians, and later days teachers by fears of poverty, material acquisition and eternal torment after death.

Like the sophists, he was also an itinerant teacher. But he distrusted and opposed the sophists wherever possible. They toured the whole Greek world: Socrates stayed in Athens, talking to his fellow citizens. The sophists made carefully prepared continuous speeches but in his case, Socrates only asked questions. The Sophists took rich fees for their teaching; Socrates refused regular payment, lived and died poor. The Sophists were elegantly dressed, turned out like contemporary film stars on a personal-appearance tour, with secretaries and personal servants and elaborate advertising. Socrates wore the working – man's clothes, bare footed and a smock. In fact, according to Bertrand Russell, he has been a stonemason and carver by trade, and came from a working-class family. He talked to people at street-corners and

in the gymnasium (like public baths and parks nowadays), where every afternoon the young men exercised, and the old men talked, while they all sunbathed. He fitted in so well there that he sometimes compared himself to the athletic trainer, who does not run or wrestle, but teaches others how to run and wrestle better: Socrates said he trained people to think. Lastly, the sophists said they knew everything on earth and were ready to explain it. Socrates said he knew nothing and was only trying to find out knowledge.

The Sophists were the first lecturers while Socrates was the first teacher. His invention was more radical than that of the Sophists. Speeches such as they delivered could be heard elsewhere – in the new democratic law-courts, where clever orators tried to sway large juries by dozens of newly developed oratorical tricks, and in the theatres, where tragic kings, queens, gods, and heroes accused and defined one another in immortal tirades, and in the assemblies of the people, where any citizen could speak on the destinies of Athens. The innovations Socrates made were to use ordinary conversation as a method of teaching, and to act on one society only, his own city of Athens, instead of detaching himself and traveling. His talk was not “*fill of flowers and stars*”. He made the other fellow do most of the talking. He merely asked questions.

According to Bertrand Russell quoted in Ozumba(1998), Socrates questioned all sorts and conditions, from schoolboys to elderly capitalists, from orthodox middle-of-the road citizens to extremists, friends and enemies, critics and admirers, the famous and the obscure, prostitutes and politicians, artists, soldiers among others. It was incredibly difficult for him to adapt himself to so many different characters and outlooks, and yet we are told that he did. Socrates looked ugly. He had good manners, but no aristocratic polish. Yet he was able to talk to the cleverest and the toughest minds of his age and to convince them that they knew more than he did. We can say that his methods were first, the modest declaration of his own ignorance- which imperceptibly flattered the other man and made him eager to explain to

such an intelligent but ‘*naive*’ inquirer; second, his adaptability which showed him the side on which each man could be best approached; and third, his unflinching good humour at crises, when the other lost his temper, to dominate it. Some of the most delightful dramatic scenes in literature are those dialogues in which we see him confronted by a brilliant fanatic and drenched with a shower of words that would have silenced most other, and then emerging, with a humorous pretence of timidity, to shake off the rhetoric and pursue the truth, until at last, under his gently persistent questions, his opponent is – not forced, but led, to admit that he was wrong, and to fall into helpless silence.

He is considered a great teacher who is worthy of mention in this study because his greatness rests primarily in his personal character, since this personal character that had considerable influence both on his contemporaries and subsequent generations. There is no doubt that a teacher’s personality teaches along with his words, as was very glaring in Socrates, who left no writing but taught through his personal interaction. Our concern in this study is to see how teaching can practically ensure sound character and moral training which cannot be taught alone through oral communication but also with the personality of the teacher. This is because the greatest need of the world today is men and women of sound moral character, and integrity, who are humble in both teaching and learning without seeing teaching as a ‘*means to an end*’ but as an ‘*end in itself*’. Learning makes a man humble because the more one knows, the more he knows that he does not know. This calls for humility, modesty and true intellectual commitment. Socrates was primarily a moralist in his personal life and teachings. And as one who lived by principles and died in these convictions, he has not ceased to command the respect and admiration of people all over the world.

4. Evaluation and Conclusion

This paper submitted that the sophists prepared the ground for the modern days lecture method of teaching in our universities. The lecture method is good since through it, information is

passed from the lecturers to the students. However, the method is deficient because it does not give room for students to freely contribute their ideas to the teaching and learning process. The Sophists, it can be said, took interest in behaviourist and information processing perspective approach. It is the view of many educational philosophers that the behaviourist approach to education is too narrow, specialized, isolated and interpersonal in stand point. In the same vein, information processing approach of the Sophists was criticized as being evenly reductionism in its analogy of computer and mind (Adeniyi,2005). These two approaches of the Sophists are teacher-centred rather than being student-centred. Thus, the Sophists failed to reflect either the active role of the learning agent or the influence of the social interactive contexts in every day to day educational setting. Phillips(2003), for instance, holds that their mechanistic underpinning by an orderly, predictable and controllable view of the universe proved inadequate to capture the active and social characteristic of learners.

Socrates approach is different from those of the Sophists. Socrates can be viewed as a constructivist and his approach is child centred and not teacher-centred. Constructivism as an educational theory is the view that learners construct meaning as he or she learns.

Constructing meaning is learning and for him there is no other kind. This view has consequences that are of two-fold. (1) We have to focus on the learners in thinking about learning (not on the subject matter). (2) There is no knowledge independent of the meaning attributed to experience constructed by the learners or community of the learners.

Thus, Socrates as a constructivist, holds that knowledge is not mechanically acquired but actively constructed within the constraints and offerings of the learning environment. The mechanistic positivist accounts of learners as recipients of hard wired knowledge were supplemented by accounts of learners as situated active knowledge constructors. In this way, Socrates brings back human subjectivity excluded by the Sophists, behaviourist and information processing accounts.

However, Socrates approach has certain radical epistemic implications. All knowledge is viewed as human knowledge and, that there can be no warrant for claiming access to knowledge that either is not, or has not been mediated through subjective or inter- subjective human experience of some kind.

By emphasizing individual or social community construction of learning, the conclusion of individual or community idiosyncrasy follows. This, infact leads to epistemological relativism and it raises the question of how we can know others and what is objectivity. It also has radical ontological implications. The universe is no longer a mind- independent existence of any real objective world. These claims lead to epistemological relativism where there exists no absolute truth and truth is as good as any other.

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