

Chapter 9

The Use of the Socratic Teaching Method in E-Learning 2.0 Settings: Challenges and Limitations

Apostolia Pange
TEI of Ionian Islands, Greece

ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to outline the use of the Socratic Teaching Method (STM) in e-Learning 2.0 practice. The research included in this chapter is intended as an introductory handout in order to help educators, learners and course designers to identify the advantages and pitfalls of using this teaching method in e-Learning 2.0 applications. More precisely, this chapter gives the writer's perspective regarding some very interesting issues, such as: a) the range of subjects that could be taught using the STM teaching practice, b) the educators' additional skills needed in order to apply STM to their online teaching, and c) whether the STM is an adequate learning approach in order to assure learners' mastery of a subject.

INTRODUCTION

I am simply your fellow-explorer in the search for truth, and if somebody who contradicts me is obviously right, I shall be the first to give way. (Socrates in "Gorgias")

The Internet has revolutionized modern society by shifting economic interests from products to services and information (Safran, Helic, & Gütl, 2007). The last two decades have been characterized by unlimited and instant access to data, leading us to conclude that we are living in the Information Age. The Internet and Web 2.0 have had a great impact not only in regards of interpersonal communication, but also on the way people teach and learn (Havick, 2000; Motteram & Sharma, 2009;

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Tsai, 2000). To be more precise, the information systems available via the Web have altered the state of the art in education, offering a variety of e-Learning and e-Learning 2.0 practices.

E-Learning presents an important alternative to traditional learning, especially for learners who were unable to conclude their studies or who need continuous training over an extended period of time. It is an educational field that has seen many changes over the last decade. The most remarkable change was the shift from traditional authoring tools and static content, to more dynamic applications that exploit the advantages of social interaction, which are referred to as e-Learning 2.0 applications (Karrer, 2007). The merger of e-Learning with Web 2.0 has given learners the opportunity and the tools to socialize, to express their thoughts, ideas, ideals and beliefs, to retrieve or transmit information and experiences, to cultivate their critical thinking and their communication skills, and the most important, to learn together.

This chapter aims to outline the use of the STM in e-Learning 2.0 applications. The trigger for this chapter was a bibliographic inquiry for the physiological and communication gap in e-Learning practices, caused by the physical distance that a learner has from the rest of the learning community. This chapter is balanced between the presentation of Social Network Sites (SNSs) and their promising use in e-Learning settings and the description of the STM and its application in online learning environments.

The research included in this chapter is intended as a handbook to help educators, learners and course designers identify the advantages and pitfalls of using this teaching method in e-Learning 2.0 applications. In addition, this paper seeks to answer some very interesting questions, such as:

- Is the Socratic Teaching Method appropriate for all subjects?
- Are all educators able to enhance their online teaching by using the Socratic Teaching Method?

- How far can one go? Is dialogue intrinsically inefficient? Is it the Socratic Teaching Method an adequate learning approach in order to assure learners' mastery of a subject?

BACKGROUND

Social Network Sites

When the Web was first developed, the core idea of Tim Berners-Lee, that everybody could contribute to its creation, was not realized. The main drawback was that many people had access to the Internet but only few were able to contribute with content (Ebner, 2007), as users had to maintain accounts and manage special tools and programming languages in order to upload Websites. Many years later, after much research and effort, and many false starts, the dream of Tim Berners-Lee, in the form of the Read/Write Web, was finally actualized.

In a monograph, Gillmor (2004) describes vividly his enthusiasm when he was first introduced with Winer's early blog application. He highlights that the writable Web was not a new idea, but the real breakthrough of this project was its simplicity. This application gave user the opportunity to edit a Web page by adding additional text or features with a simple click of a mouse. The Web was finally becoming social.

The first to introduce the concept "Web 2.0" for the so called "social" Web was Tim O'Reilly (O'Reilly, 2005). He affirms that Web 2.0 gives people control over their own data in a collaborative, user-centric online environment. In other words, Web 2.0 is a Web that allows ordinary users to participate, communicate, exchange ideas and contribute with content and knowledge. The statement made by Downes (2005) focuses on the real essence of Web 2.0:

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