What Socrates Would Say to Undergraduate Tutors

By JOHN P. CLEVELAND

When we talk about education, and about tutoring in particular, we often speak of the Socratic method. Often what we mean when we refer to that method is simply something like a question-and-answer format. But in my years of overseeing a tutoring center and training peer tutors, I have found that such a simple explanation is not enough to understand some of the tensions involved in undergraduate peer tutoring.

There is an unmistakable disconnect between the way most students perceive our services and the way we deliver quality tutoring — a misunderstanding that leads to a low-grade but palpable tension in the tutoring center. The conflict between those two viewpoints is ages old and perhaps best illustrated by the Socratic dialogues themselves.

In *The Euthyphro,* for example, Socrates and a young priest discuss at some length the true nature of piety — yet at the end of their dialogue both men remain stumped as to the correct answer. Although their argument ended in incompleteness, near irresolution, Socrates is unswayed and wishes to pursue the argument again. His true task, after all, is critical inquiry, not simply arriving at a conclusion. Socrates asks his student to begin the discussion again, but to his surprise and disappointment, Euthyphro — who exhibits behaviors and habits of mind quite similar to those of many present-day students — answers, "Some other time, Socrates, for I am in a hurry now, and it is time for me to go."

That hurried and harried demeanor is something we see in many of our students, who often come to the tutoring center in desperation, looking for quick answers and a regurgitation and recitation of several weeks' worth of material. But instead of just giving students the quick answers they seek, we try instead to teach them a process — the process of learning how to learn.

Our tutors are trained to resist passive learning on the part of tutees, and to involve students in the reassembly of the knowledge they have already gained in their classes and readings. Tutors learn to ask lots of questions to force students to recall, use, and process that prior knowledge. Questioning the students also breaks the familiar classroom pattern of passive listening, encourages them to engage in the subject matter, and helps them verbalize what and how they think. When students talk about what they know, what they're learning, and what they don't understand, they become the center of the learning process.

When I train new tutors, I show video clips from real one-on-one tutoring to demonstrate the difference between active and passive learning, then ask the new tutors to tell me what they observed about the positioning of the tutor and the tutee. Nearly everyone notices that the tutor in the video sits back, guiding and coaching the student along, while the tutee works through the homework set. I mention to them how much more effective and educational that is than the opposite approach — when the tutor furiously works away at the homework instead, while the tutee leans back and passively watches.

I recently discovered a telling statistic after surveying students who use our tutoring center: Sixty percent did not think that using the tutoring center helped them to develop thinking skills. Perhaps some of our tutors don't do a good enough job of the kind of Socratic method that I advocate. It may be that they, too, think tutoring is mostly about getting the answer rather than the process of understanding. But I also think that many of the tutees project that attitude when they walk in the door, and the tutors simply find it easier to give in rather than do the hard work of getting the students to engage their own critical-thinking skills.

Again I turn to Socrates to explain the ideal relationship between tutor and student. In Plato's dialogue *The Theaetetus,* Socrates says:

"I am so far like the midwife that I cannot myself give birth to wisdom, and the common reproach is true, that, though I question others, I can myself bring nothing to light because there is no wisdom in me. ... It is clear that they have never learned anything from me. The many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within. But the delivery is heaven's work and mine."

Tutors cannot learn for students just as midwives cannot give birth for their patients. Nor do they need to, in many cases: Socrates believed that most of his interlocutors already had knowledge within them, and if they were open to his probing, that knowledge would emerge. I suggest that we understand tutoring the same way.

I tell tutors, tutees, and faculty and staff members that using the tutoring center should not be a last resort. It should not be the place where people go to put Band-Aids on gaping wounds. Moreover, the tutoring center is not just for the down-and-out, struggling students. Even honors students can benefit from using the tutoring center by shoring up their knowledge and honing their study skills.

Likewise, I explain to new tutors that their job is not to teach. It's too much responsibility for them to teach college-level material; they are not expected to be experts and professionals. Rather, their job is being a Socratic coach. Such tutoring, if done well, augments classroom instruction.

What I try to do with the tutoring center is carve out space that allows for a deeper, more substantial approach to education to take place. In doing so, I hope to change bad habits and attitudes so that students can consciously and reflectively engage their own educational experience.

I believe that Socrates' method — while painful for tutors and students alike — is the better way. It creates a community of learners and encourages them to engage in dialogue with one another.

John P. Cleveland is an adjunct instructor of philosophy and religious studies and director of the tutoring center at the Center for Academic Excellence at Pace University's New York City campus.