

Tips for starting and facilitating a Socrates Café!

by Christopher Phillips and Cecilia Chapa Phillips, from www.philosopher.org

1. How to Get Started?

How do I find the right place to host a Socrates Café? Libraries, community centers, bookstores, and coffee shops are among the many great places to host a Socrates Café. Independent coffee shops, which are especially dedicated to reaching out to the community, are usually very receptive to the idea. Present the Socrates Café concept to the owner or person responsible for the venue. Feel free to download articles from the Society for Philosophical Inquiry website that you can use when making your pitch for holding the Socrates Café event. Ask if the place could accommodate the group during their slowest day and time so that you won't interrupt normal business activity. Weekday evenings (except Fridays) are usually good times to host the event. In addition to venues for the public, please also consider starting a group for people who are at society's margins: for example, people in prison, in nursing homes, in at-risk schools, in mental health facilities, in homeless shelters, in transitional housing shelters, and people who are recent immigrants to the United States.

If you're starting a Socrates Café or Philosophers' Club, or another dialogue group that goes by a different name, but that largely shares our goals, please tell us about it. For those starting an ongoing group, please remember that participants propose and choose the questions, and please strive to have many different facilitators.

Please note that Socrates Café and Philosophers' Club are our registered trademarks, and we do of course reserve the right to deny use of our trademarked names. The trademarks help ensure that the names are used by volunteers for live face-to-face gatherings undertaken with the specific nonprofit, community-creating purposes for which they are intended. They also help ensure that these groups specifically use the version/method/ethos of inquiry that we've spelled out on our website -- the aim with this inquiry is to create a more vibrant and participatory democracy and empathetic society.

We particularly ask that facilitators and coordinators steer clear of using this venue to promote for-profit endeavors or for any other sorts of endeavors or agendas other than those clearly spelled out by our nonprofit. Please never affiliate with us if your aim is for-profit, or if you do not share our nonprofit's goals, and/or you aspire to promote coaching or counseling or guidance services, which is anathema to our mission. And we ask that you model for other participants a keen respectfulness for and sensitivity towards the views and feelings of others. Facilitators: Please be sure to read carefully the guidelines below. And please, if possible: Join our nonprofit group. It enables us to carry on programs with those who live on society's margins, and who rarely have a chance to weigh in on matters that are of importance to all of us who want to live in a stronger democracy. Help us "dialogue for democracy," by joining SPI.

2. How to Facilitate a Socrates Café

Now that you've found a coffeehouse or bookstore or other suitable venue to hold a Socrates Café on a regular basis -- and most importantly, now that you've made a long-term commitment to doing this, whether one person attends or a hundred -- one burning question you likely have is: How do I facilitate a Socrates Café?

What kind of question is appropriate? In a Socrates Café, just about any question can be grist for a meaningful dialogue. Or at least, virtually any question can be fine-tuned so it can be looked at in a philosophical way.

Example 1: When Timothy McVeigh was put to death, a person who wanted to discuss why this happened framed the question in a way in which the group could look not only at this particular issue, but a wide range of other issues of philosophic importance that were related. The question became: "Who owns human life?"

Example 2: Soon after we went to war in Iraq, people wanted to talk about whether this was the appropriate course of action. To do so in a philosophical way, to look at it in both abstract and concrete ways in which this particular war could also be juxtaposed with wars throughout human history, they framed the question this way: "What is a just war?"

Example 3: A group of Socrates Café-goers wanted to examine the so-called "gay marriage issue" in a philosophical way, in a way that wouldn't just lead to a knockdown drag-out debate of non-redemptive putting people down and showing them up, but a way that could really examine the issue thoughtfully, and also in a way in which gay marriage was looked at in the broader context of the institution of marriage as a whole, the question was framed this way: "What is an excellent marriage?"

How do we decide on a question for discussion? How do we decide on a question for discussion? Ask the participants for questions. Encourage them to propose for Socratic discourse any question that is on their minds. Their questions don't at all have to be traditional ones. Read all the questions aloud to the participants, and then have two votes: The first time around, ask them to vote on any of the questions listed -- meaning they can vote more than once. But ask them to vote only for those questions that leave them feeling the least expert and the most curious and perplexed -- because we've found again and again that those questions that leave you feeling that the ground is shaking a little bit under your feet are those that are most worth interrogating Socratically (whereas, if you vote for a question in which you already think you know "the answer," it will be a very empty exercise). Then, vote a second time, on those two or three questions that were the top vote-getters during the first round. This time, the participants can only vote once (the facilitator does not vote -- if there's a tie, flip a coin to decide the winning question). Choose that question which gets the most votes.

How do I launch a discussion on the chosen question? At the outset, let a few of the participants respond to the question in any way they please. But just when they think it's safe to assume that this is going to be a free-for-all confab without any underlying method--start probing the question

in a Socratic way. That is, examine it for: 1) built-in assumptions, 2) embedded concepts, 3) differences of kind and degree, and logical consistencies and inconsistencies. Then try to seek out compelling objections and alternative viewpoints.

How do I find the question's built-in assumptions? For example, when a participant asks an apparently deep question like "How can we overcome alienation?" you need to challenge the premise of the question at the outset. You may ask: Is alienation something we always want to overcome? Shakespeare and Goethe may have written their timeless works because they embraced a sense of alienation rather than attempting to escape it.

Where are the concepts embedded in this question? To probe the question of overcoming alienation, you first need to ask and answer such questions as: What is alienation? What does it mean to overcome alienation? Why would we ever want to overcome alienation? By separating out the concepts and exploring them individually, everyone will get to see the question from a new perspective.

What are examples of exploring "differences of kind and degree"? In response to the alienation question, you might ask: Are there some types of alienation that you want to overcome and other types that you do not at all want to overcome but rather want to incorporate into yourself? What are some of the many different types of alienation? How do they differ? But also, what are the aspects that link them? Is it possible to be completely alienated?

How do I know there will be alternative views? You may think you already can predict the responses. But you and everyone else probably will be surprised by just how diverse and eye-opening they will be. In exploring the meaning of the terms they use, participants will reveal and articulate philosophies of basic concepts they might take for granted. This is what makes for a spontaneous and thrilling discussion.

How do I deal with people who monopolize the conversation or who do not show respect for other participants? Since Socrates Cafés are typically held in public places, anybody is welcome to participate. It is very important to create an environment in which all participants feel comfortable to participate and listen. If one of the participants seems to dominate the discussion and often interrupts others, the facilitator needs to be assertive and make sure that others have their say as well. If necessary, you may want to talk in private with the person and point out gently that he or she needs to be more considerate of others who also want to have their say. You should explain that quiet or shy people may feel intimidated if they are interrupted by more aggressive personalities and that you want to create and maintain a safe, caring, and supportive environment for all the participants. Once in a blue moon, a person simply will not abide by the parameters of discourse, and will persist in dominating and monopolizing and hectoring, despite your heartfelt attempts to explain the ethos of Socrates Café. In such an instance, you regrettably may have to ask him/her to leave, lest he/she lead to the dissolution of the entire group because of inappropriate behavior (if this does come to pass, be sure to encourage the person to start a discussion group that is more to his/her liking and that mirrors his/her preference for verbal combat rather than empathetic philosophizing).

How can I encourage people to speak? A good facilitator can create a healthy environment for exchange by setting an example for others. First and foremost, a good facilitator must be a very engaged listener. You need to be actively listening to what each participant is saying at the time; do not project how you are going to respond or what you will ask next. Also, make sure that all the people who want to participate have a chance to do so; look for body language or hand signals from people who want to speak. They may make a gesture to indicate that they have something to say, and after a while they may stop doing it because some time has passed or what they intended to say does not seem relevant anymore. If this happens, you can still give them a chance to voice their ideas by asking them what they think about what was just discussed.

Is it okay to have only one facilitator? In the beginning, you may be the only facilitator, because you took the initiative to organize the group, and because others simply don't want to try their hand at it. However, over time, you should look for other participants, especially those who are particularly careful and thoughtful listeners and questioners (it doesn't matter in the least whether they have a background in philosophy or not), who would like to try their hand at facilitating and who clearly grasp the nature of this type of inquiry. Socrates Café is meant to be a refreshing alternative, where an egalitarian spirit allows many voices. So the more facilitators, the merrier. Every facilitator will bring a different style, which will enrich the dialogues and help ensure the group's long-term viability.

Do facilitators have to be neutral or can they express their perspectives too? Like everyone in the group, the facilitator of a Socrates Café is striving to become a better questioner. As a facilitator, you will see that it is very difficult to be neutral. The kinds of questions you ask in the course of a dialogue are themselves a reflection of your personal curiosity. However, you should strive to some degree to be more neutral than the rest. You are not a teacher, and your purpose is not to lead the group to a certain answer or truth. If you monopolize the discussion, others might feel intimidated or turned off. Your role as facilitator is to help and inspire others articulate their unique perspectives.

In the Beginning

At the outset of each and every Socrates Café -- and regularly throughout the course of the dialogue, particularly if/when people start getting confrontational and lose track of what this is all about -- you should stress to participants that this is meant to be a thoughtful and reflective philosophical sharing. For this to take place, each participant must need and want to cultivate his/her capacity to become a more careful listener -- indeed, the ability to listen with all one's being to what other participants are sharing is the most important quality a Socrates Café-goer can have. Socrates Café is meant to provide a refreshing and exhilarating alternative to the way many groups engage with one another -- it is meant to be the exact opposite of the mindless types of debates and diatribes and polemics and which he/she who speaks the loudest and interrupts the most and browbeats the best and engages in the most frequent non-redemptive oneupsmanship "wins," whatever that could mean. Socrates Café is meant to cultivate new habits of discourse in which the primary purpose is to inspire each person within the community of inquiry further to cultivate and discover his/her unique point of view, nothing more and certainly nothing less.

3. Facilitator and Participant Dos and Don'ts

Do be an active and engaged listener. Respecting the ideas of each participant is a key element of a successful Socrates Café. Be open to what people have to say even if you disagree. The facilitator needs to let the group know that putting down others is absolutely taboo at a Socrates Café.

Do encourage participants to offer specific examples that back up what they take to be a universally accepted view. The facilitator should try to get them to support their perspectives with cogent, well-constructed, reasoned views.

Do question the perspectives offered by others and try to examine any perceived logical inconsistencies. The collective goal is for all participants, not just the facilitator, to become a more expert questioner.

Don't allow the dialogue to become a one-on-one back-and-forth between facilitator and participant (or between one participant and another). Remember: this is a community of philosophical inquirers. So a good facilitator should involve everyone else at every turn.

Do make sure everyone has a chance to speak. Invite but do not pressure quieter participants to contribute to the dialogue.

Do be receptive to unexpected and unfamiliar responses. Facilitators should avoid steering the dialogue in a preconceived direction, as if they know better than others what the answers, or questions, should be. Facilitators are there as fellow inquirers, nothing more or less, but you do have a special role, which is to inspire each person further to articulate and discover her perspective than she would normally have the time or take the time to do. This means you must reject the teacher and guru model, at least for this setting, and instead be an incredibly careful listener who is there to ask those questions that will further inspire participants to reveal their unique worldview.

Don't browbeat a participant or put him on the spot in a way that makes him uncomfortable. You should nudge participants into articulating their perspectives as clearly as possible, but if someone doesn't have a response to your further prodding, move on to other participants.

Don't strive for consensus. In the version of Socratic inquiry practiced at Socrates Café, it doesn't matter if everyone begins and ends a dialogue with disparate perspectives. There's never any need to try to force any sort of agreement.

Do remember the Socrates Café is just one version of philosophical discourse, and it might not work for everybody. For those who don't seem satisfied with Socrates Café style of discussion, encourage them to form their own groups so they can promote their own kinds of philosophical inquiry.

Don't try to bring the discussion to any sort of artificial closure. Most Socrates Café dialogues last about two hours. (If held at a coffeehouse or any venue that sells food and drinks, it is of

immense benefit to the owner if you take a ten-minute "pause for the cause" after an hour or so of discourse.) A Socrates Café is considered a success when participants leave a discussion with many more questions than they had at the beginning.

Do NOT ever worry about "attendance figures", or judge a gathering's success, by how many people show up. Whether one person shows up, or a hundred, the only measure of success should be whether there's a thoughtful exchange between participants. Too many Americans obsess about numbers. It's amazing how many people who have said they're committed to starting a dialogue group quit after just one attempt, when they find that at least 20 or 30 people haven't shown up from the get-go. This is a very sad statement about their genuine commitment to fomenting thoughtful discourse and deliberative democracy, but also betrays a mindless and counter-productive obsession with numbers. There were many weeks when SPI's founders were getting started when one, two, five -- and even zero a couple of times -- others showed up. They were all great gatherings (even when zero show, you can have a nice little dialogue with yourself!). What matters is commitment. If you keep showing up on a regular basis, at the same time and the same place, people will start to come, slowly but surely. Eventually, your gathering is likely to become a community mainstay. And you'll also have set an example for others of commitment and dedication over the long haul, in a time and clime when most think the only virtue is instant success and gratification (though just the opposite is true -- gratification should come from hanging in there over the long haul, and seeing your dreams becoming realized via dedication and perseverance in spite of obstacles).

Don't ever use readings or any other directive ploys to start a group discussion. This is not supposed to be a didactic directed group process. One of the ways we steer away from the traditional "philosophy club" model is that there is no teacher or guide or guru to lead the discussion, but rather a facilitator who simply makes sure that the group as a whole picks a question among those proposed by the group and then makes sure that the dialogue is well-distributed among participants, so that everyone who cares to can take part. A directed or suggested reading beforehand is much too controlling, and too much like other types of groups that are claiming to bring philosophy out of the classroom, but end up bringing the classroom model along with them. While AFTER the dialogue, it is quite appropriate for anyone who took part to suggest to others that there's certain books they may want to take a look at that relate to the topic discussed, so participants can get a more keen sense that they are part of a wonderful questioning tradition that includes great thinkers across the ages and disciplines, this should never be done as a way to jump-start the dialogue itself. A Socrates Café is meant to bring together as broad a cross-section of people as possible -- emphatically including people who possibly can't read, but who surely have very rich experiences to share in the course of a dialogue -- so directed readings would only be exclusive and elitist and rather snooty, and so anathema to the ends of a Socrates Café discourse.

Can I use the name "Socrates Café" even though it is trademarked?

Socrates Café is trademarked to assure that people who are using the name and concept stay true to the Socratic method and to the specific volunteer and nonprofit, community-creating ethos set

forth by the nonprofit Society for Philosophical Inquiry. As long as you do so you, you are welcome to use the name and concept, but please do not forget to notify us about your Socrates Café [or Philosophers' Club] group. If you choose to use the name and concept, we ask you NOT to use it to promote other personal or business-related interests or to recruit or attract clients for your or anyone else's business -- e.g., consulting, counseling, coaching, etc. [We of course reserve the right to request anyone to discontinue use of the Socrates Café and Philosophers' Club names, or to prohibit its use from the outset, if it is deemed that they are is not being used, or will not be used, for the appropriate purposes.] We are a non-profit organization that wishes to stay true to the values that Socrates himself lived by. He never charged other people and he did not promise to "lead" people to a specific truth; rather, he inspired people to discover and articulate their own unique truths by their own lights. We ask you to do the same: stay true to this ideal and do not promote yourself as a consultant or guide or otherwise. These gatherings are meant to be a safe haven from such self-aggrandizing promotions.

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