

Finding Research Questions Using a Socratic Dialogue

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Abstract

It is not easy to formulate a suitable research question. Some research is too simple and other is too complex. The Socratic Dialogue may be used as a technique for facilitating conversation and reflection as a means of developing suitable research questions. The essence of this approach is that the discussants share experiences and in so doing they not only learn from each other but also identify interesting areas for research. The technique is affected through a structured conversation or discourse which is used to explore an agreed issue. The Socratic Dialogue 'conversation' consists of three steps or stages and is suitable for six to eight participants who may be colleagues or knowledge informants. It also requires a competent facilitator who can guide the group through its conversation and reflection. Socratic Dialogues will not always lead to a consensus but even when it doesn't it can be useful to researchers seeking useful research questions.

Keywords

Socratic dialogue, discourse, learning, discovery, reflection, research questions, dialectic, conversation, experiences

Finding a Research Topic

Traditionally academic researchers were required to find their research questions in the literature. In keeping with the fact that academic research is required to build on what has already been studied and what is already

known, it was said that the research question should arise as a result of previous research. This was certainly the case until the relevance of academic research began to be seriously questioned (Starkey and Madan2001), by both academe itself and by professionals who look to academics for new ideas and concepts. Grey (2001) pointed out that the academic practice of the late twentieth was not in keeping with the original values of academe which were to educate professionals. As a result of this questioning there is a new approach to finding research questions which includes finding appropriate questions in organisations.

This is, of course, especially useful to part-time students who are undertaking masters and doctorate degrees and therefore have access. But research questions do not often present themselves in a clearly articulated form. Sometimes they have to be teased out of complex situation.

In fact in business and management studies research questions often arise as a result of conversations. Issues are mentioned in conversations or discussions which have research potential but which are not yet explored or focused in order to fully understand what is involved in researching them. A technique which may be used to encourage in-depth conversation and which also promotes reflection on the ideas which are thrown up in these conversations is the Socratic Dialogue (Saran and Neisser 2004).

Developing a research question is a very personal matter and mechanistic approaches will not often facilitate useful questions and thus the Socratic Dialogue alone would not be an ideal approach to settling on a research question. However if it is used correctly it can point the way to topics and issues which may then lead to research questions.

Finding a suitable research question is a non-trivial part of any research project or research degree. The difficulty arises because the research question needs to have a number of characteristics which are sometimes hard to fulfil. It is important that a research question has most if not all of the following attributes. The research question needs to be¹:-

1. of direct interest to the researcher and to his/her supervisor;

¹ Some of these attributes of a research question are interdependent and the list should not be considered to be in order of importance.

2. based on a real problem recognised by the academic community or practitioners in the field, and preferably both;
3. associated with one or two established fields of academic study, and preferably not more than two;
4. referred to directly or indirectly in the academic literature;
5. answerable by academic research practice;
6. if empirical then appropriate evidence is, or will become, available;
7. neither too wide ranging or so complex that it is unreasonable to expect it to be answered within the usual time allowed for a research degree;
8. reducible to sub-questions which may be answered directly by the collection of evidence;
9. Capable of being expressed in a clear and unambiguous manner.

Because of the difficulty in finding a suitable research question, research degrees are sometimes started without having established a clear question in the hope that one may arise as a result of exploratory research during the first few years of the degree. However it is not unusual for research degree candidates to be still struggling for a suitable research question some years after the research degree has been formally commenced².

The Question of the Question

As mentioned advice offered to those commencing a research degree has traditionally been that a research question needs to be found through a thorough investigation and understanding of the academic literature. This

² Research degree practice in the United Kingdom today normally required a research degree candidate to have submitted a research proposal which should include a fully developed research question. However, even where this is strictly adhered to, research degree candidates can change their minds and find themselves without a research question well into their degree registration.

meant that a research question would be discovered with the aid of some previous researcher identifying a problem and pointing out its potential for future research either in a published paper or perhaps in the final chapter of a research dissertation for a masters or doctoral degree. A strict implementation of this approach meant that real problems experienced by practitioners, unless they were also referred to in the literature, were not eligible to be considered, in their own right, as a suitable research degree subject.

It is now thought that this approach is too restrictive. Insisting that the research question originated in the academic literature, assisted in establishing and maintaining rigorous research standards, but at the same time it also lead to research questions being less relevant than they could or indeed should have been. It has now been established in the business and management field of study that a research question may be found by reference to current business situations – problems, challenges or opportunities. This does not, of course, release the research degree candidate from knowing the literature, but it does give the individual a different starting point. The problem which is now faced is that current business problems, challenges or opportunities are often not understood or expressed in such a way that they can be easily reduced to useable academic research questions. Sometimes what management suggests as a problem is actually not the case³. Sometimes managers are not especially articulate about their problems and challenges. Sometimes the expression of the issues is too vague or high level to be used as a research question. In these circumstances the research question has to be teased out so that the issues are clear and the question complies with all or most of the question characteristics described above. Teasing out questions usually means discussing the issues with several people and trying to find some degree of consensus. The Socratic Dialogue is a technique for facilitating this as an appropriately structured conversation and subsequent reflection can assist in highlighting the real research issues.

³ It has sometimes been said that management is not really the art of solving problems but rather the art of finding out exactly what the problem is.

What is this Socratic Dialogue?

The Socratic Dialogue is so called because it is based on a question and answer process which is not entirely dissimilar to that described by Plato as the *dialectic* and who attributed the development of that technique to Socrates. The traditional dialectic was originally conceived as a conversation between two people. Socrates, when he visited the marketplace in Athens, is reputed to have engaged individuals in controversial conversation and argued with them one at a time. He is said to have been a past master at this and was always able to point out the weaknesses and the fallacies in other people's arguments⁴. Socrates normally achieved this by pointing to experiences which he and his victim could agree supported Socrates argument.

In the 21st century this one-to-one approach would take too long to have any real impact even among relatively small groups of academics and their informants. In any event, it is now felt that perhaps more depth as well as breadth can be achieved when a group of individuals are involved in these dialogues as this offers a wider range of different insights. The original Socratic model relied on one 'master' who dialogued with the learners. The new approach allows multiple individuals to benefit from multiple experiences. There is quite intentionally no 'master'. Everyone's experience is equally valid and the facilitator plays a background role. The Socratic Dialogue is specifically not a debate – it an exchange and exploration of experiences. Although insights will come from participants hearing they speak as well as engaging in discussion, most of the benefit comes from active listening. What is said by the participants of the Socratic Dialogue is of course key to its success and here the facilitator needs to be careful that only experiences of the participants are discussed. Thus to be a member of a Socratic Dialogue and to get full benefit from it, an

⁴ As Socrates did not write an account of this himself we only have Plato's account of what actually took place.

individual needs to be enthusiastic about sharing experiences and hearing the thoughts of others⁵.

It is also the case that all the individuals who participate in the Socratic Dialogue may benefit from the conversation and reflection. It is not simply a tool which will benefit the researcher alone.

The Socratic Dialogue Applied to Research Questions

The first step in the Socratic Dialogue involves bringing a group of appropriate people together, say, six to eight, to closely examine an opening question⁶. Ideally the question should be made known to the individuals in advance and they all need to be familiar with the issues involved and be prepared to share their experiences with each other. The questions which are amenable to this are wide ranging and many. A few examples of such questions are:-

1. What is the nature of effective knowledge management?
2. How could the real benefits of intellectual capital be harvested?
3. What is the nature of good leadership?
4. How are we to improve our understanding of our client base?
5. What would help us achieve a greater commitment from our colleagues to our corporate strategy?
6. In what way could we obtain a greater delivery of benefits from our information systems?
7. What are the most critical human resource challenges which we currently face?

These examples of an opening question are, in academic research parlance, possible research topics that can be explored with a view to helping in the establishment of a research question.

⁵ See <http://www.philodialogue.com/Authenticity.htm> viewed 25 March 2006

It is important to focus on the fact that the conversation generated during the Socratic Dialogue is required to be entirely experientially based. This means that participants are not allowed to discuss the question in terms of anything other than their own personal experiences with the issues involved. Mentioning theoretical views on the subject is generally not allowed.

Discovery as a Way to Knowledge

At the heart of the Socratic Dialogue is the notion of learning through discovery. This discovery operates by creating an opportunity for debate and reflection in a non-threatening conversational setting. This objective enhances understanding by discussing the *actual experiences* of the group. The group needs to be open, non-adversarial and needs to treat all opinions as equally valid and important. Ideally the group should be relatively small. Members of the group may come from diverse backgrounds but care has to be taken with individuals from different status levels.

In addition to examining research topics and research questions the Socratic Dialogue is generally used to:-

1. encourage participants to think independently and critically, and to then reflect on that thinking;
2. build self-confidence in individuals own thinking;
3. answer a philosophically oriented question and to endeavour to reach consensus,- i.e. to reach an outcome;
4. engage in the co-operative activity of seeking answers to questions and to understand each other through the exploration of concrete experiences;
5. Deepen individual insights and understandings.

Ideally the Socratic Dialogue leads to a consensus among the individuals. But participants may not always reach a definitive outcome in the form of totally agreed research question or even a set of possible research questions. This should not necessarily be seen as a failure, as the Socratic Dialogue experience itself promotes reflective learning which is useful in the research process.

The Process of a Socratic Dialogue⁷

The process of a Socratic Dialogue requires the use of a set of guidelines or rules which, although not inflexible, need to be kept consciously in the mind of the facilitator.

At the outset it needs to be said that no philosophical training⁸ is needed to be part of a Socratic Dialogue. Openness and an interest in learning from others are perhaps the only qualifications required to derive benefit from a Socratic Dialogue. A firm but sensitive facilitator is required who can ensure that the group does not stray too far off the subject and that no one person dominates the discourse.

Before the group assembles an appropriate question needs to be established. This question needs to be well-formulated and general in nature. As it is effectively a research topic it should not be a long and complex question. Each member of the group needs to be made aware of the question in advance and be asked to reflect on their experience regarding the issue in the question. The only qualification for being a participant in a group is that the individual has some direct experience of the subject matter being discussed.

Discourse in Five Parts

There are five parts to a Socratic Dialogue. These are:-

1. The telling of the original stories;

⁷ A Socratic Dialogue is not to be confused with the Socratic Dialogues (Greek Σωκρατικός λόγος or Σωκρατικός διάλογος), which are prose literary works developed in Greece at the turn of the fourth century BCE, preserved today in the dialogues of Plato and the Socratic works of Xenophon - either dramatic or narrative - in which characters discuss moral and philosophical problems, illustrating the Socratic method. Socrates is often the main character. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_Dialogue viewed 25 March 2006.

⁸ See website http://www.sfcg.org.uk/socratic_dialogue.htm viewed 25 March 2006

2. The choosing of one story to explore in detail;
3. The retelling of the story and the detailed conversation and reflection;
4. The compiling of what has been understood and learnt from this detail;
5. The confirmation of how these understandings relate to all the original stories.

When the group assembles each participant is asked to recall a real life experience which is directly related to the question or topic. Each story should be told in no more than three minutes and the facilitator should keep the speakers to the time limit. A list of titles or key words for these different stories should be compiled by the facilitator as they are being told.

When all the stories have been told the group itself chooses one of these stories/experiences to examine in detail. Specifically the facilitator should not influence the choice of the story. It may take a while for consensus to be reached as to which experience is the most relevant or the most effective to closely examination. The member of the group who has provided this story, and who is referred to as the example giver, needs to be prepared to recount the story in as much detail as he or she can recall, and also be prepared to be questioned about this experience by the other members of the group.

The story is now retold by the example giver in five to ten minutes. This provides a broader and a more in-depth perspective of the experience being discussed.

Members of the group are encouraged to ask questions which come into their mind without too much analytical thought. These questions may seek background information or details of the actions, attitudes and values of the individuals involved in the example. This part of the Socratic Dialogue may take between one or two hours.

The retelling of the story of the real life experience needs to be transcribed, at least in summary, as do all significant comments made by the other members of the group. The discourse between the members of the group needs to unfold slowly and carefully with as much consensus in

understanding as possible being established on a step by step basis. Here any conflicts (differences of opinion or differences in usage of language) should be resolved if possible and a genuine attempt be made to formulate shared insights and knowledge. This will become the overview of the discourse or dialogue and is used to summarise the key issues raised during the dialogue. This activity will need about half an hour. Each member of the group is now asked if their individual story relates to the summary created. The extent to which the summary reflects the essence of each story is discussed and the summary changed if this discussion reveals new dimensions of the story. This process may require up to half an hour.

Drawing out Research Questions

Once the overview has been established then the discussion needs to turn to the issue of research questions. The overview as a statement based on a summary of individual experiences will inevitably contain issues which could be further explored. Identifying these issues will produce a list of possible research questions. As mentioned above the Socratic Dialogue cannot be relied on to produce research questions in any mechanistic way. What it does is produce a collective understanding of a topic which will usually lend itself to further exploration and thus to research questions.

Making the Socratic Dialogue Work

The Socratic Dialogue is actually an exercise in learning through exchanging experiential knowledge that leads to new insights or discoveries by reflection. The group members need to be honest in the recounting of their experiences and to be honest in describing their personal reactions to the experiences of other members. The Socratic Dialogue should be as judgement free as possible. Any suggestion that a member of the group is being judged by the other or by the facilitator will reduce the value of the event. Members' thoughts need to be expressed as clearly and simply as possible. If something is not clear then it should be discussed until everyone understands the point being made. This requires at all times careful attention to the discussion. If members of the dialogue become tired then they should advise the

facilitator who may call for a break for refreshments. There should in fact be a number of refreshment breaks as in general running a Socratic Dialogue for more than an hour and a half without a break is not advised.

It is important that no one individual or group of individuals dominate the Socratic Dialogue. If this occurs then any member of the dialogue may ask the facilitator for a break for the purposes of having a meta-discussion. A meta-discussion involves talking about how the Socratic Dialogue is proceeding. Normally there is little need to have these meta-discussions. When they do arise they should be concluded as quickly as possible so that the group may return to the main purpose of the event. If any member of the dialogue feels that the discussion is drifting way from its original purpose then he or she may also call for a strategy-discussion. Strategy discussions are used to refocus the dialogue if it has wandered away from the original point.

The Facilitator and the Socratic Dialogue

A skilled facilitator greatly enhances the Socratic Dialogue. The function of the facilitator is to ensure the smooth running of the meeting and to bring all the members of the group into the discussion.

The facilitator will normally keep the record of the different experiences and will also act as scribe for the overview of the detailed study on the chosen experience. It is important that the facilitator does not attempt to influence the direction of the discourse. The discussion may stray off the subject and provided these lapses are not for long or too far from the question they may be tolerated. However in the end the facilitator should bring the discussion back to the issue for which the Socratic Dialogue was initiated.

Timing and the Socratic Dialogue

A Socratic Dialogue may be structured in several different ways. Firstly a Socratic Dialogue may be run as one continuous event. Of course this does not imply that there are no refreshment breaks. In such a case using a large group, say ten people, then a whole day of eight hours would be

required to complete an event. Some events may require a little longer, perhaps twelve hours. Smaller groups may require less time say three or four hours. In some circumstances it may not be possible for individuals to make such a long period of time available. In these cases the Socratic Dialogue may be conducted in a number of parts or a number of sessions. The first session might run until the group has listed its experiences and perhaps chosen the one which they wish to study in detail. Then two or three sessions of one hour each could be put aside to elaborating on the one chosen example. In this way the Socratic Dialogue experience could be obtained over an extended period.

Some Final Points

The Socratic Dialogue facilitates learning through discovery by reflecting on actual experiences. Therefore the conversation needs to be based on real experiences, which means avoiding what Shakespeare referred to in Othello as, "*Mere prattle without practice*"⁹. These experiences need to be discussed actively by all the members of the group who need to say what they really think and in an ideal situation the discussion needs to proceed until a high degree of understanding and consensus is reached. Thus in a Socratic Dialogue there is a need to start with the concrete experience and remain in contact with this experience throughout the entire event. Proper insight is gained only when the link between any statement made and personal experience is explicit¹⁰. This means that a Socratic Dialogue is a process which concerns the whole person. The members of the Socratic Dialogue should attempt a full understanding of each other. This involves much more than a simple verbal agreement. Participants should try to be clear about the meaning of what has just been said by testing it against their own experiences. In ideal circumstances the limitations of individual personal experience which stand in the way of a clear understanding should be made conscious and thereby it is hoped that this limitation will be transcended.

⁹ Othello Act 1, Scene 1 line 26.

¹⁰ See http://www.sfcp.org.uk/socratic_dialogue.htm viewed 25 March 2006.

Beware of being distracted by less important questions. Following a subsidiary question until a satisfactory answer is found may be useful, but again it may not be. Groups often bring great commitment to their work and gain self-confidence in the power of their intellect or reason. This may mean not giving up when the work is difficult. Sometimes the discussion has to move on, but it may return to the problematic issue again. An honest examination of one's thoughts and the thoughts of others is essential. This honesty may help with the striving for consensus although consensus itself may not necessarily arise.

Summary and Conclusions

Finding useful research questions can be a major problem especially for many masters and doctoral students. They often struggle to find issues which have an appropriate research potential. It is surprising how often a considerable amount of time is wasted by research students in pursuing questions which will not enable them to deliver the understanding which they need to demonstrate to obtain their degrees.

Research question development is not a subject which is frequently addressed in research methods classes. The characteristics of good and poor research questions, as mentioned earlier in this paper are often discussed. But how to arrive at a question is a problem. It is not easy to "teach" techniques which can facilitate the development of research questions. The Socratic Dialogue is an approach which helps to surface issues which may otherwise be difficult to discern or access. If the discussion is correctly facilitated then it can stimulate shared self learning as well as lead to insights and understandings which often in turn offer a list of useful questions.

But it is worth pointing out that this type of shared learning will not suit all research topics or indeed all researchers. A Socratic Dialogue can take time – a considerable number of hours. Some researchers find listening to members of a group such as this tedious. Some of the members of the group can have relatively naïve views. There are also situations in which the Socratic Dialogue will be cumbersome – perhaps if there are too many views for the Socratic Dialogue to converge on an

agreed opinion. Without achieving a final consensus the Socratic Dialogue can still be valuable but not all the members may see this as being effective. However, most of the time the Socratic Dialogue will help tease out research questions from a research topic and will thus be of use to a researcher.

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