

## Questioning – Probing or Pimping?

The distinction between the genuine Socratic method and pimping is not always obvious, since the essential transaction of both is an exchange in which the teacher poses questions to learners. The differentiation between Socratic teaching and pimping lies in the intent of the questioner and the perception of the learner<sup>1</sup>.

If the educational environment is not conducive to learners recognizing Socratic teaching, then even a well-intentioned teacher’s probing questions may be received as pimping<sup>1</sup>. The most effective probing questions will occasionally exceed the bounds of learners’ knowledge, and may thus be perceived as pimping if psychological safety has not been established<sup>1</sup>.

Probing (Socratic Method)	Pimping
<p><b>Teacher</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questions are intended to stimulate new knowledge and inspire them towards critical analytical thinking</li> <li>• Challenges learners to advance themselves while still recognizing that, for students, “It’s okay to not know yet”</li> <li>• Learners are coached to follow a path of inquiry and lifelong learning, because they will soon become professionals themselves</li> </ul>	<p><b>Teacher</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher relies on fear and intimidation tactics</li> <li>• When a student does not know the answers to questions, yet the faculty member continues to pepper the student with questions</li> <li>• Questions are posed to reinforce the teacher’s position of power over them, and maintain hierarchies</li> <li>• Questions are intended to expose ignorance, humiliate, and disgrace</li> </ul>
<p><b>Learner</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students recognize questions asked are to probe their current understanding and guide them to expand their knowledge</li> <li>• Learners are able to focus on building schema for knowledge, skills, and attitudes</li> </ul>	<p><b>Learner</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are unaware of reasoning behind questioning</li> <li>• Students work to shield their worth</li> </ul>
<b>Psychologically safe learning environment</b>	<b>Psychologically unsafe learning environment</b>

### How to create psychological safety<sup>1,2</sup>?

- Teachers need to create an atmosphere of respect by explaining early on how they will probe, the reason for probing, and reminding students of what probing will sound like.
- Questions are asked at an appropriate level for the learners.
- When probing, teachers give sufficient time for answers by allowing silence or “wait time” after posing questions, during which learners have the opportunity to consider the question, reflect on their knowledge, or think aloud.
- Learners should be allowed to say “I don’t know” or ask for help from others.

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- Teachers and students use verbal and non-verbal communication in which learners are challenged and supported.
- The teacher does not overlook or ignore inadequate performance; however, corrections or reprimands are applied in a compassionate manner that clearly identifies the failings without causing humiliation or resentment (often done privately, not in class).
- Threats of humiliation and hostility are minimized so learners sense interpersonal trust, enjoy mutual respect, feel valued, and are comfortable being themselves.

### Why continue to probe if it might be mistaken for pimping?

The use of open-ended, probing questions by teachers in an environment of psychological safety leads learners to identify their own knowledge deficits and motivates them to expand their own knowledge<sup>1</sup>.

Teachers must uncover learners' existing knowledge and skills in order to pose questions or problems to them that are challenging but do not surpass their current developmental stage<sup>1</sup>. Once learners' existing knowledge has been ascertained, subsequent questions should then inspire them to expand on that knowledge to solve a problem or care for a patient<sup>1</sup>.

When correctly applied, the probing or prompting is very engaging and highly rewarding for teachers and learners; however, it is time- and effort-intensive, so its use should be judicious (used on most important concepts), and it must be executed correctly<sup>1</sup>. Proper execution of probing questions can occur only in an environment of psychological safety.

### References

1. Stoddard, H. A., & O'Dell, D. V. (2016). Would Socrates have actually used the "Socratic Method" for clinical teaching? *Journal of general internal medicine*, 31(9), 1092-1096.
2. Mavis, B., Sousa, A., Lipscomb, W., & Rappley, M. D. (2014). Learning about medical student mistreatment from responses to the medical school graduation questionnaire. *Academic Medicine*, 89(5), 705-711.