
AN INQUIRY INTO TEACHING IN THE *MENO*

David Diener
Indiana University

In Plato's *Meno* the overarching question is whether virtue can be taught, and as Socrates and Meno explore this subject they are led to question the nature of teaching and learning in general. The following is a textual analysis into what Socrates believes to constitute teaching in the *Meno*, with the nature of learning also being tangentially addressed given the integral link between the two. After briefly explaining Meno's paradox and Socrates' theory of recollection I will begin with an examination of what Socrates *says* teaching is, and this will be followed by an assessment of what he *demonstrates* it to be in the slave-boy episode. While at first glance the slave-boy episode seems to contradict what Socrates says elsewhere about teaching, I will argue that a careful reading of the text erases the apparent contradiction. Finally, I will show that the slave-boy episode demonstrates five key characteristics of a teacher which, when taken together, define what Socrates believes to constitute teaching.

The explicitly educational portion of the dialogue begins when Meno presents Socrates with a paradox: "How will you look for [virtue], Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?"¹ Dominic Scott correctly recognizes that Meno's series of questions actually contains two paradoxes. The first is a paradox of inquiry and asks how one can search for what one does not know. The second is a paradox of discovery and asks how one can know that one has discovered what was being sought if it was not previously known.² Taken together, these paradoxes form the basis of Meno's attempt to deny the possibility that learning can occur at all. Socrates responds to Meno by outlining his theory of learning as recollection and then using the slave-boy episode to demonstrate the truth of this theory.

Socrates argues that the soul is immortal and continually moves between our world and the underworld. When the soul enters our world we call it birth and when it leaves our world we call it death, but in reality the soul never perishes. Since it has over time seen all things, both in this world and the underworld, the soul knows everything□ there is nothing it has not learned. Thus what we generally call learning is nothing but the soul recollecting what it already knows (81a8□e3).

Meno responds by asking Socrates to teach him that this theory of recollection is true, and it is here that Socrates makes his first statement about what constitutes teaching. Socrates responds to Meno's request by saying, "You now ask me if I can teach you, when I say there is no teaching but

recollection, in order to show me up at once as contradicting myself” (81e6–82a2). What is important about this response is that Socrates accuses Meno of trying to trap him in the contradiction of teaching Meno that there is no teaching but recollection, but that is not what Meno asked him to do. Meno asked to be taught that “what we call *learning* is recollection,” not that there is no *teaching* but recollection. (81e4–5, emphasis added). Furthermore, in Socrates’ explanation to Meno of the theory of recollection, the word “teaching” is never used. Thus in order for Socrates to recognize a potential contradiction in what Meno asks him to do, it must be that he takes learning to be a necessary condition for teaching. That is, whenever teaching occurs, learning also necessarily occurs.

A second passage later in the dialogue demonstrates that Socrates not only takes teaching to imply learning but accepts the converse as well: whenever learning occurs, teaching also necessarily occurs. At 89d3–96c6 Socrates constructs an argument for why virtue cannot be taught, and he begins with the assertion that for something to be taught there must of necessity be both someone who teaches it and someone who learns it. Given these premises he then sets out to demonstrate that indeed there is no one who can teach virtue. The argument is completed at 96a–c where he argues that to be a teacher of something one must already have knowledge of that thing within oneself, or, in terms of the theory of recollection, have already recollected that knowledge (esp. 96a2–b5). Socrates concludes that by this definition there are no teachers of virtue. If there are no teachers, he reasons, there are no learners, and if there are neither teachers nor learners, then virtue cannot be taught (96c1–6). The important point for our present purpose is not Socrates’ conclusion that virtue cannot be taught but rather that his reasoning in this passage demonstrates his belief in a conditional relationship between learning and teaching. His statement that if there are no teachers then there are no learners is logically equivalent to the statement that if there are learners then there are teachers. Since the occurrence of learning implies by definition the existence of a learner, and since the existence of a teacher, insofar as “teacher” can be predicated of an individual, by definition implies the occurrence of teaching, it follows that the occurrence of learning implies the occurrence of teaching. This implication, along with its converse from the former passage, can simply be conjuncted to demonstrate that Socrates believes teaching and learning to be logically equivalent: when either one occurs the other necessarily occurs as well.

Toward the end of the dialogue Socrates once again makes this bi-conditional relationship clear as he reviews with Meno the line of reasoning they have employed. He reminds Meno that regarding goodness, “We thought it could be taught if it was knowledge...and that it was knowledge if it could be taught” (98d7–8). Given Socrates’ position that knowledge can only come about through recollection (what we call learning) and that such recollection

brings about knowledge, it follows that any occurrence of knowledge or learning always implies the other. Similarly, any occurrence of that-which-is-taught *de facto* implies the occurrence of teaching and vice versa. It therefore follows from the bi-conditional Socrates posits between knowledge and that-which-is-taught that neither learning nor teaching can occur independently of the other. This passage, then, like the other passages previously examined, conclusively demonstrates that Socrates believes teaching and learning to be always concurrent: when one occurs the other necessarily occurs.

So far it seems that Socrates has offered a consistent, though arguably not very informative, perspective of what constitutes teaching. He has postulated that what we call learning is really the recollection of knowledge we already possess, and he has repeatedly said that teaching is both a necessary and sufficient condition for this learning to occur. An examination of the slave-boy episode, however, complicates the issue, for it seems to show that what Socrates *says* teaching is and what he *demonstrates* it to be are not completely compatible. This episode begins when Meno asks Socrates to prove to him that what we call learning is really nothing but recollection of knowledge that the learner's soul already possesses. Socrates then turns to a slave-boy and works through a series of geometric problems with him in order to demonstrate that the boy already has geometric knowledge within him despite his lack of training in geometry. Throughout the episode Socrates repeatedly insists that he is not teaching the boy anything but is merely asking questions (82e3□4, 84c8□d1, and 85d3□4), and at the end of the exchange with the boy Socrates asks Meno: "Has he, in his answers, expressed any opinion that was not his own?" (85b8□c1). Meno's negative answer provides Socrates with ample grounds for explaining to him that the slave-boy demonstration has therefore been successful in proving that "learning" is merely recollection.

The problematic nature of this slave-boy episode should be immediately obvious given what we have already seen that Socrates says about the process of education. While elsewhere Socrates repeatedly argues that teaching and learning cannot occur independently of each other, he here attempts to demonstrate that the boy can learn geometry without being taught! This seemingly patent contradiction, however, can be quite easily avoided by the recognition of a simple distinction: With regard to the slave-boy episode Socrates uses "teaching" in a more restrictive sense than he does elsewhere. In other words, his denial that he is teaching the boy in the narrow sense does not contradict his repeated statements elsewhere that teaching in the broad sense and learning always occur together. The apparent contradiction can thus be reconciled by understanding that he uses the term "teaching" in two distinct ways, and once this ambiguity is recognized the contradiction vanishes.

A careful examination of the text will show that Socrates does indeed mean to make such a distinction. The original intention of the demonstration with the slave-boy was to show Meno that the boy could learn without being

taught. When the demonstration is done, however, the question Socrates asks Meno in order to conclusively demonstrate the success of this endeavor is whether or not the boy has ever expressed an opinion that was not his own (85b8–c1). The parallel between Socrates' goal and the question he asks to evaluate whether that goal has been realized demonstrates that in this episode Socrates is narrowly defining teaching simply as imposing upon another an opinion which is not his own. Indeed, if in the slave-boy episode Socrates means to define teaching in the broader sense, then by his own definitions of teaching and learning the episode can never prove his theory of recollection to be true. Rather it inevitably demonstrates his theory to be contradictory given his argument that learning can never occur if teaching does not also occur. Socrates explicitly recognizes that this contradiction exists if teaching is taken in the broad sense, however, when at 81e6–82a1 he accuses Meno of attempting to lure him into a contradiction by asking for a demonstration of his theory. Thus although Socrates denies teaching the boy by the narrow definition he uses in his question to Meno at the end of the slave-boy episode, given what he says elsewhere about the inseparability of teaching and learning he still believes that in a broader sense he is teaching the slave-boy.

Having addressed this apparent contradiction that arises in the slave-boy episode, we can now turn to the more intriguing question of whether or not, and if so how, Socrates teaches the boy through their interactions. In general there are two interpretations of whether Socrates succeeds or fails to not teach the boy in the narrow sense of teaching outlined above. The first position maintains that Socrates does teach and in fact imposes his own understanding of geometry upon the boy in a way that reduces the boy to an essentially passive receptacle. The second view, however, argues that Socrates' assessment that he does not teach the boy is correct in that he gently guides the boy in a way that allows the boy's learning process to be fundamentally autonomous.

The first view posits that far from encouraging autonomous learning, Socrates actually discourages the boy from independent thinking and encourages him to "follow slavishly wherever Socrates leads."³ Roslyn Weiss argues that Socrates "comes perilously close to actually telling the slave-boy what to think" and that it is undeniable that Socrates "feeds" the boy the answers he desires.⁴ F.J.E. Woodbridge goes as far as to say that the boy discovers that his opinion was corrected through being told that his opinion did not count,⁵ and Jerome Eckstein argues that it is "downright silly" to believe that the boy's responses are coming from within himself. Eckstein maintains that the slave-boy episode demonstrates the exact contrary of what Socrates wants to prove in that Socrates does in fact teach and the boy does not in fact learn. "If anything," he writes,

this is a demonstration of what Socrates here calls "teaching"; for Socrates is "telling" or "explaining" the answers...The impression is left that without prompting the slave-boy could not reconstruct

the argument, see any of its logical implications, cope with a slight variation of the problem, or apply the principle to a theoretical or practical situation. In short, he has not learned.⁶

Weiss succinctly summarizes this first position with her assessment that Socrates' denial that he teaches is completely fallacious: "All attempts by scholars to justify Socrates' denial that he teaches are doomed to failure... The fact is that Socrates teaches the slave-boy at every stage of the demonstration."⁷

The second view, on the other hand, gives more credibility to Socrates' claim that he does not teach the slave-boy, and it does so by analyzing the boy's learning process and the role that Socrates plays in it. "When Socrates says that he does not teach anyone anything," writes Alexander Nehamas, "he does not mean that he will not ask obvious/leading questions or make statements. What he does mean is that he will not ask anything of his interlocutor but that he assent only to what he thinks is true."⁸ Thus Socrates' questions, while they may be leading, do not negate his claim that the boy's answers come from within himself. While Eckstein maintains that in this episode the boy does not truly learn anything, John Thomas argues the opposite and outlines three stages of the boy's learning process: The first is the stage of false opinion. The boy answers Socrates based on what seems right to him, and Socrates shows the boy's responses to be false judgments. The second stage is that of *aporia*. The boy is shown that his initial opinions are false and thus recognizes his own ignorance. The third and final stage is that of true opinion. In this stage, which can only arise subsequent to the necessary stage of *aporia*, the boy rethinks his original answers and through a process of dialectic comes to learn what the correct answer should be. Thomas writes that

what is interesting about all this is that Socrates elicits knowledge *from* the boy rather than imparts knowledge *to* the boy. The boy's often plausible but wrong answers are his own. This discovery, though made with Socrates' assistance, engages the boy's own thought processes. What Socrates has done is to draw knowledge out of the boy, in the true etymological sense of "education."⁹

According to this second position, then, Socrates is correct in saying that he is not teaching the boy anything in the narrow sense.

These two views lucidly highlight the central problem of the slave-boy episode with regard to whether teaching and learning do in fact occur. The first view maintains that Socrates does teach in the narrow sense but does not in the broad sense, while the second view holds exactly the opposite: Socrates does teach in the broad sense but does not in the narrow sense. Both positions answer whether or not, and if so in what way, Socrates teaches, but both sets of conclusions ultimately rest on definitions of what constitutes teaching that lie outside of the text. The key textual question that must be asked to determine how teaching is presented in the *Meno*, however, is addressed only tangentially by scholars in both camps. This question is as follows: Given that Socrates

clearly thinks he is teaching the boy (in the broad sense), what does the slave-boy episode demonstrate that he believes to constitute teaching? In the following I will attempt to answer this question by outlining five key characteristics of what it means to be a teacher that Socrates demonstrates throughout the slave-boy episode.

The slave-boy episode first of all demonstrates that a teacher has knowledge that the learner does not. Socrates asserts the necessity of a teacher having knowledge at 96a3–b1 where he argues that everyone who is recognized as a teacher is recognized to have knowledge of the subject matter that they teach. This is also made clear in the slave-boy episode, where “it is Socrates who draws all the figures and, above all, the diagonals on which the solution of the problem entirely depends.”¹⁰ It is Socrates’ knowledge of geometry which allows him to lead the boy down the path of learning and out of a state of perplexity, and it is highly improbable that Socrates would have been able to guide the boy toward the discovery of the correct answer if he did not already know what that answer was. At the end of the episode he says to the boy regarding their geometric discovery that “clever men call this the diagonal,”¹¹ thereby explicitly demonstrating that indeed he did have some knowledge of the matter before the episode began. Thus although the process of learning is essentially one of finding knowledge within oneself, Socrates is able to facilitate the slave-boy’s “recollection” of geometric knowledge due to his own greater knowledge of geometry. Given this interpretation of the slave-boy episode and explicit statements made by Socrates elsewhere in the dialogue, we can therefore conclude that according to Socrates learning takes place only when the teacher has knowledge that the learner does not, or, as Socrates might put it, when the teacher has knowledge that the learner has not yet recollected.

The second characteristic of what it means to be a teacher that is demonstrated by the slave-boy episode is that a teacher shows the learner that the latter lacks knowledge of a given sort. At the beginning of the dialogue the boy is confident that he knows the correct answer, and Socrates asks him a series of questions which show his answer to be incorrect. The realization that his first answer is not satisfactory is followed by a second attempt, and when this is shown to also be unsatisfactory, the boy finally exclaims, “By Zeus, Socrates, I do not know” (84a2). It is only once the boy has reached this state of complete perplexity that Socrates begins to lead the boy through the exercise in such a way that he will arrive at the correct answer. At 84a2–c5 Socrates points out to Meno that the boy is better off after being shown that his initial answer was incorrect because now the boy realizes that he doesn’t know and will be more eager to find out. Before he was shown to be wrong he was not perplexed because he thought he knew the correct answer, and he thus did not have a longing to find it. Now, however, he realizes that he does not know the correct answer and hence desires to further investigate the matter so as to

obtain true knowledge. Part of a teacher’s job, therefore, is to bring the student to a state of *aporia*, or perplexity – to a dead end that shows the student that further inquiry is necessary. It is only when this occurs that the student will realize he lacks some sort of knowledge and will therefore be motivated to find it, for no one sets out to search for something that they believe they already possess.

The slave-boy episode thirdly demonstrates that a teacher helps the learner give birth to knowledge by asking questions which help the learner see the implications of his opinions and which assist the learner in developing new opinions if the formerly held opinions prove to be inadequate. Throughout the entire dialogue with the boy Socrates is continually asking the boy questions. At times these questions elicit correct answers, and at times incorrect ones. At no point, however, does Socrates simply give the boy the solution to the problem. Thus as Tony Jeffs writes,

For Socrates, education was not merely transferring knowledge from “teacher” to “pupil” – a curriculum transmitted, an outcome measured. Rather it was an adventure, an activity of the mind – a pursuit demanding reflection, analysis and investigation, a social activity undertaken by equals freely associating to engage in dialogue. Teaching was not therefore the bovine delivery of pre-packaged units but the fostering of a dialogical enquiry undertaken via questioning designed to help all “give birth” to their own ideas.¹²

Throughout the dialogue with the boy Socrates continually employs this method, asking questions to help the boy see the implications of his own opinions. Whenever the boy realizes that his opinion is inadequate, Socrates helps him form and test a new hypothesis by asking a new series of questions.

The fourth characteristic of what it means to be a teacher that is demonstrated by the slave-boy episode is that a teacher has succeeded in helping to bring about learning when the learner adopts an opinion that is not shown to be false upon scrutiny by further questions. In other words, the standard by which knowledge is judged is whether it can withstand a process of further evaluative questioning. Every time the boy offers an incorrect opinion, Socrates asks questions which cause the boy to realize the inadequacy of the implications of that opinion. The lesson ends, however, when the boy evaluates the final hypothesis and finds that it does in fact provide the desired conclusion. Because it is not shown to be false when subjected to further questioning, it can be accepted as true knowledge. According to Nehamas, it is precisely this procedure for evaluating knowledge that allows Socrates to reject Meno’s paradox. One can in fact know that one does not know by an inability to answer questions. On the other hand, the continued ability to answer questions demonstrates that knowledge has been achieved.¹³ Put in terms of Scott’s twofold division of the paradox,¹⁴ the paradox of inquiry is answered by the

fact that one can search for what one does not know by asking questions and evaluating the consistency of the results. Similarly, the paradox of discovery is answered by the fact that one can know that one has discovered what was being sought by verifying the discovery through continued questioning. As the slave-boy episode demonstrates, when a process of critical questioning does not show an opinion to be false, then the teacher and student have succeeded in bringing about knowledge.

Fifth and lastly, the slave-boy episode demonstrates that a teacher uses demonstration and asks the learner evaluative questions along the way to ensure that the learner is drawing accurate conclusions from the demonstration. This is immediately apparent with regard to Socrates' interaction with the boy. Socrates does not ask the boy abstract questions but bases them on a figure he has drawn which is then manipulated in various ways. Perhaps more interesting, however, is how Socrates teaches Meno through demonstration as well. The entire purpose of the slave-boy episode is to help Meno "recollect" something about the process of learning, namely that it is possible. Thus Socrates also functions as a teacher to Meno by means of his interaction with the slave-boy, and he demonstrates through his dialogue with the boy what he wants Meno to learn. At various points throughout the episode Socrates turns to Meno and asks him questions which are intended to guide him, based on the demonstration he is witnessing, to the conclusion that the slave-boy's understanding of the diagonal came about by recollecting what he already knew. Thus Socrates employs demonstration as an integral part of both the boy's and Meno's learning process, and he questions both in order to ensure that the purpose of the demonstration is being realized.¹⁵

These five characteristics of what it means to be a teacher are the core of what constitutes teaching in the *Meno*. Socrates wants both the boy and Meno to learn something, and given what he says throughout the dialogue it is clear that in order for learning to take place teaching must also occur. In the slave-boy episode these five characteristics are all manifested by Socrates, and it is by them that Socrates demonstrates what he believes to constitute teaching in the broader sense. Whether or not Socrates succumbs to engaging in the narrow sense of teaching can still be debated. Either way, however, it is clear that teaching in the narrow sense is presented as being completely antithetical to teaching as defined by these five characteristics and not part of what is necessary for learning to occur.

In conclusion, then, we find in the *Meno* a definition of what constitutes teaching that is neither explicit nor homogenous. At the very least it is clear from what Socrates says about teaching that he believes teaching to be both a necessary and sufficient condition for learning: when one occurs the other necessarily occurs. I have attempted to prove that what Socrates *says* does not in fact contradict what he *demonstrates* in the slave-boy episode, and I have further argued that in his dialogue with the boy Socrates demonstrates five key

characteristics of a teacher which, when taken together, define what he believes to constitute teaching. Both the efficacy of the pedagogical theory I have attributed to Socrates and the authenticity of the teaching and learning that take place in the slave-boy episode can and will be critiqued based on other theories of education. While such analyses are valid and useful, my purpose in this paper has been simply to offer a detailed textual examination of what Socrates himself believes to constitute teaching in the *Meno*. Regardless of our assessment of his position, Socrates' approach to teaching has had a profound influence on educational thought for over 2,400 years, and the pedagogical theory expounded in the *Meno* deserves careful consideration by all who are engaged in or study the art of teaching.

NOTES

1. Plato, *Meno*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1976), 80d4–7. This work will be cited parenthetically in the text for all subsequent references.
2. Dominic Scott, *Recollection and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 29.
3. See for contrast 87c2–5.
4. Roslyn Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave: Moral Inquiry in Plato's "Meno"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 97.
5. *Ibid.*
6. F.J.E. Woodbridge, "Education," in *Plato's "Meno": Text and Criticism*, ed. Alexander Sesonske and Noel Fleming (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1965), 47.
7. Jerome Eckstein, *The Platonic Method: An Interpretation of the Dramatic-Philosophic Aspects of the "Meno"* (New York: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1968), 37.
8. Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 97–98.
9. Alexander Nehamas, "Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher," in *Plato's "Meno" in Focus*, ed. Jane M. Day (New York: Routledge, 1994), 236.
10. John E. Thomas, *Musings on the "Meno"* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1980), 152–54 (emphasis in the original).
11. Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's "Meno"* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 103.
12. Tony Jeffs, "Quest for Knowledge Begins with a Recognition of Shared Ignorance," *Adults Learning* 14, no. 6 (2003): 28.
13. Nehamas, "Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher," 239.
14. Scott, *Recollection and Experience*.

15. See Harold Tarrant, *Recollecting Plato's "Meno"* (London: Duckworth, 2005), 50–52, for an analysis of the learning process Meno undergoes throughout Socrates' demonstration with the slave-boy.
