

Professional Expertise versus Socratic Ignorance

David Ellerman, World Bank*

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Two models of the relationship between the World Bank or any development agency and the client.

1. Professional Expert Social Engineer and client: Social intervention is conceptualized like an engineer building a bridge or a surgeon performing an operation on a patient. The medium receiving the expert activity is passive like the materials being turned into a bridge or the patient being operated upon. Participation by the clients in a social intervention is like the patient trying to perform part of the operation. One is reminded of the recent subway billboards that compared "Doing you own website" with "Performing brain surgery on yourself".

Quotations from: Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale.

"Enlightenment thinkers such as Condorcet were looking ahead to the day when the tools would be in place. He wrote in 1782: 'Those sciences, created almost in our own days, the object of which is man himself, the direct goal of which is the happiness of man, will enjoy a progress no less sure than that of the physical sciences, and this idea so sweet, that our descendants will surpass us in wisdom as in enlightenment, is no longer an illusion. In meditating on the nature of the moral sciences, one cannot help seeing that, as they are based like physical sciences on the observation of fact, they must follow the same method, acquire a language equally exact and precise, attaining the same degree of certainty.' The gleam in Condorcet's eye became, by the mid-nineteenth century, an active utopian project. Simplification and rationalization previously applied to forests, weights, and measures, taxation, and factories were now applied to the design of society as a whole. Industrial-strength social engineering was born." [Scott 1998, 91]

"Lenin's design for the construction of the revolution was in many ways comparable to Le Corbusier's design for the construction of the modern city. Both were complex endeavors that had to be entrusted to the professionalism and scientific insight of a trained cadre with full power to see the plan through. And just as Le Corbusier and Lenin shared a broadly comparable high modernism, so Jane Jacobs's perspective was shared by Rosa Luxemburg and Aleksandra Kollontay, who opposed Lenin's politics. Jacobs doubted both the possibility and the desirability of the centrally planned city, and Luxemburg and Kollontay doubted the possibility and desirability of a revolution planned from above by the vanguard party." [Scott 1998, 147]

"Modern research institutions, agricultural experiment stations, sellers of fertilizer and machinery, high-modernist city planners, Third World developers, and World Bank officials have, to a considerable degree, made their successful institutional way in the world by the systematic denigration of the practical knowledge that we have called metis." [Scott 1998, 332]

* The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and should not be attributed in any manner to the World Bank, to its affiliated organizations, or to the members of its Board of Directors or the countries they represent.

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Model 2: Socratic teacher and learner. Even IF the teacher has the answers to complex policy questions that the World Bank deals with (and that is a big "if"), such knowledge cannot be transferred to the learner as if it were "Waterloo, 1815". Such knowledge must be reappropriated by the learner through an active process of learning. The role of the teacher is not to "teach" but to be midwife to the learner's learning experience through dialogue, argumentation, evidence, and experimentation.

Quotations from: Versényi, Laszlo 1963. *Socratic Humanism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

"What distinguishes knowledge from opinion is neither its truth nor belief in it but simply the knower's ability to account for the truth of what he holds to be true. For Socrates, to know something means to be able to give reasons for it, to defend it by rational argument and to demonstrate it to others. It means to hold something not as an unconnected isolated piece of information unsupported by anything else, but to hold it as a conclusion fastened by a long chain of reasoning to an unshakable foundation in first principles whose truth cannot be questioned. In contrast to opinion (right or wrong), knowledge is something reflected upon, something reasoned, criticized, and argued, something that is not merely accepted on someone else's authority but appropriated by the knower himself through rational reflection, made his own by questioning and accepted on his own authority as a reflective human being. To turn mere opinion into knowledge, reflection is required, a relentless questioning of every statement until we can account for it by giving the reasons and arguments that make us accept it as true. What makes the knower a knower is not the truth of a statement but that search for and appropriation of the truth which alone can result in the acquisition of knowledge rather than opinion. Opinions can be accepted without any work on our part; mere assent to a statement makes it an opinion we hold. Knowledge cannot be acquired in this manner because it requires rational assent which presupposes rational reflection on the part of the individual, i.e. something he himself must engage in and work at. Anyone can supply a man with opinions, but only he himself can appropriate knowledge." [Versényi 1963, 111-2]

"The man who knows something has appropriated it by his own search and will know how to search for and acquire further knowledge, will know how to learn what he does not yet know. Knowledge is not only certain, self-authenticated, and not to be swayed by persuasion, but is also self-augmenting: the knower not only knows what he knows, but, being reflective and critical, he also possesses an invaluable tool—rational inquiry—for testing opinion, ascertaining truth, modifying belief, and extending knowledge beyond its existing limits." [Versényi 1963, 113]

"In contrast to the Sophists [DE: read "WB expert"], Socrates wanted to impart knowledge, and this called for an entirely different method. Since knowledge, unlike opinion, could not be accepted uncritically but had to be made one's own by reflection, had to be appropriated by the learner himself, no external method of education could suffice. It was no longer enough to be eloquent and move the student by the beauty of the word to the passive acceptance of an opinion. He had to be made to participate actively by thinking on his own. Since only one's own search could lead to knowledge, whoever now wanted to teach had only one task: to start the student on

his own rational, reflective, critical search. This obviously could not be done by giving lectures, epideictic speeches, and orations to a captive and passive audience, nor by answering all questions and presenting the student with ready-made solutions to all problems, as many a Sophist [WB expert] was wont to do. Answers and ready-made solutions encourage unreflective, uncritical acceptance, provide the student with opinions rather than knowledge, and, instead of helping, they actually hinder his search." [Versényi 1963, 115-6]

"That real education aims at imparting knowledge rather than opinion, that knowledge cannot be handed over ready-made but has to be appropriated by the knower, that appropriation is possible only through one's own search, and that to make him aware of his ignorance is to start a man on the search for knowledge—these are the considerations that govern and determine the Socratic method of teaching. [This] total method is variously described by the words maieutic [by a midwife], elenctic, aporetic, negative, and ironic... ." [Versényi 1963, 117]

"Socrates' favorite ironic mask was that of ignorance. He professed to know less than he knew, declared his own knowledge to be 'negligible and disputable like a dream' (*Symposium* 175D), most often pretended to know nothing at all except that he did not know, and assumed the mask of the learner who, being ignorant, needed instruction and wanted to be enlightened. This device was thoroughly in line with his method. Professing ignorance, he had a perfect excuse for not dispensing knowledge outright, for teaching no ready-made truths, and he avoided the danger of imparting mere opinion. Disclaiming all authority, he left his students unable to rely on his wisdom and compelled to stand on their own feet." [Versényi 1963, 120-1]