

Giving Birth to Midwives

A Forum for Midwifery Educators

Vol: 3 Number 1 SPRING 2007

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Socrates the intellectual midwife

by Seán Moran

Introduction

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates (470-399 BCE) was the son of a midwife. He often uses ideas from childbirth as metaphors for teaching, and in this dialogue, in which he tells the boy Theætetus of his midwifery credentials:

Socrates: "And have you never heard, simpleton, that I am the son of a midwife, brave and burly, whose name was Phænarete?"

Theætetus: "Yes, I have"

Socrates: "And that I myself practice midwifery?"

Theætetus: "No, never"

Socrates goes on to explain that he is a midwife of knowledge. He will help his companion deliver his thoughts and then conduct a health-check on them, but he is no teacher, for he has no ideas of his own to give to his student. Some of these claims strike modern teachers and tutors as a bit odd, and, as we shall see, a number of his midwifery allusions are horrifying to present-day childbirth practitioners. Nevertheless, he still has some valuable things to say to us about teaching and learning in today's obstetrics environment.

Claim to know nothing

A modern midwife might temporarily adopt a pose of ignorance and say to a student: "I want you to imagine I'm a primagravida and explain to me, step-by-step, what will happen during labour." But Socrates isn't just acting; his stance rests on a genuine belief that he knows nothing for sure. He expresses this professed ignorance via the fact that in his day, it was traditional only for women past their child-bearing years to become midwives:

Socrates: "You forget, my friend that I neither know, nor profess to know, anything about these matters; you are the person who is in labour, I am the barren midwife"

Socrates shows a humane concern for his students and their difficulties in dealing with new ideas, expressed once again in the form of midwifely analogies:

Theætetus: "... I cannot shake off a feeling of anxiety"

Socrates: "These are the pangs of labour, my dear *Theætetus*; you have something within you which you are bringing to the birth"

Exposure

However, once an idea is born, Socrates does not deal with it in a nurturing manner, but rather puts it to the test to determine whether or not it should be allowed to survive:

Socrates: "Then this is the child, however he may turn out, which you and I have brought into the world. And now that he is born, we must run around the hearth with him, and see whether he is worth rearing, or is only a wind-egg and a sham. Is he to be reared in any case and not exposed? Or will you bear to see him rejected, and not get into a passion if I take away your first-born?"

Here where we part company with Socrates, both pedagogically and ethically, but the reasons for his harsh views are worth exploring. The practice he mentions of running with the baby around the fireside - a sacred place in the ancient Greek house - was part of a naming ceremony (*Amphidromia*) which traditionally took place between 5 and 7 days after the birth. After surviving the first week, the baby was felt to be worth naming. However, if the child was disabled in any way, or was the product of a 'shameful' union, or in some cases simply had the misfortune of being the mother's first-born, he or she would often be 'exposed' by being left out in the open to die or be adopted by a passer-by. The neonate would be placed on the ground by the mother, and if the father picked the baby up, he or she would be looked after. If not, 'exposure' was the outcome. (Incidentally, some attribute to this ritual the origin of the phrase "to raise a child").

We may think of traditions such

as this (and stories such as Oedipus' abandonment and the biblical account of Moses being abandoned in the bulrushes) as relics of the past, but unfortunately exposure and other forms of infanticide - particularly female infanticide - is still common in many countries, including China and India. For example, 60 million girls are estimated as 'missing' from the Indian population, according to a recent United Nations report (Leidl, 2005)

However, Socrates only personally deals harshly with unwelcome ideas, not unwanted babies. Can we accept this as a legitimate way of dealing with our students' misconceptions and intellectual wind-eggs (phantom pregnancies) or do we nowadays hold more enlightened views on these too?

Putting students' ideas to the test

Socrates' technique of dealing with the ideas born of his students - a process called *elenchus* - involved him in revealing fully and examining carefully their beliefs, by means of a relentless, forensic questioning. *Elenchus* is his intellectual version of running around the hearth with the baby, or the modern post-partum examination. At some point during this process, the illuminating power of the dialogue would bring to light inconsistencies among the various statements made by the student, who would then have to concede that the claimed knowledge was in fact illegitimate. This rather shamefaced admission would then lead to the 'exposing' of these intellectual babies, to make way for sounder offspring - a sort of educational eugenics. Socrates would first check for any multiple births:

Socrates: "Are we in labour then, with any further child, my friend, or have we brought to birth all we have to say ...?"

The student would then be invited to think again:

Socrates: " ... try to conceive afresh ... If you succeed, your embryo thoughts will be the better as a consequence of today's scrutiny, and if you remain barren, you will be gentler, and more agreeable to your companions, having the good sense not to fancy you know what you do not know."

Socrates saw an apparently negative result - the demonstration of the limitations of a student's knowledge - as valuable in its own right. Also, his insight that education can usefully consist in 'drawing out' (from the Latin *educare*) putative knowledge from his student - instead of just cramming it in - and his willingness to engage fully with the ideas offered by the student - rather than simply dismissing them without showing how they are flawed are valuable ones, but in both cases he goes too far.

Furthermore, shaming students into abandoning hard-won theories - flawed or not - is harmful both to their self-esteem and also to the tutor-student relationship. This habitual use of *elenchus* caught up with Socrates in the end and he made many enemies, who eventually saw to it that he was condemned to be executed (by drinking hemlock-juice [Conium maculatum – the active ingredient of which is a muscle-paralytic]) on a trumped-up charge of corrupting the youth of Athens.

Of course there may be times in an emergency when a point has to be made unambiguously, and perhaps assertively – for example when the health of the mother or baby is in danger of being compromised by inadequate knowledge on the part of the midwifery student - but this should not be a routine educational technique. Many trainee midwives have had significant previous experience as general nurses, so encouraging them to examine critically their own ideas and practices for flaws and opportunities for improvement is a more appropriate and professional starting-point for discussion than a merciless pointing-out of their shortcomings. An internalised Socratic interlocutor (a sort of 'inner teacher') is in many ways more useful, and certainly more available, than an external one.

However, the change in status from experienced nurse to beginning midwife can be a stressful one, and students naturally feel exposed and underconfident, so support and esteem-building are vital accompaniments to more robust Socratic and didactic methods.

Conclusions

So what lessons has the philosophical son of an ancient Greek midwife for the present-day education of midwives? I feel that there are four:

1. Mentors and tutors of midwives can act as 'midwives for knowledge' by helping students to articulate their own pre-existing ideas. This is often a much better starting point for discussion than the stating of unchallengeable assertions by 'the expert'
2. Students are uncomfortable in delivering their new ideas and need reassuring that such discomfort is both natural and normal. A patient, supportive, nurturing manner is just as desirable during the training of midwives as it is during the delivery of babies.
3. The ideas articulated by the students can be put to the test during dialogue, and any misconceptions gently rejected. This joint construction of viable knowledge takes longer than a simple dissemination by the 'expert', but it is worth it because the learning which results is more firmly embedded in the minds of the participants in the dialogue.

4. Having one's newly-delivered ideas rejected is distressing, but necessary if learning is to proceed. Some of these misconceptions are remarkably resilient, though, and will not always succumb immediately to simple exposure.

However, valuable as Socrates' insights are, there are two further conclusions with which he would not agree:

1. Not all learning can be 'drawn out' of the student. Some conceptual and procedural knowledge clearly has to be provided and demonstrated for the trainee midwife, but we should find ways of making this 'adopted' knowledge take its place in the student's family of ideas, alongside their own legitimate intellectual offspring.

2. Self-esteem is important for professionals, and too relentless a process of elenchus will undermine this in a harmful way. Just how far to go in a critical dialogue is a matter for judgement, based on intuition, experience and knowledge of the student. We should bear in mind the pressure that the students (and their tutors/mentors) are under during placements, and try to nurture the protégés into becoming better practitioners, rather than dispatching their misconceptions too cruelly.

Socrates clearly thought highly of midwives – "...this midwife's art is a gift from heaven; my mother had it for women..." – and believed that he too could act as a sort of midwife, but for learners. Today's tutors and mentors of midwives should take heart from their illustrious forebear – possibly the finest teacher the world has ever seen – and his midwife mother. His notions about teaching are not perfect, but we can draw inspiration from them nevertheless, and give birth to our own ideas – a result which the intellectual 'midwife' Socrates would be delighted.

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