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Being a Programme Theory Socrates

Intro

Socrates was famously the questioner. While often mistaken as a troll, Socrates actually viewed himself as stirring people towards the truth, rather than stirring trouble or being irritating. His hope wasn't to trip people up: it was to participate in a learning process.[1]

What is relevant to participatory programming is his famous dialectic method of inquiry, known as the Socratic method, which he largely used when examining concepts such as Justice or the Good. However, this approach can be just as meaningfully used when engaging in workshops, or in particular, when developing Programme Theory/Theories of Change.

When Socrates was examining a concept, he would approach it as a problem. This problem would be broken down into a series of (often open-ended) questions, and then gradually distil the answers to these lower questions. Once these are determined, they are used as building blocks to understand the bigger problem.

Similar to examining a concept, the Socratic method can be used to understand issues in programming or develop chunks of programme theory: a series of questions are posed to help a person or group to determine their underlying beliefs and the extent of their knowledge about something. This then allows for collective examination of the validity of these beliefs or knowledge to understand if there is a causal step present or not.

Note: this is not a negative method of hypothesis elimination, in that better hypotheses are found by steadily identifying and eliminating those that lead to contradictions. This instead allows for examination of one's own/ a group's beliefs and the validity of such beliefs.

Please see below for examples of how to be a Programme Theory Socrates.

Guidance

To be a programme theory Socrates in a programme theory workshop (or any participatory workshop), there are a few key principles you need to keep at the forefront of your mind:

1. **Neutrality:** the programme theory Socrates has no opinion themselves on the work at hand, they are there to support others.
2. **Questioning nature:** the programme theory Socrates is there to question the process in a way conducive to the exercise, rather than steer it, make assertions, or disrupt it.
3. **Open questions:** the programme theory Socrates is there to facilitate others' thinking, and therefore will predominantly ask open questions (i.e. 'what are the

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[1] For those interested: this distinction is actually discussed in the Platonic dialogues, as the distinction between the philosopher and the sophist.

      barriers to that group learning that skill?' rather than 'the barrier is autocratic management, isn't it?')

4. **Guiding questions:** the programme theory Socrates will also ask guiding questions to support examination of thought: 'what is our evidence base for asserting that?', 'Could you explain how that is consistent with our gender-focused principles?'

5. **Irritating questions:** importantly, the programme theory Socrates will stay true to the philosopher's nature and ask simple – and often irritating – questions. This ensures that the group examines the obvious before moving to the complicated (i.e. 'why did we choose to work with that organisation?', 'Might you consider it hypocritical to teach that skill to that group?')

6. **Fundamentals:** ultimately, the programme theory Socrates helps the group stay on track by coming back to the fundamentals. What matters? What do you need to know? Is this line of discourse helpful to what we're doing?

Bearing these principles in mind, it is relatively easy to enter a session and be a useful character. The primary point is to listen to the conversations occurring and use your open questions to either challenge or guide the group to conclusions. This role is particularly crucial when there is disagreement, or when the group is getting stuck: for example, if the group isn't certain of what activities are needed, using those fundamental questions of 'what matters here?', 'what is the ideal versus what is in scope?', 'what do you need to achieve?' can be helpful. Equally, using judgement, it might be more specific queries such as 'if we are a peer-to-peer organisation, what activities are available to us?', 'which of these might be relevant here?'. Use your judgement and ask useful questions in line with the 6 principles, so long as it helps the group reach a conclusion rather than causes disruption.

The next step is picking an appropriate PTS to introduce into your session. You need some key features in your PTS in order for them to embody these principles to the most useful degree:

1. **No stakes:** to be neutral, your PTS must be independent to your programme. This reduces likelihood of bias.

2. **Devil's advocate:** pick an independent person who is willing to be the devil's advocate sometimes. This makes it easier to abide by #5 and #2.

3. **Informed enough:** your PTS should have been provided with relevant background material (but not too much!) to be able to ask relevant questions without knowing so much as to form an opinion.

Examples

Fundamentally, this is all there is to embodying this character, but below are some examples of the kinds of Socratic questions that it is helpful to ask when guiding a team.

In an actor-based change framework workshop, a systems map was being used to assess reach. The team were getting stuck on what stakeholders link to what behaviours.

"Why are we mapping by hierarchy as opposed to other things?"

"What does power mean in the Krygyz Republic?"

"If we are needing problem-solving, what actors can shift the cultural blockers?"

"We will do this through classroom-based learning, right? Who will respond positively to that and engage?"

In designing programme theory, the PTS wondered if behaviours were being retrospectively crowbarred in.

"Can you explain why that behaviour is needed for that change?"

"What really matters here?"

"What are your core activities again?" … "What does capacity building mean in this context then?" … "How does that connect to this COM change?"

In a large programme theory workshop, disagreement arose over what activities were needed to shift an opportunity barrier.

"Why is that opportunity a barrier?"

"What really matters here?"

"Is that in scope?"

"Is this relevant to this barrier?"

"What activities do we uniquely offer as opposed to the NGOs working in this space?"