

Questions and Answers; Curiosity and Explanation

We will study Syntax, Semantics, and Pragmatics in this class, focussing on why and how one asks interesting questions, and why and how one recognizes satisfying answers to them. **These are the bases of all education**, the so-called Socratic method. This class is especially designed for incoming students who are worried they might be interested in too many subjects; the professor has spent 48 years in college being interested in practically everything, and strongly recommends curiosity.

The most common modern metaphor for education is the *Coke-bottle* model, in which students' minds are viewed as empty containers, to be filled up with Knowledge by successive teachers – until Graduation, when caps are put on and the student is officially declared to be full of it. If you view your education this way, you won't like this class.

If, however, you are curious about a lot of different stuff, and despair of ever taking enough classes to satisfy your interests, you'll have a lot of fun with it. The educational theory *we* will use is the classical "Socratic" (or Question-and-Answer) model, which places a premium on **Curiosity**, the habit of asking questions – especially interesting ones; and **Explanation**, the habit of finding answers for them – especially satisfying ones.

Questions and explanations are linguistic phenomena, and a great deal is known about them. We will study the structures of the grammar, meanings, and uses of questions, in both conversation and writing. And we will study the ways in which metaphors (like the Coke bottle) can bridge question and explanation – as well as interest and satisfaction.

There will be weekly writing (mostly of questions, at least at first), and sporadic readings, plus a term research project. Mostly, however, there will be class discussion, as we try to

- (a) figure out what subjects we're curious about and how to learn more about them,
- and
- (b) decide which explanations about them satisfy our curiosity, and why.

These habits, of asking interesting questions and of finding satisfying answers, are what education is **really** about, and some early experience in forming these habits can often pay off, even beyond Graduation.