



Socratic-Informed Digital Help

A practitioner primer for one-to-one digital support

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Digital help can easily become something that is **done to a person**.

The helper takes the phone, finds the setting, fixes the problem, hands the device back and says, "There you go."

The problem may have disappeared. But very little learning may have occurred.

A more useful question is:

How can I help this person understand enough, discover enough and do enough themselves that they leave with greater capability and confidence than when they arrived?

That is where a Socratic-informed approach becomes valuable.

It does not mean refusing to give answers. It means using questions, observation, explanation, demonstration and practice deliberately so that the person remains an active participant in solving their own problem.

The objective is not merely a successful transaction.

It is **increased agency**.

1. Begin with the person, not the device

Before diagnosing the technology, establish what the person is actually trying to achieve.

Useful opening questions include:

- What are you trying to do?
- What normally happens?
- What is happening now?
- When did it last work?
- What have you already tried?
- What would a successful outcome look like for you?

This matters because the problem presented may not be the real problem.

“I can’t use Google Maps” might mean:

- the person cannot find the application;
- location services are turned off;
- they do not understand the map orientation;
- their device lacks a useful function;
- they are frightened they will press the wrong thing;
- they simply need somebody to explain what the symbols mean.

Do not diagnose before listening.

2. Find out what they already know

Socratic teaching begins with existing knowledge.

Rather than assuming either competence or incompetence, discover the person’s starting point.

Ask:

- What do you recognise on this screen?
- Which part have you used before?
- What do you think that symbol might do?
- Where would you normally look for this?
- Does anything here look familiar?

This does two things.

It gives the helper valuable diagnostic information.

More importantly, it demonstrates to the learner that they **already possess useful knowledge**.

For someone who has begun saying, “I’m hopeless with these things”, that can be significant.

3. Ask before telling

When appropriate, turn the next step into a small piece of discovery.

Instead of:

“Press Settings.”

Try:

“Where do you think we might look if we wanted to change how the phone behaves?”

If necessary, narrow the field:

“Can you see anything here that looks like settings?”

And eventually:

“Yes — that little cog. Try that.”

The purpose is not to test the person.

It is to help them build the mental connections that will allow them to find their way again later.

A useful sequence

Ask → Prompt → Explain → Demonstrate → Practise

Start with the least intervention required.

Increase assistance only when necessary.

4. Let their hands do the learning

Whenever it is practical and safe, the participant should operate their own device.

There is an enormous difference between watching somebody change a setting and changing it yourself.

A useful discipline for the helper is:

Keep your hands off the device slightly longer than feels natural.

Point.

Ask.

Guide.

Describe.

Let the person press the button.

Taking over is sometimes necessary, particularly where there is a safety issue or a complicated technical task. But afterwards, give control back.

“Now you try it.”

The goal is not speed.

The goal is learning.

5. Make the learner explain it back

One of the strongest indications of understanding is whether someone can explain what they have just done.

Near the end, ask:

- What would you do first next time?
- Where would you find that setting again?
- What do you think caused the problem?
- If this happened tomorrow, what would you try?
- Can you show me how you would do it again?

This is not an examination.

It is a way of turning a successful moment into retrievable knowledge.

Sometimes it will immediately reveal that the person has followed the procedure without understanding it.

That is useful information too.

6. Protect dignity

Good questioning must never feel like interrogation.

This is especially important where somebody is already embarrassed about their digital ability.

Avoid questions that effectively say:

“Surely you know this?”

Instead create curiosity together:

“Let’s see what this does.”

“I wonder where they’ve put that setting.”

“That’s interesting — that’s not behaving the way I expected either.”

This changes the relationship.

There is no clever expert demonstrating superiority over an inadequate learner.

There are two people investigating a problem, with one bringing greater technical experience.

7. Work with uncertainty

One of the most valuable things a digital helper can model is not knowing.

Technology changes constantly.

Menus move. Interfaces change. Manufacturers behave differently. AI can be wrong.

It is perfectly legitimate to say:

“I don’t know. Let’s work it out.”

That teaches something much more powerful than memorising a menu sequence:

how to approach an unfamiliar digital problem.

The helper is modelling:

- curiosity;
- cautious experimentation;
- verification;
- problem decomposition;
- searching;
- judgement;
- knowing when to stop.

Those are transferable digital capabilities.

8. Adjust the teaching to the person

There is no single correct teaching style.

One person may learn through explanation.

Another needs repetition.

Another wants to write every step down.

Another understands immediately once shown visually.

Another may have hearing, eyesight, dexterity, memory or language considerations.

The practitioner therefore needs to continually ask:

Is my method working for this person?

If not, change the method rather than blaming the learner.

This is one of the central skills of good facilitation.

9. Know when Socratic questioning is inappropriate

Questions are a tool, not a doctrine.

There are times to simply provide the answer.

For example:

- when there is an immediate security or privacy risk;
- when the person is becoming overloaded or distressed;
- when a technical procedure offers little learning value;
- when the interface is genuinely obscure;

- when accessibility makes discovery unnecessarily difficult;
- when the person simply wants a quick transactional answer.

Good facilitation means knowing **when to ask and when to tell**.

The measure is not how faithfully the helper followed a teaching theory.

The measure is whether the person was helped appropriately.

10. AI should strengthen the human relationship, not replace it

AI can become extremely useful within this approach.

It can help the practitioner:

- diagnose unfamiliar problems;
- translate technical language;
- suggest different ways of explaining something;
- identify accessibility options;
- compare possible solutions;
- check instructions;
- create simple follow-up guidance;
- explore a problem collaboratively with the participant.

But the human remains responsible for judgement.

The practitioner decides:

What question should we be asking?

Is the AI's answer plausible?

Is it safe?

Is it appropriate for this person?

What information should not be entered?

Does this person understand what we are doing?

In this model, AI is neither the teacher nor the decision-maker.

It is an additional thinking resource inside a human relationship.

That is a practical example of **human control alongside AI**.

A simple conversation model

A useful mental model for an encounter is:

1. Understand

What does the person actually want to achieve?

2. Explore

What do they already know, and what have they tried?

3. Discover

Can questioning or guided exploration help them identify the next step?

4. Support

Provide explanation, demonstration or technical intervention where required.

5. Practise

Give the device back and let the person perform the task.

6. Consolidate

Ask them to explain or repeat what they have learned.

7. Empower

Leave them with something they can try themselves next time.

The practitioner's internal questions

During an encounter, quietly ask yourself:

1. **Am I solving the person's problem, or taking it away from them?**
2. **Have I understood what they actually want?**
3. **What do they already know?**
4. **Can they discover this next step themselves?**
5. **Am I talking too much?**
6. **Are they doing enough of the physical interaction?**
7. **Am I moving at their pace or mine?**
8. **Do they understand, or are they simply following instructions?**
9. **Is there a privacy, security or safety boundary here?**

10. What could they leave knowing that they did not know when they arrived?

And after the encounter:

What did I learn about how to help this person learn?

That final question turns everyday digital assistance into practitioner development.

The larger idea

The deepest objective of digital inclusion may not be teaching somebody where a particular button is.

Buttons move.

Applications change.

Devices become obsolete.

The more enduring capability is helping someone develop enough **confidence, curiosity, judgement and problem-solving ability to approach the next unfamiliar digital situation.**

Socratic-informed practice offers one way of doing that.

The success of the helper is therefore not demonstrated by how quickly they can solve someone else's problem.

It may be demonstrated by how much less that person needs them next time.

