

Socratic Seminars



The Vision

- Socrates believed that enabling students to *think for themselves* was more important than filling their heads with *“right answers.”*



The Vision

- Participants seek deeper understanding of complex ideas through rigorously thoughtful dialogue, rather than by memorizing bits of information.



What are Socratic Seminars?

- **Highly motivating** form of intellectual and scholarly discourse.
- An effective Socratic Seminar creates **dialogue** as opposed to debate.



Dialogue

Dialogue is *"an interchange of ideas especially when open and frank and seeking mutual understanding."*

- It is a collective inquiry in which we suspend opinions, share openly, and think creatively about difficult issues.*

Dialogue is NOT Debate!



Debate

- Is **oppositional**
- Goal is **proving others wrong**
- **Defends assumptions and beliefs as truth**
- **Creates a close-minded attitude**
- **One searches for flaws and weaknesses**
- **Rebuts contrary positions and may belittle others**
- **Assumes a single right answer**
- **Demands closure**

Dialogue

- Is **collaborative**
- Goal is **cooperation and understanding**
- **Re-evaluates** assumptions and temporarily **suspends one's beliefs**
- Creates an **open-minded attitude**
- Searches for **strengths** in all ideas
- **Respects others** and seeks not to alienate
- One listens to find **common ground**
- Remains **open-ended**

Four Elements

- An effective seminar consists of four interdependent elements:
 1. the **text** being considered
 2. the **questions** raised
 3. the seminar **leader**, and
 4. the **participants**



The Text

- **A seminar text can be drawn from readings in literature, history, science, math, health, and philosophy or from works of art or music.**



The Text

- Socratic Seminar texts are chosen for their **richness in ideas, issues, and values**, and their ability to stimulate extended, thoughtful dialogue.



The Question

- An opening question **has no right answer**
 - *It reflects a genuine curiosity on the part of the leader.*

Should human embryos be cloned in order to save lives?



The Question

- An effective opening question leads participants **back to the text** as they speculate, evaluate, define, and clarify the issues involved.
 - Responses to the opening question **generate new questions**
 - The line of inquiry evolves **on the spot** rather than being predetermined by the leader.



The Leader

- Plays a **dual role** as leader and participant
 - Consciously **leads** a thoughtful exploration of the ideas in the text.
 - As a seminar **participant**, actively engages in the group's exploration of the text
- Helps participants **clarify** their positions when arguments become confused

The Leader

- Involves **reluctant participants** while restraining their more vocal peers
- Must be **patient** enough to allow participants' understandings to evolve
- Be willing to help participants explore **non-traditional insights** and unexpected interpretations



The Participants

- **Share responsibility** for the quality of the seminar.
- **Most effective** when participants:
 1. study the text closely **in advance**
 2. listen **actively**
 3. **share** their ideas and questions in response to others
 4. search for **evidence in the text** to support their ideas



Designing the Best

- Seminar is approached as a joint search.
- *Seminars* in which something **new** and **unexpected** is discovered.
- *At the end of a successful Socratic Seminar, participants often **leave with more questions than they brought with them.***



Benefits include:

- Time to engage in **in-depth** discussions, problem solving, and clarification of ideas
- Building a strong, **collaborative** work culture
- **Enhanced knowledge** and research base
- **Increased success** for all students
- Teaching **respect** for diverse ideas, people, and practices
- Creating a **positive learning environment** for all students



Conducting a “Fishbowl”

- A strategy to use when you have a **LARGE class** (over 25 students)
- Divide the class into “**Inner**” and “**Outer**” circles



Conducting a “Fishbowl”

- **Inner circle** = active participants
- **Outer circle** = students observe 2-3 active participants for:
 - New ideas
 - Positive comments
 - Question asked
 - Negative Behavior
 - Referred to text
 - Side conversations



Tips for Teachers

Before the seminar:

- Read the text **CAREFULLY**
 - Focus on possible interpretive questions
 - Select short, high interest passages for special attention
 - Identify tough vocabulary words
- Choose an **introductory question** in advance
 - Broad, open-ended, provocative



Guidelines for Questioning

Learning occurs based on the kinds of questions asked

- Develop opening, core, and closing questions before the seminar
 - Non-judgmental and derived from the text
 - Questions that raise questions
 - Ask hypothetical questions
 - Avoid using yes/no questions
 - Continue to ask “why?” Probe responses of the participants with further questioning



Tips for Teachers



Review & Post Seminar

Rules/Procedures:

- Respond to the opening questioning
- Use active listening
- Speak clearly - one person at a time – no interruptions/side conversations
- Accept answers without judgment (value others opinions)
- Refer to text when defending your position
- Stay on topic; stay focused on discussion questions

Tips for Teachers



During the seminar:

- Begin with an opening question that has **NO right answer**
 - *“What is meant by...”*
 - *“What is the title, theme and tone of the reading..?”*
 - *“What is your own interpretation of the reading...?”*
- Teacher **listens HARD**, follows each answer, if necessary, with another question.

Tips for Teachers

- **Keep students focused and insist on standards of rigor**
 - Teacher's role is to **facilitate**
 - Ask students to **clarify** a viewpoint
 - Ask students about **implications**
 - Encourage students to **paraphrase** other's responses
 - *“Nicole, what did you understand Carmen to say?”*

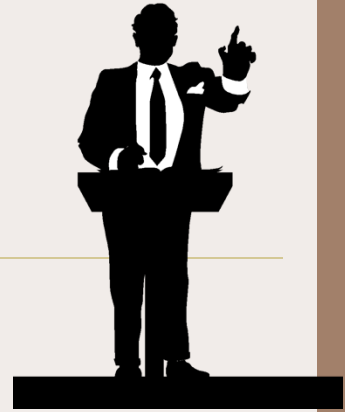


Tips for Teachers

- **Allow for pauses**
 - Silent moments for thinking
- **As a leader, take notes**
 - Sum up what you've heard at the end of the session



Tips for Teachers



- **Conduct a debriefing**
 - Have students write a **reflection**
 - **Debrief** the topic
 - *“If you have changed your mind about a particular point or issue, what made you change it????”*
 - **Debrief the PROCESS**
 - What **seminar guidelines** observed
 - What **social skills** did the group exhibit
 - What might the **group goal** be for the NEXT seminar

Tips for Teachers



- **Assessing students**

- Many teachers choose NOT to assign a grade to a student for **PERFORMAMNCE** in a seminar because

- *They want student to **speak out of interest** in the text, NOT for a grade*
- *They **don't want** students to equate lots of talking with a good grade and reflective silence with a poor grade.*
- If you DO choose to assess student participation, there are sample **rubrics in your packet**

Tips for Teachers

- **Assessing students**
 - Most teachers prefer to assign a culminating written assignment or essay on the topic

