

NORTH CAROLINA ASSOCIATION FOR MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION

JOURNAL

James Davis, Ph.D., Editor
Coastal Carolina University

Summer 2017, Volume 29, Number 1

Socratic Seminar Discussions: A Vehicle for Teaching Thinking and Comprehension

Louise E. Miller
New Hanover County Schools, NC, Retired

Introduction

The practice of discussing text in seminar settings has been used for some time, but it needs to rise to the level of a standard practice used regularly and skillfully by all literacy educators in middle schools. The Common Core State Standards Initiative makes clear that educators of English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects are charged to prepare students with the literacy skills and concepts required for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015a). Socratic Seminar discussions should play a vital role in this preparation; seminars should become a part of “dinner” rather than “dessert” in a middle grades literacy curriculum. Think of a traditional “square meal” with servings of meat, potatoes, and vegetables as analogous to servings of reading, speaking and listening, and writing. All three combine to provide vitality and nourishment, and the lack of any one serving diminishes the nutritional value of the whole.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for 6-12 English Language Arts delineate Anchor Standards in four major strands: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language with the Language strand standards being applied as the other strands are taught. With Socratic Seminar discussions, five of the six Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening can be taught and practiced very effectively, while the formal dialogue of a seminar provides the bridge between close reading and exact writing, effectively integrating the major strands of English Language Arts for the enhancement of all skills. Plus, seminars are an outstanding opportunity to focus on reading and writing grounded in evidence from the text, one of the three major shifts in the new literacy standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015b). Discussions also function as another form of the close reading stressed in the standards.

Socratic Seminar discussions also prove worthwhile because their instructional design capitalizes on the distinctive nature of young adolescents who want to be social as they learn, making the structured dialogues developmentally responsive which is the first of four essential attributes of a successful middle level education as defined by the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE, 2010, p. 13). Effective seminar discussions are also challenging and empowering, meeting the second and third essential attributes, because every student is a part of a learning community, which is held to high expectations during these formal dialogues. There, students join with others and gain the skills needed to create interpretations of what they have read. Lastly, seminars are equitable, the fourth essential attribute, because students can contribute to discussions conducted in a roundtable format with pre-discussion reading activities and post-discussion writing tasks that combine to provide multiple levels of entry and challenge.

A Socratic Seminar in Action

Socratic Seminars are discussions organized with questions. They use an inductive approach in which students discover their own knowledge by responding to open-ended questions posed by the leader. Teachers do not impart information in these sessions, but rather, teach students to think critically about text. The teacher begins with typical pre-reading activities and a first reading of the chosen text along with appropriate instructional activities such as vocabulary development, an examination of characterization, finding a theme, etc.... Then the teacher poses a seminar question, which can be answered in more than one way based on evidence from the text. Students read the selection a second time while making annotations, considering the seminar question and formulating their initial answer to it. A seminar discussion follows in which the class (or half of a large class) assembles in a circle and responds to the seminar question orally. The teacher acts as a facilitator who asks why, asks for evidence, and probes to encourage dialogue while never answering the

question. After the discussion, each student writes his or her own response to the seminar question (which may have changed based on the dialogue in the Socratic Seminar) thus constructing his or her own knowledge, using higher order thinking skills, and extending his or her comprehension of the text. For example, in Daniel Defoe's (2003) *Robinson Crusoe* there is a point where the protagonist writes a list of both good and evil aspects of his solitary shipwrecked situation. A seminar question I have asked is: Is Robinson Crusoe hopeless or hopeful? Evidence exists in the text to bolster either interpretation that the students choose. If time permits, we then make personal connections to the topic.

This instructional approach teaches the first CCSS Anchor Standard for Speaking and Listening under the subheading Comprehension and Collaboration: "Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively." It addresses standard two, also, as students "Integrate and evaluate information presented . . . orally." In addition, it meets standard three wherein students "Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric." Moreover, standards four and six under the subheading Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas are included. These ask for students to "Present...supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning..." and for them to "Adapt speech...demonstrating command of formal English..." (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015b).

My Socratic Seminar Path

I first encountered seminar discussions early in my career at a Great Books Foundation training that detailed the teaching and learning environment it promoted along with its trademarked process called Shared Inquiry (Great Books Foundation, 2015). As a young teacher, I was struck by the focus on the students and their thoughts and ideas about literature, as well as the clearly delineated role of the teacher as discussion facilitator and fellow inquirer. Shared Inquiry questioning emphasizes interpretation and the search for the author's meaning. Back in my classroom, I discovered that when we discussed whether the old woman or the beggar was more dishonest in the children's story *Stone Soup* (Brown, 1947); my students' perceptions about honesty and its role in relationships were insightful. They came up with their ideas from reading and discussing the text, not from listening to my explanations.

Along my teaching road, I received training in conducting Paideia Seminars, defined by the National Paideia Center (2015a) as "collaborative, intellectual dialogue facilitated by open-ended questions about a text" (What is Socratic Seminar? Section, para. 2). Paideia classrooms use Socratic questioning in these seminars that form one of the Three Columns of Instruction of the Paideia Program for education. The purpose for conducting these dialogues is to enlarge understanding of ideas, values, and issues and Paideia Seminars occur for approximately 15-20 percent of a week's instructional time (National Paideia Center, 2015b). Again, I heard the emphasis on thinking through discussion and I liked it. Now, my classes were reading nonfiction essays like "School vs. Education" by Russell Baker (1975) and trying to determine if you can get an education in school. I facilitated as all members of the group listened and learned from one another, building more confidence in their abilities to think critically and interpret text. They opened to the process of being seekers of knowledge with their whole group. They were engaged, attentive, responsive, and they were comprehending text.

Later, I became an Advancement Via Individual Determination [AVID] teacher in a program designed to prepare students for high school and college success. AVID Secondary (grades 6-12) brings best practices and methodologies to middle and high school students with the goal of improving

outcomes for all students and increasing the number of students who enroll and succeed in college (AVID Center, 2014a). AVID emphasizes inquiry, collaboration, and critical reading among its most important academic strategies and brings these to bear in Socratic Seminars (AVID Center, 2014b). Again, I found that emphasis on inquiry as a pillar of learning. My classes read a newspaper article and then discussed in a Socratic Seminar whether teachers should become Facebook friends with their students, supporting answers with evidence from the text. After examining ideas in the text, we explored the students' personal ideas about the topic.

Socratic Seminars had become a regular part of my practice with middle schoolers. I grew to understand that the value of seminars comes from engaging students in a collaborative process, empowering students to respond thoughtfully, and challenging them to make connections using evidence from the text. I was upending the traditional "right-answer" dynamic as I refrained from answering my own questions and I was allowing the students' neurons to fire as they worked together to interpret the text. The result was better reading comprehension and more engagement in thinking and learning.

Socratic Seminars and Successful Middle Level Education

The model that I follow for seminars is a combination of the pedagogy of all three programs mentioned above (Great Books Foundation Shared Inquiry, Paideia Socratic Seminar Discussions, and AVID Inquiry). It challenges and empowers the students, two essential AMLE (2010) attributes for successful middle level education, by restricting the leader's input to probing, restating, asking for clarification, asking why, and asking for evidence from the text. The challenge is inherent because the questions are higher-level and open-ended and everyone is held to the high expectation of contributing to the exploration for answers. Seminars are empowering because the teacher truly functions as a facilitator or guide while the students create their own knowledge through the connections they make. Each contribution is respected and honored as it is explored.

Such seminars are also developmentally responsive, another AMLE (2010) essential attribute, because the learning is active, social, and collaborative. We sit in a circle where everyone can see or hear the others; this says each person is important and we will search for meaning together. A collaborative, problem-solving approach to interpreting text foreshadows the work model of 21st Century careers our students will have.

Equity is the fourth essential attribute of successful middle level education. In a volume titled *Informed Choices for Struggling Adolescent Readers* commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation (Deshler, Palincsar, Biancarosa, & Nair, 2007), the authors detail how text-based collaborative learning proves successful for students of mixed abilities. "Grouping students with different reading levels together allows struggling readers the benefit of peer models and helpers; and such groupings also expose more advanced readers to cognitive or conceptual confusions, which have been shown to improve learning and engagement" (Deshler et al., 2007, p. 52).

Questioning, the Key to Successful Seminars

Along with the teacher/leader refraining from giving any answers, appropriate questions are key to the success of the Socratic Seminar practice. The better the question, the better the discussion. It works best if the teacher is genuinely curious about the main question posed for the group. In my practice with younger, less-seminar-experienced groups, I found it easier, initially, to pose a primary question which has an either/or component.

Moving on to “why” questions is more advanced and the leader must judge the text and the students’ readiness. For example, in the short story *Harrison Bergeron* by Kurt Vonnegut (1968), we find the lead character revolting against the handicapping of citizens in a futuristic, dystopian society. He chooses to revolt by removing his handicaps, grabbing a ballerina, removing her handicaps, and dancing with her on national television. I asked this question: Why did the author have Harrison Bergeron revolt by dancing rather than making a speech or using violence? Then the students probed the use of dancing and the words the author used, and they found meaning in the story using their own thinking abilities.

Sections of a novel can also become the basis for a seminar, as when I posed this question after reading the first three chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960): What is author Harper Lee saying about parenting through her character Atticus Finch? After we examined what Harper Lee wrote and found our interpretations, I shifted the discussion to the “connection” portion of the seminar wherein the students commented on parenting in their own lives. The teacher of an eighth grade class where I conducted this seminar to introduce her to the Socratic Seminar discussion strategy commented, “I have an opportunity to observe the level of understanding that my students achieve and watch as my students discover things in reading that go beyond the surface of a passage” (K. Kallet, personal communication, June 16, 2015).

Whole novels can also inspire seminar questions. After reading *The View From Saturday* (Konigsburg, 1996), I asked my students if they believed that one of The Souls, a team of sixth graders preparing for an academic competition, is the leader of the group. (No team leader is ever officially identified in the novel.) The teacher of the sixth grade class where I modeled this seminar observed, “Students truly listened to others’ opinions, sometimes reconsidering their original opinion” (E. Yucius, personal communication, June 18, 2015).

A Research-Based Best Practice

Socratic Seminars are a principal example of text-based collaborative learning, a best practice that provides significant learning outcomes for students. The effect of text-based collaborative learning on comprehension is supported by Deshler et al. (2007) who summarized a report of the National Reading Panel from 2000 as follows: “Although a common argument for collaborative learning is that it improves motivation, research has shown that when collaborative activities focus on shared text-based learning tasks, students’ comprehension improves on both researcher-designed and standardized tests” (p. 52). Deshler et al. (2007) go on to state:

Grouping students and allowing them to read and complete focused activities with texts has been found to improve comprehension and learning across the content areas for upper elementary through high school students, as well as with English-language learner (ELLs) and students with learning disabilities in inclusive settings. (p. 52)

In a policy research brief, The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) advocates for reforming programs of adolescent literacy with strategies that target motivation, comprehension, and critical thinking. Regarding critical thinking, NCTE (2006) states, “Effective literacy education leads students to think deeply about texts and use them to generate ideas and knowledge. Students can be taught to think about their own thinking, to understand how texts are organized, to consider relationships between texts, and to comprehend complexities (p. 6).

The Junior Great Books Shared Inquiry approach to seminar discussions has been the subject of much research, which has documented the power of this text-based collaborative learning approach.

In their comprehensive meta-analysis of empirical studies, Murphy et al. (2009) looked at evidence of the effects of classroom discussion on individual student comprehension, critical thinking, and reasoning. Key findings include:

- The Junior Great Books Shared Inquiry approach exhibited moderate to strong effects on text-explicit and text-implicit comprehension as well as critical thinking and reasoning.
- Junior Great Books Shared Inquiry was particularly effective at promoting students' critical thinking, reasoning, and argumentation about and around text in multiple-group and single-group design studies. (as cited in Great Books Foundation, 2016, p.5)

Conclusion

Increased student engagement and improved comprehension, critical thinking, and reasoning are the chief benefits that accrued to adopting Socratic Seminar discussions as a regular practice in my middle grades literacy curriculum. I attribute the engagement to the formally structured dialogue conducted while the class is seated in a circle looking at one another, and to the restriction I place upon myself of never answering the questions I pose as the leader. Eyes meet across the circle and voices can be heard which draws participants into the discussion and capitalizes on the desire for social involvement on the part of middle level learners. I limit my interaction to asking why, asking for evidence, and probing to encourage dialogue. When I do not answer, the students do! For me, it has the "I-thou" relationship that I enter into with my students when I sit in the circle with them to experience a Socratic Seminar. Each of us is a seeker; I am not an imparter. We collaborate and together we learn.

References

Association for Middle Level Education (2010). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents*. Westerville, OH: Author

AVID Center. (2014a). *College & career readiness*. Retrieved from

<http://www.avid.org/avid-college-readiness-system.ashx>

AVID Center. (2014b). *What is AVID secondary?* Retrieved from

<http://www.avid.org/what-is-avid-secondary.ashx>

Baker, R. (September.1975). School vs. education. *New York Times*.

Brown, M. (1947). *Stone soup*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2015a). *English language arts standards*. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/>

Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2015b). *Key shifts in English language arts*. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/other-resources/key-shifts-in-english-language-arts/>

Defoe, D. (2003). *Robinson Crusoe*. New York: Barnes and Noble.

Deshler, R., Palinscar, A. S., Biancarosa, G., & Nair, M. (2007). *Informed choices for struggling adolescent readers*. New York: Carnegie Corporation.

Great Books Foundation. (2015). *What is shared inquiry?* Retrieved from <http://www.greatbooks.org/professional-learning/what-is-shared-inquiry/>

Great Books Foundation. (2016). *Evidence for the effectiveness of Great Books K-12 programs and inquiry-based learning*. Retrieved from

http://www.greatbooks.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/17/GreatBooks_Effectiveness.pdf

Konigsburg, E. L. (1996). *The view from Saturday*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Lee, H. (1960). *To kill a mockingbird*. New York: Warner Books.

Murphy, P. K., Wilkinson, I. A. G., Soter, A. O., Hennessey, M. N., & Alexander, J. F. (2009). Examining the effects of classroom discussion on students' comprehension of text: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101(3), 740-764.

National Council of Teachers of English. (2006). *NCTE principles of adolescent literacy reform*.

National Paideia Center. (2015a). *How to teach a Socratic Seminar*. Retrieved from <http://www.paideia.org/about-paideia/socratic-seminar/>

National Paideia Center. (2015b). *The three columns of instruction*. Retrieved from <http://www.paideia.org/about-paideia/teaching-practices/>

Vonnegut, K. (1961). *"Harrison Bergeron," Welcome to the monkey house*. New York: Delacorte Press.

Louise Miller is a retired middle grades teacher from New Hanover County, NC.
Email: Louisemiller48@hotmail.com