

## Guidelines to Building a Successful Socratic Seminar

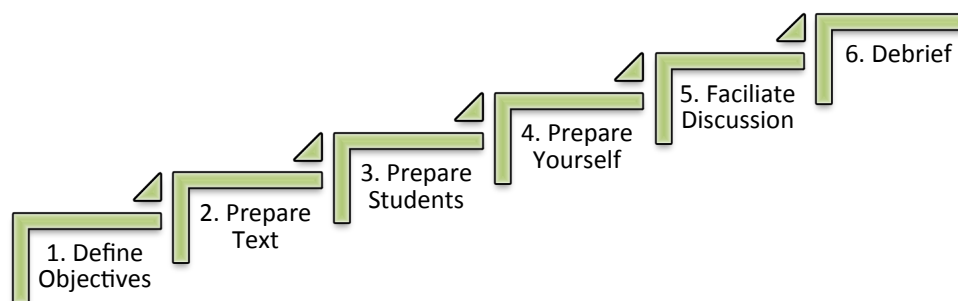
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A Socratic Seminar, sometimes called a Socratic Circle, is a teaching strategy that provides students the opportunity to think about and discuss literature or expository text to gain a deeper understanding of content than they might otherwise have with reading alone. It encourages participants to use their own voice and opinion without being overly focused on whether or not they have a right answer (Styslinger & Pollack, 2010). The process of the Seminar serves to balance the two purposes of education: the worth of free inquiry and the cultivation of values (Treadway, 1995).

In this Brief we explicate the six steps for conducting a Socratic Seminar, discuss some of the obstacles one may face in using the Seminar in practice, and consult the literature as we ask if the Seminar has any lasting measurable effects.

### Six Steps

The focus of a Socratic Seminar is inquiry. Its name is derived from the Greek philosopher Socrates, who himself challenged students to deepen their understanding through conversation and questioning. He did not provide answers to students, rather, he responded to their questions with more questions. This provided students with the impetus in order to examine their own thinking and look for inconsistencies within themselves (Chowning, 2009). Questioning students can cause them to reflect on their own thinking, which can build deeper and more meaningful understanding. There are six steps toward building a successful Seminar experience for students.



The **first step** in conducting a Socratic seminar is to clearly define learning objectives. Objectives are typically rooted in grade level standards, but will likely be explored in more depth than with other activities. As you ponder objectives, you might ask yourself what knowledge students will gain from the text, and, whether or not they can arrive at that learning through thoughtful discussion. Seminars are conducted so that students learn from themselves and each other, not the teacher. It is an approach that strays away from fact recitation and instead focuses on deeper understandings, however, learning will still occur under the umbrella of clearly defined objectives (Ball & Brewer, 1996).

The **second step** requires you to select and prepare the text. Choose text that contains powerful ideas and is at an appropriate level for students. A text with no clearly defined stance to be taken might be ideal (Chowning, 2009). In an article published in The Education Digest titled *Seminars Benefit All Students*, the authors argued that when choosing a topic for a Seminar, controversial is sometimes more effective. A topic that might be intimidating from a teachers' perspective, might actually be the topic that gets students the most interested.

There are several guidelines you should remember when grappling with what text to choose.

- It should be *replete with issues*, in order to sustain a discussion.
- The most effective texts are those in which there are *ambiguities or contradictions*. You want students to interpret the issues differently.
- “The seminar text [...] is not pure science but the ethics of science; not mathematical computation, but the theory and the usefulness of math; not the chapter on the six causes of the Civil War, but a soldier’s diary and the Gettysburg Address” (Ball & Brewer, p.33). Keep in mind the learning objectives of the Seminar, but also the notion that you are *building critical thinking skills*.

The **third step** in building a successful Seminar is to prepare students. Before beginning, you must teach the students the norms and procedures of the Seminar. In addition to the usual classroom norms, some examples of Seminar norms may be,

- Before the Seminar
  - Read the text carefully
  - Prepare notes about your feelings, opinions, and questions (Chowning, 2009)
- During the Seminar
  - Do not raise your hand, but wait your turn
  - Address others respectfully
  - Listen carefully
  - When speaking, refer to the text as evidence for your statements

Properly prepared students will come to the Seminar already having read the text and taken notes, and will be aware of the Seminar procedures.

The **fourth step** is the most crucial – prepare yourself. You must come up with open-ended questions to ask during the Seminar in order to keep the discussion alive. Interpretive questions, those in which there may be several answers, lead to the best conversations. When you initiate a conversation with a simple fact question, you tell students there is an answer you are looking for, and you stifle creativity. When you begin with an open-ended question, students are free to respond without fear of being wrong. Moreover, students will likely be more engaged in the discussion because they feel you are not trying to push them in one direction (Seminars Benefit All Students). You might consider the following guidelines as you develop questions:

- Questions should be open-ended, and lead students to think
- Questions should be accessible and clear for all students
- Questions should force students to be evaluative and make decisions
- Subsequent questions can be based on student responses & ideas (Treadway, 1995)
- Keep away from questions that conflict with individual students beliefs - “...the goal is to encourage well-justified reasoning based on evidence in the text” (Chowning, 2009, p.39).

Facilitating the seminar is the **fifth step** in the process, and the key to good facilitation is room environment. The classroom can be arranged so that students can look directly at one another. Chairs can be in a circle or square and teacher and students should be seated at the same level (Chowning, 2009). An alternate desk arrangement divides students into inner and outer circles or squares. Students in the middle circle discuss the article, while students in the outer circle actively listen and take notes. The outer circle then gives feedback to the inner circle. Then, both circles change roles. This arrangement, done the same each time a seminar is held, allows for predictability in the grouping and students can move quickly through the procedures without the teacher having to direct each and every time (Metzger, 1998). This arrangement is of particularly effective when needing to manage large class sizes.

You will be the seminar leader, however, you might never participate or give her opinion in the discussion. Treadway (1995) noted that, “As a seminar leader, the teacher’s role is to guide students to (1) a deeper and clarified consideration of the ideas of the text, (2) a respect for varying points of view, and (3) adherence to and respect for the seminar process” (p.28). The teacher leader poses questions related to the text, and leads the students to clarify or elaborate on their statements using evidence from the source. Follow-up questions may need to be asked to keep the discussion going, especially if the conversation gets off track. While students are engaged in discussion, you will note

whether or not certain students participated, and if there were any recurrent themes discussed. At the end of the discussion the leader, or better yet a student, can summarize the main points made in the discussion (Chowning, 2009).

The **sixth and final step** is to make sure there is proper follow-up. Directly after the Seminar the facilitator/leader should ask questions to debrief students. It is helpful for students to hear the leader share experiences from the seminar from a facilitator's point of view (Chowning, 2009). Strategies to debrief include,

- A follow up discussion about the process with a writing assignment
- Small group discussion about the process – What went well? What didn't? etc.
- A self-reflection checklist including gauging level of participation
- A discussion of topics for ensuing Seminars

### **Assessment**

Assessment of Socratic Seminar can be difficult, but you have several options. You can assess how students have prepared for the seminar by examining notes, look at student writing from the reflection phase, or keep a checklist of participation during the event. The Northwest Association of Biological Research Teachers has developed a rubric that rates students on their civility, discussion skills, and reasoning. Teachers in the primary and elementary grades can use this rubric to refine and focus subsequent discussions. In the upper grades, you might ask students to use this tool to assess themselves, or peers (Chowning, 2009).

### **Obstacles**

There are a few obstacles that may arise in getting a successful Socratic Seminar implemented in the classroom. Logistical issues like scheduling, room arrangements, copying materials, group size, and time restraints are all problems that can get in the way. Seminars also require you to be exceptionally knowledgeable of the material and well prepared with follow-up questions (Seminars Benefit All Students). The biggest obstacle is probably you having to let go of control, but you may be surprised at how students rise to the occasion of the conversation once they learn they will be treated like adults. Many report that the greatest rewards come from their ability to give students power, and build class community as students struggle to comprehend text together (Chowning, 2009).

### **Lasting Effects**

There have been several studies that have documented the effectiveness of Seminars. In one high school literature class, students were asked to evaluate the experience. Metzger (1998) noted some of their responses, "I learned the difference between participating and thinking" and "I learned to listen. I always participate a lot, but I sometimes don't listen.

Many quiet people have good ideas that aren't heard, so I learned to listen" (p.7). Students who attended schools that adopted Socratic methods were found to have used metacognition, critical thinking skills, and develop a higher interest in learning (Chowning, 2009).

Students thrive in an atmosphere where they are encouraged to have conversations in which they do not feel judged or critiqued. Similar opportunities include read aloud responses, paired readings, reader's theater, choral readings, or any other type of creative projects. These instances bring our shyest and most reluctant students the confidence to speak in larger group settings like a seminar (Styslinger & Pollack, 2010).

### Summary

A Socratic Seminar is a highly effective teaching strategy that promotes critical thinking and can be used at any grade level. Six Steps can help guide building successful Seminars – define objectives, select text, prepare students, prepare yourself, facilitate discussion, and reflect on the process. Socratic Seminar enables students to use high end reasoning and thinking in order to process new information. Many times seminars delve into ethical questions and students see different perspective on how to live their lives. The process of the Seminar prepares students to be *thinkers* in society (Treadway, 1995).

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