

A Few Tips, Guidelines, and Biases for Socratic Seminars

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1. The basic "life-cycle" of a Socratic seminar is to select a relevant text, distribute it to the class, assign a careful reading and "ticket", check for completion of the ticket to determine who is "in" or "out" of the circle, conduct the seminar, conduct the critique of the seminar, and assign a follow-up task of some sort. Seminars should only be conducted in a circle with each participant sitting at a desk or table. Name cards should be used to allow students to call each other by name and a dictionary should be readily available. Each participant must have his/her copy of the text out. If your room doesn't accommodate a circle, trade with a colleague, use a conference room, arrange tables in a part of the library, or find some other space that allows all students to see each other. All of these specific components "make a seminar, a seminar!"
2. All students should be expected to participate in Socratic seminars. There is nothing more elitist or contrary to the purposes of public education than to say: "I can imagine my older students or higher ability students doing seminars, but not lower ability kids or ninth graders." Seminars are one of the most egalitarian of classroom processes. In fact, experience has shown that many students who tend to be less likely to complete other homework, do complete seminar "tickets" so that they can participate in the conversation. The fact that it is "their" discussion, and that the central goal is about making meaning rather than responding in more rote ways, tends to spark engagement. All abilities and all histories of engagement in classroom activities find a common place around the seminar table. Sitting in a circle, using name cards, insisting that ideas be linked back to the text, and encouraging the construction of meaning are all elements that contribute to the egalitarian nature of Socratic seminars.
3. Socratic seminars differ from many "regular" classroom discussions. A seminar does not have a pre-determined destination and is not intended to "teach" some identifiable piece of content. Rather, a seminar goes where the group takes it, and uses as a measure of success the rigor with which the ideas are pursued and developed. While learning should take place, it is highly individual and idiosyncratic. Classroom discussions, however, often have an intended destination in terms of teacher objectives and content or ideas to be learned. A well conducted discussion allows for the free exchange of ideas and making of meaning, but the direction and outcomes are frequently determined by the teacher and her/his objectives. These, and more open-ended discussions, are examples of many interactive strategies for the teaching of, and wrestling with, identified content, skills, and issues. Seminars are a specific opportunity for a group of students to come together with the help of a skilled leader and consider the many issues, ideas, and values in the assigned text.
4. The actual Socratic seminar itself should be a "grade free zone." In other words, students should not be assigned a grade for either talking or not talking during the seminar. A goal of Socratic seminars is authentic conversation, so "paying" students to participate works against authenticity. Additionally, it seems unworkable to assign points for potentially mundane speaking, but not reward thoughtful and engaged silence. This is not to say that seminars are an "assessment free zone." The teacher should always be cognizant of each student's participation and engagement in the seminar. Are certain students talking too much? Are others consistently quiet? Does one student tend to take the discussion in extremely tangential directions? Are there side conversations? Does a student consistently misread text? All of these are questions that deserve careful attention and individual conferencing with students. This can be accomplished, however, without needing to add a grade to the grade book or force participation through a point regime.

5. Opening questions are difficult to determine! A good opening question is open-ended (or allows for open-ended responses), takes the participants into the text, and is something the leader has genuine curiosity about. A poor opening question is one that the leader knows the answer to and wants the group to "get" in the course of the seminar or asks participants how they "feel" about the text. Don't be afraid to let go of the opening question if other issues arise and the conversation is "working." Often, it becomes possible to revisit the opening question after no one has referred to it for quite a while. I try to write on the top of each text these three questions: where did you find that in the text, how do you know that, and how does what "X" said relate to what "Y" said? Effective seminar leading arises from careful listening and tracking of the conversation and helping the participants do better and more rigorous thinking. Careful listening will go much further than a lengthy list of questions you want to be sure to ask. Be prepared to set aside your own agenda in favor of helping the group do its work as best as it can.
6. The "critique" after the actual Socratic seminar is important to building a culture of seminars in the classroom and should always take place immediately after the seminar has ended. The critique is not a time to continue the seminar discussion. Rather, each participant is expected to share something specific he/she noticed about the seminar--about the leader, fellow participants, the conversation itself. A structured go-around where each has a chance to speak works best. Participants can pass, but should be expected to comment after everyone has had a chance. This works best when there is no comment, by either the leader or other participants, when observations are being made. While many comments are relatively mundane, experience leads to more insightful and targeted observations.
7. Take advantage of whatever training opportunities might be available for leading Socratic seminars. The immersion in seminar practice is invaluable to becoming a confident leader. Try, as well, to pull together a group of individuals who lead seminars and have an "adult" seminar once a month. Share responsibility for finding and distributing a text, come together for a couple of hours in the evening, have a seminar with one of you leading, critique it, and then troubleshoot your own classroom experiences and share text ideas.

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