Sacramento County Office of Education

Capital Metropolitan Area AVID and the Sacramento County Office of Education present:

Socratic Seminar

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> *"The harder we question, the harder we hunt. The harder we hunt, the more we learn."*
>
> Patrick Rothfuss

Inquiry

Inquiry is about thinking: thinking that is revealed in questioning, analyzing, and constructing knowledge and understanding. Inquiry in a classroom is both teacher- and student-driven. Teachers pose questions and guide students into deeper levels of thought. Students use questioning processes to probe the meaning of texts, solve problems, or design investigations.

Inquiry puts students at the center of an active learning process in which the teacher is the facilitator of learning. Inquiry engages students with their own thinking processes (i.e., metacognition). It teaches them to think for themselves instead of chasing the "right answer." The result is student ownership of the learning process and a better understanding of concepts and values (Donohue & Gill, 2009). Derek Bok (2008), former president of Harvard University, says that "the ability to think critically—to ask pertinent questions, recognize and define problems, identify the arguments on all sides of an issue, search for and use relevant data and arrive in the end at carefully reasoned judgment—is the indispensable means of making effective use of information and knowledge."

One of the tenets of AVID's philosophy is that inquiry is fundamental to rigorous teaching and deep learning. AVID uses Costa's Levels of Thinking as a framework for inquiry. The three levels provide a concise approach to the levels of intellectual functioning represented in the framework. Students thinking at higher levels of cognition is at the heart of classroom rigor. Many AVID strategies—such as tutorials, Socratic Seminars, and Philosophical Chairs—are built around students asking higher level questions to clarify, analyze, and synthesize material and discuss with each other in a logical, reasoned manner. Conley (2007) emphasizes the necessity of inquiry and thinking processes for students' college readiness: "In order for students to be prepared for success in college classes, they must be able to engage in complex problem solving, understand and analyze research, and reason with precision and accuracy."

By the end of this chapter, the reader will be able to:

- Use effective questioning techniques in the classroom to promote students' critical thinking or higher order thinking skills.
- Create a classroom culture that nurtures thinking and inquiry.
- Engage students in using Costa's Levels of Thinking to think more deeply and broadly.
- Teach students to identify and employ the strategies and skills of successful learners.

Pre-Assessment for Teachers

This pre-assessment is intended to assist teachers in assessing their current level of supporting inquiry.

On a 1–5 scale—with 5 being the highest level—rate your current ability to complete the following:

Objective	Rating	Explanation and Evidence of Rating
Use effective questioning techniques in the classroom to promote students' critical thinking or higher order thinking skills. *Consider:* • *What activities do you use to teach inquiry/thinking skills?* • *How might you incorporate more thinking and questioning processes?*		
Create a classroom culture that nurtures thinking and inquiry. *Consider:* • *How do students view themselves as learners—as active or passive participants?* • *Do students feel safe asking questions and responding during thought-provoking discourse?*		
Engage students in using Costa's Levels of Thinking to think more deeply and broadly. *Consider:* • *What scaffolds are in place to teach higher level thinking skills to students?* • *Do students understand how thinking at higher levels promotes deep learning?*		
Teach students to identify and employ the strategies and skills of successful learners. *Consider:* • *Do students frequently participate in inquiry-based, structured debates and dialogues?* • *How are students taught academic skills, such as active listening, self-reflection, and structured discourse?*		

Inquiry and Levels of Thinking

A tenet of AVID's philosophy is that inquiry is fundamental to rigorous teaching, on par with such skills as reading and writing. Inquiry, simply put, is about effective questioning, and the product of regular inquiry is students who can think critically.

Aspects of Student-Driven Inquiry

One aspect of inquiry in the classroom is student-driven. Development of students' college-readiness capabilities must include learning how to ask thought-provoking questions about content. Making focused observations is a thinking skill that helps students make sense of content material, experiences, or their environment and leads to authentic questioning. This provides a natural transition into the thinking-level models proposed by Arthur Costa (2001) and Benjamin Bloom (1956).

AVID uses Costa's Levels of Thinking as the framework for inquiry. The three levels present a concise, direct approach, which aids accessibility for students over other expanded models. The gathering/recall (Level 1), processing (Level 2), and application (Level 3) levels involve intellectual functions of increasing complexity. The thinking skills and inquiry-based strategies can be taught to students at all grade levels and all subject areas, but they must be scaffolded so that students learn incrementally and with support.

Aspects of Teacher-Driven Inquiry

A second aspect of inquiry in the classroom is teacher-driven, as teachers pose interesting, open-ended questions to draw students into the content material and "kick-start" student-driven inquiry. Well-formed questions provide for diverse responses that incorporate content and thinking skills. Teachers can then use the student responses to frame their follow-up questions—"How?" "Why?" and "What if?"—and guide students to develop and refine their thinking competencies (Valdez, Carter, & Rodgers, 2013). The think-aloud process is another strategy that teachers can use to model the inquiry inherent in many thought processes, such as analyzing a text.

Students can learn how to pose, respond to, and identify higher level questions as teachers model these processes in the classroom. Writing higher level or critical thinking questions based on subject matter material must be deliberately and strategically taught to students so that they become aware of their own cognitive processing.

Socratic Seminar

Socratic Seminar is a structured activity designed to engage students in deep thinking. The Greek philosopher Socrates believed that encouraging students to think for themselves was more important than filling their heads with the "right" answers. The Socratic method of teaching is a form of inquiry-based discourse focused on questioning to spur critical thinking and drive ideation. It is through exploration, dialogue, considering new perspectives, and constant questioning that students develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Through Socratic Seminars, students develop confidence in articulating their ideas to others while providing supporting evidence with reasoned thinking.

Metacognitive Skills

Socratic Seminars offer more educational purpose than practicing academic dialogue alone. Socratic Seminars provide teachers with opportunities to explore the metacognitive skills that academically successful students employ. In addition to practicing their academic dialoguing abilities, students will become more effective communicators as they learn to differentiate between social and academic language, as well as hone their listening and non-verbal communication techniques. As students develop these abilities, they gain confidence in more advanced levels of inquiry and improve their ability to analyze complex problems.

Prerequisites

If students are to feel safe in expressing their thoughts and opinions without the fear of being judged or ridiculed, it is important to recognize that they need opportunities and guidance to rise to a certain comfort level with their classmates. It is recommended that Socratic Seminars—regardless of configuration—be attempted only after students have successfully built a positive sense of community, with at least Stage 2 relational capacity. Debriefing the Socratic Seminar, and varying the style, will provide opportunities for deepening and broadening the Socratic Seminar experience. With these points in mind, Socratic Seminars are powerful avenues for students' personal growth.

4.10: Socratic Seminar: Classic Style

Student Objective
Students will develop a deeper understanding of complex ideas through rigorous and thoughtful dialogue.

Overview
Socratic Seminar: Classic Style is a structured, collaborative dialogue, focusing on a common text or resource, which students have analyzed and toward which they have prepared questions to spur the discussion. This strategy provides a format for students to practice skills in critical thinking, reading, and inquiry, as they participate in the inquiry-based dialogue.

Materials/Set-Up
- Handouts:
  - 4.10a: Dialogue vs. Debate for Socratic Seminar
  - 4.10b: The Role and Responsibilities of the Socratic Seminar Participant
  - 4.10c: Rules of Engagement for Socratic Seminar
  - 4.10d: Academic Language Scripts for Socratic Seminar
- Teacher Resources:
  - 4.10e: The Elements of Socratic Seminar
  - 4.10f: Text Selection for Socratic Seminar
  - 4.10g: Sample Class Arrangements for Socratic Seminar
  - 4.10h: Tips for Socratic Seminars
- In advance of the activity, complete the following:
  - Provide students with a text to read and prepare for prior to the Socratic Seminar.
  - Refer to Text Selection for Socratic Seminar for a list of potential sources of seminar texts.

Instructional Steps
1. Discuss the purpose and format of the Socratic Seminar activity with students (see Teacher Resources noted in Materials/Set-Up, above).
2. Utilizing Sample Class Arrangements for Socratic Seminar, choose the class arrangement or seminar variation that you will use and review the arrangement with students.
3. Using Dialogue vs. Debate for Socratic Seminar, guide students to an understanding of the difference between these two discourse styles.
4. Review the "Before the Seminar" section of The Role and Responsibilities of the Socratic Seminar Participant.
5. Instruct students to read or study the subject or prompt, incorporating the appropriate **critical reading process strategies**, such as marking the text, pausing to connect ideas, writing in the margins, taking Cornell notes, or analyzing visuals.

The critical reading process is to plan, build vocabulary, pre-read, interact with the text, and extend beyond the text. Strategies to support these steps include tracking vocabulary, numbering the paragraphs, marking the text, and writing in the margins.

Example: "Before we read this text, let's number the paragraphs. Now, I'd like you to read only the title, first paragraph, and last paragraph, and then write a one-paragraph prediction about what this text covers."

6. Remind students to complete the following:
    - Understand the purpose for reading, following the reading prompt, if provided.
    - Preview the text or subject, thinking about any teacher- or student-provided background information, to determine the structure of the text and identify possible biases.
7. Have students generate at least two open-ended, higher level questions—Costa's Levels 2 or 3—that will help them probe deeper into the meaning of the text and the author's intention.
8. Remind students of the four essential elements of Socratic Seminar, which are described in Elements of Socratic Seminar.
9. Review the "During the Seminar" section of The Role and Responsibilities of the Socratic Seminar Participant and the Rules of Engagement for Socratic Seminar. Include your directions on what to do when the dialogue moves into debate.
10. Review the Rubric for Socratic Seminar (which follows in the Socratic Seminar: Debriefing activity) or another assessment tool of your choice, so students know how their participation will ultimately be assessed.
11. Instruct students to review the Academic Language Scripts for Socratic Seminar handout and have it available to use during the seminar.
12. Ask students to arrange their chairs into a circle. They should be able to see everyone without having to lean forward or backward. Students should also have all of their necessary materials for participating in the Seminar—marked text, questions, pen and paper for taking notes—with them.
13. Determine the opening question for the dialogue using one of the methods below:
    - The Seminar leader, who can also be seated in the circle, poses an opening question relating to the text in order to initiate the dialogue.
    - Each student in the circle reads one of his/her questions. After listening carefully, the Seminar leader or the students can select one as the starting question to open the conversation.
14. Begin the dialogue with participants responding to the opening question. The dialogue continues as group members ask clarifying questions or offer responses. Consistently require students to build upon the comments and analysis of others.
15. Continue the Socratic Seminar in this manner until all of the questions have been explored or time has drawn to a close.
16. Consider conducting a **Whip-Around** so that each student can provide a closing thought or rhetorical question that summarizes their thinking.
17. The final step of the Socratic Seminar is to debrief and reflect upon the process. Refer to Socratic Seminar: Debriefing for more information on this step.

Whip-Around is a strategy used to activate prior knowledge and quickly process information. With students in small groups of four or five, present a question or discussion prompt. Going around the group sequentially, each student then comments on the question or discussion prompt.

Example: "In your groups, do a Whip-Around about the importance of making positive introductions and first impressions. You will have three minutes, and each student needs to contribute at least one response."