

WHAT IS A SOCRATIC SEMINAR? A Socratic seminar is an exploratory intellectual discussion of a text. The idea is based on the age-old method of Socrates and later refinements by Mortimer Adler (*Paideia Proposal*), The Great Books Foundation, The National Paideia Center, The Coalition of Essential Schools and others.

A Socratic seminar IS:

- *a student-centered activity in which students take ownership and play leadership roles.
- *a chance for students to practice critical thinking as they grapple with complex issues and ideas.
- *a democratic forum in which all participate as equals (including the teacher).
- *an opportunity for students to practice good citizenship by listening, building, collaborating and showing respect.
- *an open-ended exploratory forum aimed at an enlarged understanding of the material.
- *a rigorous practice in careful reading, thinking, listening and speaking.
- *a flexible strategy that can be used to start a unit, conclude a unit, as preparation for writing . . . etc, etc, etc.
- *a chance for students to develop and pose questions of their own, questions that have meaning and importance to them.

A Socratic seminar is NOT:

- *an interrogation in which the teacher tries to extract correct answers.
- *a way to quiz students on what they've learned.
- *an excuse for students to digress into irrelevant topics.
- *a competition for right answers with students looking to please the teacher.
- *a debate in which one side tries to defeat the other.
- *a conversation amongst the 4 or 5 most talkative students in the class.

BENEFITS OF SOCRATIC SEMINAR: STUDENTS WILL

- *practice thinking for themselves.
- *learn to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate texts and ideas.
- *engage and retain more than through passive learning.
- *develop character through listening and collaboration.
- *practice expressing their ideas cogently, forcefully and concisely.
- *develop academic "habits of mind" (questioning, reasoning, supporting, arguing).
- *prepare deeply and effectively for tests, writing assignments, and real-world problems.
- *become better citizens by practicing skills essential to democracy.

THREE SIMPLE RULES:

1. **Listen**—No one speaks while someone else is speaking. No side conversations.
2. **Build**—Speakers learn to incorporate the ideas of others into their own remarks, and find ways to disagree with others respectfully and tactfully.
3. **Refer to the Text**—As often as possible, speakers must support their assertions and connect their ideas directly to details in the text. All students must have read the text closely with annotations.

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

1. **Factual**—A question based on a fact in the text. It has a clear-cut correct answer. These questions do not lead to productive exploratory discussion because they are "closed" rather than "open-ended." **Ex. What is the first component of happiness that Aristotle lists in paragraph three?**
2. **Interpretive**—A question that has multiple possible answers that can be supported with evidence from the text. These are excellent seminar questions because they are "open" but require students to go back into the text to support their various views. **Ex. According to Aristotle, is happiness easy or difficult to achieve? How would Aristotle explain the fact that so many people are unhappy?**

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3. **Evaluative**—A question that has many possible answers, but that is based on each individual's own beliefs and values rather than textual evidence. These questions make great discussion starters or quick write topics. **Ex. Do you think that a person can simply choose to be happy? Is happiness a choice? Does happiness require effort to achieve? Can a lazy person be truly happy?**

A STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS

Prior to seminar day:

1. **Select a short, challenging text.** Ideally the text is one that takes your curriculum to a deeper level, deals with broader implications of the subject you're studying, explores the moral, ethical or social questions raised by the material, etc. (i.e. In biology class, perhaps a short article on cloning).
2. **Read and annotate the text carefully.** Using the 4 "I"s strategy is helpful.
3. **Write a few interpretive (level 2) and a few evaluative (level 3) questions.** These should be questions you genuinely wonder about, or that puzzle you, or that you really want to hear others' opinions about. You will probably want to inject some of your questions into the discussion, but remember that students' own questions are the foundation of an effective Socratic seminar.
4. **Assign the short reading to students.** Have students do an initial reading of the text and make their own notes.

On seminar day:

1. **Have students read the text again and add to their notes and questions.**
2. **Have pairs share their notes and questions with each other.***
3. **As a whole class, brainstorm a list of questions.** Try to emphasize interpretive questions. This list will form a tentative agenda for the discussion.
4. **Use one or more of your evaluative (level 3) questions as a quick write topic to get the group focused for the discussion.***
5. **Appoint a student as facilitator or you can facilitate yourself.** The facilitator's job is to pose the initial question, call on participants and keep the discussion moving forward by posing new questions from the agenda as necessary. However, all participants should be encouraged to pose questions.
6. **Appoint a few observers.** The observers' job is to pay close attention to the discussion, take notes and report their findings at the end. You can ask observers to keep track of direct references to the text (good), side conversations (bad), the number of speakers who participate, or anything else you would like to be observed.
7. **Start the discussion.** Having students arranged in a circle works best. You could begin by asking for responses to the quick write or one of the questions the class brainstormed.
8. **Let the discussion happen.** This is often the hardest part. Remember, your job is not to get the class to a particular answer or destination, but rather to support them as they practice becoming better thinkers, speakers and listeners. Don't try to control it too much. Let students be responsible for figuring it out. This is their chance to grapple with the material. Steer gently from the back of the boat. Try letting 10 students speak in between each of your contributions. Awkward periods of silence are OK. Don't feel you must jump in and rescue the discussion. Let the students work it out.
9. **At the close, let the observers share their observations and you share yours.** Discuss with the class what went well. Offer praise. Discuss what we can work to improve next time.
10. **Realize that Socratic seminars take practice.** Expect the first few to be a little rough. Start with short discussions (20-30 min) to get the feel of it. All the messiness is worth it when students start to take charge and gain real ownership over their learning.
11. **Evaluation.** Be clear with students about what quality participation means. There are various scoring guides you can use, but the key is that students know they are being judged not on quantity (how many times they speak) but on quality (listening, building, referring to the text, showing respect, being a team player). Make it clear that all students are expected to speak in the discussion, but let students choose their moments rather than "putting them on the spot." A student should have the right to "pass" once in a while. There will be lots of opportunities for everyone to contribute. Extremely shy students may eventually get more comfortable, but could also be appointed facilitator or observer to ensure that they will have a speaking role during or at the end of the discussion. This can also be done with students who tend to dominate so as to "contain" their participation.

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