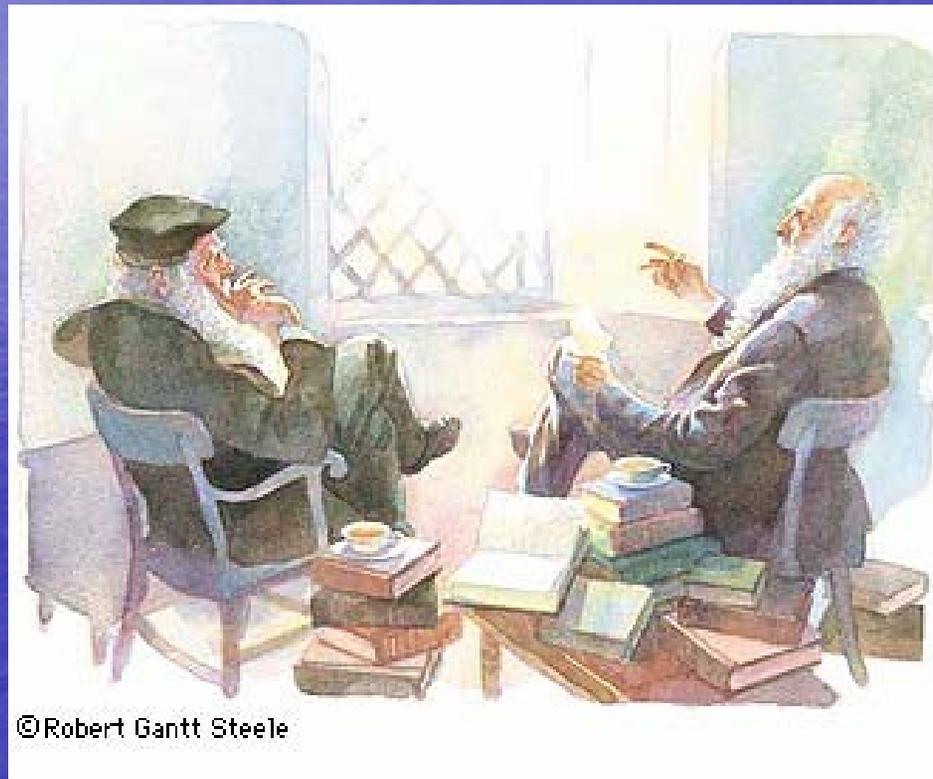


Socratic Seminar: The Power of Questions



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What is Socratic Seminar?

- A teaching strategy to encourage students to engage in critical thinking, listening, communicating, and wonder
- A forum in which *students* determine the flow of classroom discussion and *teachers* serve as facilitators
- An atmosphere of intellectual engagement, cooperation, and conversation where students learn the difference between DIALOGUE and DEBATE
- The goal is *not* to answer questions, but to generate more questions

Boy, I wish I had learned this in elementary school...

- Dialogue



VS!

- Debate



Socratic Seminar: The teacher's role

- Facilitator, not director
- Teacher's sole responsibility is to pose well thought out, open-ended questions
- The teacher gives no response, negative or positive, to the students' discussion
- The teacher can pose more questions to "move" discussion from stalemate positions

Socratic Seminar: Guidelines

1. The group sits in a circle, allowing all participants to make eye contact.
2. Only students who have prepared for the seminar should participate in the discussion.
3. Silence is not a negative.
4. Allow discussion to flow on its own.
5. Mutual respect is a key to successful seminars.
6. One student speaks at a time.
7. Allow for post-seminar reflection time.

Socratic Seminar: The students' responsibilities

- Being prepared for the seminar
- Directing the flow of the discussion within the seminar
- Determining the meaning of the seminar
- Constructing their own analysis of the seminar
- Utilizing critical thinking, listening, and communicating skills
- Respecting and honoring the opinions and voices of all other participants

Some questions for thought...

- What do you do if you have a particularly shy student who hates to talk in class?
- How do you make sure that all students– not just the really verbal ones– get to participate equally in the seminar?
- What do you do if no one talks?
- What makes an appropriate text for Seminar discussion?
- How do you make sure that your students are really “learning”?
- How do you– and should you– assess Socratic Seminar?

Socratic Seminar: Suggested Rules

- Do not raise your hand during discussion.
- Do not interrupt another person. Begin speaking when he or she has finished.
- Be respectful of all participants' opinions.
- Disagreement is fine. Do so in a respectful manner.
- Don't direct your comments to the teacher— direct them to everyone.
- Support your opinions with evidence from the text.
- Use all of your "talking chips."
- Don't be afraid to ask questions!
- Remember... there's no one "RIGHT ANSWER."

Pre-seminar activities help kids make personal connections, activate prior knowledge, increase motivation and interest, and become personally knowledgeable about the topic.

- Strategies might include:

- Reader Response (brief discussion)

- Free (or fast) writing activities

- Webbing

- Personal and group research

- Thought Questions

Post-seminar activities help kids make personal connections based on the insights gained during the seminar and apply these connections to their own lives.

Strategies might include:

Journal writing

Self-assessment narratives

Authentic follow-up projects (such as writing an editorial for a local newspaper on the topic covered in the seminar . . . from several perspectives)

Differentiation and the Socratic Seminar: Is it possible?

- Center seminars around *themes* or *concepts* rather than specific materials. (readiness)
- Assign preparatory materials/texts/ readings at varying levels of difficulty, linked by a common theme. (readiness)
- Ask questions requiring a variety of kinds of perspectives/expertise/knowledge. (interest/ readiness/ learning profile)
- Use a variety of types of thinking prompts to provoke discussion. (learning profile)
- Integrate “break-out” groups into the seminar format. (interest/ readiness/learning profile)
- Differentiate follow-up activities. (interest/readiness/learning profile)

Socratic Seminar

Topic: A New Land

Purpose: To begin a unit on exploration and to spark interest in pursuing a research quest about explorers.

Focus Concepts: Discovery, change

Lesson Sequence:

- Students read a story about Columbus' discovery of America and how it affected the people who were already inhabiting the land (you could also differentiate these readings by reading ability).
- Socratic Seminar on exploration (see questions). Students should always be guided to use specific examples from the article that they read to provide evidence for their responses.

Seminar follow-up

- Students list two important, unresolved questions that the seminar provoked in them about exploration that they'd like to explore further
- Students use these "burning questions" about exploration as guides to help them design and conduct a research quest.

Socratic Seminar: A New Land

Seminar prompting questions:

- What does it mean to “explore” something?
- What can we gain by “exploring” something?
- Is “discovery” always a good thing?
- Why do you think people like to explore and discover?
- Do you think other creatures in nature like to explore and discover, or does this seem to be something that only humans like to do?
- Should there be rules about exploring and about discovery?



Socratic Seminar: 9th grade Literature

Topic: Love stinks, yeah yeah...

Purpose: To bring the whole-class reading of *Romeo and Juliet* to a close and to spark interests to pursue in independent readings.

Focus Concepts: Love, conflict

Lesson Sequence:

1. Socratic Seminar on the nature of love. Students should always be guided to use specific examples from *Romeo and Juliet* and other texts read in class to provide evidence for their responses.
2. Seminar follow-up
 - a. Students list two important, unresolved questions that the seminar provoked in them and that they'd like to explore further
 - b. Students use these "burning questions" as guides to help them choose an independent reading book to read next. Students can go to the library, get advice from the librarian, or consult a suggested reading list provided by the teacher.

Socratic Seminar: Love stinks...

Seminar prompting questions:

- Do you think Romeo and Juliet were really in love? Why or why not?
- What is love? Are there different types of love?
- Is love a basic human need, as basic as the need for food and water?
- How is love portrayed in the media? How is this similar to or different from how love is portrayed in *Romeo and Juliet*? How accurate is this portrayal?
- How much do you think the vision of love depicted in *Romeo and Juliet* has influenced our society's vision of romantic love?
- Does loving someone make us better people? More selfish? How does it affect us?
- How do we choose who we love? *Do we choose who we love?*
- Can love be a destructive force? Is it always a constructive force?
- How are love and conflict related?



Socratic Seminar: Genetic Engineering

- Students read different readings about genetic engineering, differentiated according to student readiness in science— one from a popular magazine (such as *People*) or newspaper, one from a high-school level textbook, and one an advanced scientific journal.
- Students do a “quick write/ I think” reaction to the reading in their journals.

Prompting Questions for Genetic Engineering Socratic Seminar

- Should there be limits to scientific experimentation?
- Who has the right to decide about what these limits should be?
- What ethics should guide science?
- What are "ethics"? What is "science"?
- What are some of the possible benefits of genetic engineering?
- What are some of the potential consequences of genetic engineering?
- What makes us as humans continually push forward the boundaries of knowledge?

Most important things...

- Choose an interesting, engaging, and rich text.
- Allow students a little time to get “warmed up” before seminar.
- Pose engaging, open-ended question to start off.
- Be prepared with follow-up questions if conversation stalls.
- Do NOT take over the discussion. Just be a participant like everyone else.
- Do NOT make evaluative statements.
- Model respectful behavior.