Socratic Seminars

Definition:
A Socratic Seminar is a scholarly discussion of an essential question in which student opinions are shared, proven, refuted, and refined through dialogue with other students. In classes of more than fifteen students, the fishbowl format for Socratic seminars should be used. In this format, the teacher or seminar leader facilitates the discussion. Only half the class, seated in an inner circle, participates in the discussion at one time. The other half of the class, seated in an outer circle, consists of the students who act as observers and coaches.

Advantages:
- Provides opportunities for critical readings of texts
- Teaches respect for diverse ideas, people, and practices
- Enhances students' knowledge and research base
- Creates a community of inquiry
- Develops critical thinking, problem solving, speaking, and listening skills
- Clarifies one's ideas, ethics and values
- Maximizes student participation
- Encourages divergent thinking

The Seminar:
- Students sit in one of two circles (inner circle for participants, outer circle for coaches).
- Teacher poses the essential or opening question.
- The teacher may need to ask follow up questions to lead the participants to greater understanding of the text.
- Students respond to the question orally or in writing.
- Teacher facilitates the seminar discussion by guiding students to a deeper and clarified consideration of the ideas of the text, a respect for varying points of view, and adherence to and respect for the seminar process.
- Students cite evidence from the text, ask questions, speak, listen, make connections, and add insight or new knowledge to discuss their point of view in regards to the opening question.
- Teacher takes notes for evaluative purposes but provides no verbal or nonverbal feedback that either affirms or challenges what the students say. The teacher may ask follow-up questions; however, teacher questions are used sparingly and deliberately.
- When satisfied that the opening question has been thoroughly explored, the teacher asks one or more additional questions to examine central points of the text.
- Students may pose new questions when the discussion is exhausted. New questions posed must relate to students’ ideas and contributions in response to the initial essential question.
- Once the text has been explored thoroughly the teacher may ask a closing question, which is derived from the text but which seeks to have students apply the topic to their own lives or the world.
- The teacher will thank students for their participation and summarize the main ideas and concepts examined during the discussion.
Rules and Roles for Socratic Seminars

The Participants:
- May only participate in the discussion if they have read the selection
- Must support their opinions with evidence from the text
- May speak at any time during the seminar with respect for the other participants
- May whisper with their coaches if the teacher allows it
- May refer to other works the class has read if the teacher allows it
- May write notes to themselves during the discussion if the teacher allows it
- May ask relevant questions of other participants

The Coaches:
- Must evaluate the participant's performance during the seminar
- Must provide oral and written feedback to the participant after the seminar
- May not speak to their participants during the seminar unless the teacher allows it
- May not speak to other participants or coaches at any time

The Teacher/Leader:
- Must provide adequate "think time" for students to respond appropriately
- Can only ask questions; cannot state his or her opinions or interpretations
- Must require participants to support their opinions with evidence from the text
- Must encourage participants to agree and disagree for substantial reasons
- May record the number and quality of participant responses
- Student self-evaluation
- Peer evaluation

Bibliography


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