

Socratic Seminar

Background

The Socratic method of teaching is based on Socrates' theory that it is more important to enable students to think for themselves than to merely fill their heads with "right" answers. Therefore, he regularly engaged his pupils in dialogues by responding to their questions with questions, instead of answers. This process encourages divergent thinking rather than convergent.

Students are given opportunities to "examine" a common piece of text, whether it is in the form of a novel, poem, art print, or piece of music. After "reading" the common text open-ended questions are posed.

Open-ended questions allow students to think critically, analyze multiple meanings in text, and express ideas with clarity and confidence. After all, a certain degree of emotional safety is felt by participants when they understand that this format is based on dialogue and not discussion/debate.

Dialogue is exploratory and involves the suspension of biases and prejudices. Discussion/debate is a transfer of information designed to win an argument and bring closure. Americans are great at discussion/debate. We do not dialogue well. However, once teachers and students learn to dialogue, they find that the ability to ask meaningful questions that stimulate thoughtful interchanges of ideas is more important than "the answer."

Participants in a Socratic Seminar respond to one another with respect by carefully listening instead of interrupting. Students are encouraged to "paraphrase" essential elements of another's ideas before responding, either in support of or in disagreement. Members of the dialogue look each other in the "eyes" and use each other's names. This simple act of socialization reinforces appropriate behaviors and promotes team building.

Pre-Seminar Question-Writing

1. Before you come to a Socratic Seminar class, please read the assigned text and complete the assigned activity.
2. Once you receive the seminar text, allow yourself plenty of time to read, think, and annotate the text so you will be ready for the upcoming seminar. Here are some sentence starters for you to note as you read and prepare.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ❖ What puzzles me is... | ❖ I have questions about... |
| ❖ I'd like to know more about... | ❖ One way to use this idea is to... |
| ❖ This is similar to what I know about... | ❖ Another point of view is... |
| ❖ This is very different from... | ❖ What if it meant... |
| ❖ The big idea seems to be... | ❖ I have questions about... |

3. You should circle, underline, or highlight the text and note, draw, or sketch in the margins of the text to record your preparation thinking. It will make it much, much easier for you to participate in the seminar.

Guidelines for Participants in a Socratic Seminar

1. Refer to the text when needed during the discussion. A seminar is not a test of memory. You are not "learning the subject;" your goal is to understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in the text.
2. A successful seminar is one in which the members work together to help each other understand the reading and the questions that develop out of the readings and conversations. Discuss what you want to find out, not what you know.
3. Help other participants build on other incomplete ideas.
4. Come to class with questions, thoughts, or feelings about the text.
5. Do not stay confused; ask for clarification. State incomplete thoughts, feelings, or questions. The seminar is about thinking out loud not about stating answers.
6. Direct your thoughts, questions to the other participants, not to the teacher.
7. Don't raise hands; take turns speaking (you must give others an opportunity to speak!)
8. Listen carefully.
9. Discuss ideas rather than each other's opinions.
10. You are responsible for the seminar, even if you don't know it or admit it.

Expectations of Participants in a Socratic Seminar

When evaluating your Socratic Seminar participation, I ask the following questions. Did you...

- Speak loudly and clearly?
- Use the text/documents to find support?
- Listen to others respectfully?
- Stick with the subject?
- Talk to each other, not the teacher?
- Paraphrase accurately?
- Ask for help to clear up confusion?
- Cite reasons and evidence for their statements?
- Support each other?
- Avoid hostile exchanges?
- Question others in a civil manner?
- Seem prepared?

What is the Difference between Dialogue and Debate?

- Dialogue is collaborative: multiple sides work toward shared understanding.
- In dialogue, one listens to understand, to make meaning, and to find common ground.
- Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.
- Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: openness to being wrong and an openness to change.
- In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, expecting that the other people's reflection will help improve it rather than threaten it.
- Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.
- Dialogue remains open-ended.
- Debate is oppositional: two opposing sides try to prove each wrong.
- In debate, one listens to find flaws, to spot differences, and to counter arguments
- Debate defends assumptions as truth.
- Debate creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right.
- In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.
- Debate call for strengths in one's beliefs.
- Debate demands a conclusion.

Easy (and Important) Ways to Become More Involved in a Socratic Seminar

Ask a clarifying question.	<i>"I'm not sure I fully understand what you're saying? Can you restate what you just said?" What do you think the author means in line 6?"</i>
Paraphrase another participant's ideas for clear understanding.	<i>"So what you're saying is..."</i>
Ask for specific illustrations.	<i>"Can you give us an example to illustrate your point?"</i>
Question the relevance of questions & comments.	<i>"Could you explain how that question or comment relates to the current point?"</i>
Search for possible alternate perspectives.	<i>"Are there some ways to interpret this? Or Think about how someone from a different perspective might view this."</i>
Question assertions and underlying assumptions.	<i>"Are we assuming that it's true that..."</i>
Identify common ground to move the dialogue forward.	<i>"Can we take it as a given that _____ is true?"</i>
Ask for specific textual support.	<i>"Is there a quote that reflects _____?"</i>
Identify connections to previous comments or questions.	<i>"Does this relate back to the earlier idea about...?"</i>

Socratic Seminar Observation Checklist

Your Name: _____ Partner's Name: _____

Directions: Each time your partner does one of the following put a check in the box.

Speaks in the discussion

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Makes eye contact with other speakers or as she/he speaks

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Refers to the text

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Asks a new or follow-up question

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Responds to another speaker

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Paraphrases and adds to another speaker's ideas

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Encourages another participant to speak

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Interrupts another speaker

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Engages in side conversation

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Dominates the conversation

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AFTER the discussion: What is the most interesting thing your partner said?

AFTER the discussion: What would you like to have said in the discussion?

Socratic Seminar Self-Assessment Participant

Name: _____ Seminar Text: _____

**Directions: Score your performance in today's seminar using the following criteria:
4 = Excellent 3 = Good 2 = Showing Progress 1 = Needs Improvement**

- _____ I read the text closely, marked the text, and took notes in advance.
- _____ I came prepared with higher level questions related to the text.
- _____ I contributed several relevant comments.
- _____ I cited specific evidence from the text to support an idea.
- _____ I asked at least one thoughtful, probing question.
- _____ I questioned or asked someone to clarify their comment.
- _____ I built on another person's idea by restating, paraphrasing, or synthesizing.
- _____ I encouraged other participants to enter the conversation.
- _____ I treated all other participants with dignity and respect.

Overall Score (circle one): 1 1.5 2 2.5 3 3.5 4

Two goals I have for our next seminar are:

- 1.
- 2.

An area where I would like help:

Socratic Seminar Evaluation : /80 Points

51

	Beginning – 0 pts	Developing –10 pts	Focused –15 pts	Exemplary –20 pts
Speaking/ Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Offers little commentary <input type="checkbox"/> Distracts the group by interrupting other speakers or by offering off topic questions and comments. <input type="checkbox"/> Ignores the discussion and its participants <input type="checkbox"/> Does not participate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Participant demonstrates a general knowledge of the text <input type="checkbox"/> Relies more upon his or her opinion, and less on the text to drive comments <input type="checkbox"/> Emphasizes own ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates a good knowledge of the text <input type="checkbox"/> Remarks often refer back to general parts of the text. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates a deep knowledge of the text <input type="checkbox"/> Remarks often refer back to specific parts of the text. <input type="checkbox"/> Moves conversation forward <input type="checkbox"/> Asks probing questions <input type="checkbox"/> Speaks to all participants
Listening/ Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Does not listen to others, offers no commentary to further the discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Is actively listening to others, but does not offer clarification and/or follow-up to others' comments <input type="checkbox"/> Loses track of conversation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Shows that he/she is actively listening to others and offers clarification and/or follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Offers no commentary to further the discussion <input type="checkbox"/> Pays attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Shows that he/she is actively listening to other participants offers clarification and/or follow-up that extends the conversation <input type="checkbox"/> Asks for clarification <input type="checkbox"/> Builds on others comments
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Comes to the seminar ill-prepared with little understanding of the text <input type="checkbox"/> No notes <input type="checkbox"/> No marked text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Is less prepared, with few notes and no marked text <input type="checkbox"/> Reads text, few notes and creates questions that do not encourage dialogue. (yes, no) <input type="checkbox"/> Comes with some text preparation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Comes to the seminar prepared, with notes and a marked text <input type="checkbox"/> Reads closely, takes notes and develops few high level questions before seminar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Comes to the seminar prepared, with notes and a marked text <input type="checkbox"/> Reads closely, takes notes and develops several high level questions before seminar
Respectful Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Acts disrespectful; inappropriate participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Judges others' ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates patience and respect toward others' opinions/ideas throughout majority of Seminar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates patience and respect toward others' opinions/ideas throughout entire Seminar