

E1. Let's Talk About It!

Socratic Seminar Guide---Teacher

"I would trade all the technology in the world for one day with Socrates."

--Steve Jobs

Overview

As I explain it to students, Socratic Seminar is a fancy name for just a simply great discussion where everyone listens and pushes ideas. Socrates believed that dialectic—deep discussion on a topic—is the most powerful way to obtain knowledge, far beyond the use of books and other sources. He would certainly agree that dialectic is more powerful than spending time on your computer to help you learn how to think and understand ideas.

Facilitating Socratic Seminars in your teaching

In the DoRight curriculum I use this term loosely. The student handout provides guidelines for Socratic Seminar. Seminar applications can become very formal, with participants being required to take notes, having a group note taker, written summaries, etc. These are options, however this guide puts forth a very manageable guide to enrich class discussions with the rigor and discipline found in more formal Socratic Seminars.

- Arrange class seating in a circle
The seating arrangement is extremely important. Set up the class so that all students have equal status in their physical position. Even a student set back from the circle by a couple of feet can have a huge impact on their participation.
- Facilitate with "big idea" questions
Use questions that steer to higher order thinking of synthesis and evaluation such as: "What would happen if...? If things were different how would it play out? What does that depend on?"
- Encourage students to paraphrase back to others what they thought they heard
When a student makes a point and it may not be entirely clear, have the responding student paraphrase to the first student what they thought they heard. This process is extremely valuable to heighten listening and speaking skills as well as to model an important habit for critical thinking.
- Stay out of the way---keep it student centered
Resist the temptation to add too much, overly clarify, or direct the discussion. This is a delicate balance. Also, if students direct their discussion toward you (which they will) steer them back to talking to each other.
- Evaluating success
Not all students need to speak—this is a very important point. Even if a student appears to be detached, that student is likely absorbing a great deal from the experience, and often students who appear detached are actually intently listening. Over time such students can be brought into the fold. It can be a great idea to **follow seminars with a journal write** so that students who are shy and introverted can express their ideas in writing, and you can gain data on how they were being reached.
- Review the concepts of dialog vs. debate with students
Students will naturally gravitate to making the seminar a debate or bull session. This needs to be addressed at the outset that the purpose is for expanding everyone's knowledge and perspective.

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Socratic Seminar Guide—Student Guide

Guidelines for Participants in a Socratic Seminar

Adapted from www.studyguide.org

1. Refer to the text or main topic when needed during the discussion. A seminar is not a test of memory. You are not "learning a subject"; your goal is to understand ideas, issues, and values.
2. It's OK to "pass" when asked to contribute.
3. Do not participate if you are not prepared. A seminar should not be a bull session.
4. Do not stay confused; ask for clarification.
5. Stick to the point currently under discussion; make notes about ideas you want to come back to.
6. Don't raise hands; take turns speaking.
7. Listen carefully.
8. Speak up so that all can hear you.
9. Talk to each other, not just to the leader or teacher.
10. Discuss ideas rather than each other's opinions.
11. You are responsible for the seminar, even if you don't know it or admit it.

What is the difference between dialogue and debate?

- Dialogue is collaborative: multiple sides work toward shared understanding. Debate is oppositional: two opposing sides try to prove each other wrong.
- In dialogue, one listens to understand, to make meaning, and to find common ground. In debate, one listens to find flaws, to spot differences, and to counter arguments.
- Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view. Debate defends assumptions as truth.
- Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change. Debate creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right.
- In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, expecting that other people's reflections

will help improve it rather than threaten it. In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.

- Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs. Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.
- In dialogue, one searches for strengths in all positions. In debate, one searches for weaknesses in the other position.
- Dialogue respects all the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend. Debate rebuts contrary positions and may belittle or deprecate other participants.
- Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to a greater understanding. Debate assumes a single right answer that somebody already has.
- Dialogue remains open-ended. Debate demands a conclusion.

Dialogue is characterized by:

- Suspending judgment
- Examining our own work without defensiveness
- Exposing our reasoning and looking for limits to it
- Communicating our underlying assumptions
- Exploring viewpoints more broadly and deeply
- Being open to disconfirming data
- Approaching someone who sees a problem differently not as an adversary, but as a colleague in common pursuit of better solution.