

Socratic Seminars: Engaging Students in Intellectual Discourse

Lynda Tredway

A technique that dates back to ancient times offers a tangible, engaging way for students to develop both ethics and critical thinking—actively and cooperatively.

The first axiom of involving students actively in the learning process is to relate activities to their own experiences, thereby engaging them on an emotional level. Emphasizing this all-important cognitive hinge, Robert Sylwester (1994) noted recently that modern brain research “may provide biological support for the profession’s beliefs.” Sylwester recommends that

schools focus more on metacognitive activities that encourage students to talk about their emotions, listen to their classmates’ feelings, and think about the motivations of people who enter their curricular world. For example, the simple use of *why* in a question turns the discussion away from bare facts and toward motivations and emotions.

A potent learning model that does just this is the Socratic seminar, a form of structured discourse about ideas and moral dilemmas. The process balances two traditional purposes of education: the cultivation of common values and the worth of free inquiry (Bellah et al. 1992).

In the 1980s, some schools reintroduced this technique to develop critical thinking skills as part of Mortimer Adler’s Paideia Proposal for large-scale school reform (1982). Despite their record of success, Socratic seminars are conspicuously absent in most classrooms today.

Compelling Questions

How are Socratic seminars conducted? They typically consist of a 50–80

minute period once a week. Students, usually in groups of 25 or fewer, read a common text prior to or during the seminar—a novel, poem, essay, or document. Or, they may study an art reproduction. They then respond to a question the teacher (or other facilitator) asks about what they’ve read or seen, often voting on initial ideas.

At Paul Junior High School in Washington, D.C., for example, a group of 7th graders were engaged recently in a series of seminars on “How to Be Kind and Forgiving in a World That Is Often Not,” a compelling issue in the lives of many young people. They read excerpts from two works—“On Revenge,” an essay by Francis Bacon, and *Middle Passage*, a novel by Charles Johnson in which the main character (Ngonyama) leads an uprising on a slave ship, but insists there be no revenge against his captors.

The teacher then posed this question:

To what extent would Francis Bacon agree with the ideas and actions of Ngonyama—totally, mostly, some, not at all?

The students voted on the answer, and their votes ran the gamut. To support their positions, they cited evidence from the text, disagreeing with one another’s reasoning, asking one another questions, and, in a few cases, changing their minds based on classmates’ ideas. Several times during the seminars, students set up

comparable situations from their own experiences with friends or in the community to determine whether they agreed with the advice of Bacon or Johnson.

The question the teacher posed required students to evaluate options and make decisions. They then participated in a conversation about it. All subsequent questions in the seminar were based on the students’ ideas and contributions in response to this initial question. Thus, the term *Socratic seminar*. The technique is derived from an ancient form of discourse—Socratic dialogue: Through doubt and systematic questioning of another person, one gets to ultimate truth.

Conversations such as the one at Paul Junior High School are the backbone of seminar participation. As students consider different—and often conflicting—ideas, they make meaning, that is, they think deeply and critically about concepts; look at ethical quandaries; and develop moral principles. They thereby refine their critical thinking skills and deepen their collective understanding of the material they discuss—the main objectives of the process.

Cooperative Inquiry

In Socratic seminars, students perform in a “variety of thought-demanding ways to explain, muster evidence, generalize, apply concepts, analogize, represent in a new way...” (Perkins 1993). In other words, they engage in active learning. The assumption is that when students actively and cooperatively develop knowledge, understanding, and ethical attitudes and behaviors, they are more apt to retain these attributes than if they had received them passively.



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Students also are schooled in the art of intellectual discourse. In another central feature of these seminars, three to five students act as observers on a rotating basis. Using an observation form, they tally how many and what kind of contributions classmates make, whether they use evidence to support ideas and ask questions of others, and whether they yield to others when several wish to speak at once—in short, whether they demonstrate habits of conversation and mind that educators seek in students.

Students learn to paraphrase, defer, and take turns, as well as to deal with frustration when waiting. They do not raise their hands, but use body language, eye contact, and mutual respect to “read” the seminar process. Teachers in other classes report that students in these seminars exhibit these practices more frequently than do those who have not had the benefit of seminars.

Learning the Basics

Within the context of interesting issues that capture the imagination of students, the seminar process accomplishes other important educational objectives: vocabulary development, interpretative and comparative reading, and text analysis. For example, the lone student in the seminar who said

Francis Bacon would “not at all” agree with Ngonyama said that Bacon required public, state-sponsored revenge and that Ngonyama never considered that option. His persuasive comments, based on close reading, encouraged classmates to examine the text in a new light.

Students also gain experience in synthesis and evaluation—the higher levels of cognition of Benjamin Bloom’s much-used taxonomy. The process thereby achieves results that often elude other forms of classroom instruction. Indeed, because seminars require reasoning, predicting, projecting, and imagining, students must gather and analyze information before they can construct ideas (Woolever 1987).

Literacy and Character

Using compelling texts that lead to discussions is only one of the twin components that interest students in learning and lead to a discussion of issues. The seminar also supports intellectual and character development by cultivating ways of working

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together to question, disagree, negotiate, appreciate different points of view, and solve problems. As Brown (1991) has said:

Literacy is first of all a process of making meaning and negotiating it with others.... This literacy of thoughtfulness [is] used to convey both reasoning and the collaborative aspects of literacy, the caring about and working with others.

Substantive texts also help students explore their relations with others and gain intellectual and emotional maturity. This process by no means guarantees instantaneous respect for others, nor does it eliminate the conflict that is all too common in schools these days. It does, however, guide students to develop more respectful, tactful, and kinder attitudes and behaviors. And, as Heath (1994) insists:

[Schools *can* change if] adults are as committed to the maturation of students' character and selves as to their minds, and [if] teachers empathetically understand the interpersonal world of students as the students themselves perceive it.

Through the process of active learning and cooperation, Socratic seminars also help build self-esteem. Feelings of self-worth are inextricably tied to feelings of competence—the ability to independently construct meaning and arrive at thoughtful ideas, and to be validated for this by others. Contrary to a popular notion, self-esteem “training” will not bolster academic achievement. Instead, as Alfie Kohn (1994) observes:

Students acquire a sense of significance from doing significant things.... When students meet, make decisions, and solve problems regarding carefully chosen works, they reflect on important values.... They then get the message that their voices count ... [and] gain a sense of belonging and active participation in their community.

Literacy and Ethics

As adults, we know that the kind of moral decisions that engage students and the kind we encounter regularly are not always clear-cut. Most decisions require choices among competing values. A seminar is an important occasion for students to confront such conflicts and actively work out solutions, testing their ideas against writers and their peers.

For example, the seminar at Paul Junior High School was followed the next week by a discussion of a short story, Richard Wilbur's “The Game of Catch,” in which a 7th grade boy gets even when he feels left out of a game with two other boys. The opening question: “Who is most responsible for what happens, Monk, Scho, or Glennie [the story's three characters]?”

Of course, textual evidence was central in clarifying students' understanding of motives. They talked about how the problem could have been avoided and who should have exerted leadership to see that it was. In some classes, however, students pondered other hypothetical situations, including whether the outcome would have changed if girls had been in the same situation.

Some might argue that it is the teacher's responsibility to state categorically what is right and what is wrong. But consider what happened in a seminar at Washington, D.C.'s Shepherd Elementary School. Students there read a story called “The Parsley Garden” concerning a young person's petty theft. The seminar leader did not state that stealing is wrong, but the story propelled students to discuss such complex issues as: Does one theft as a young person define you as a thief? What is fair punishment? How should it be decided, and by whom?

The following day, students returned with definitions of theft. They had obviously given considerable thought to motives, actions, and consequences.

The Teacher as Facilitator and Participant

As a seminar leader, the teacher's role is to guide students to (1) a deeper and clarified consideration of the ideas of the text, (2) a respect for varying points of view, and (3) adherence to and respect for the seminar process.

The leader questions, helps paraphrase and restate ideas based on students' responses, and helps students solve problems when they are at loggerheads. The leader also models

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behaviors that are expected from students—listening, thinking, and interaction:

“What I heard you say was ____.”

“Can you compare Tamika's response to what you heard José say?”

“Where is the evidence in the text for what you said?”

“I want to hear what Monica thinks.”

There is no need to preach protocol—when students see it, they will follow suit.

Teachers may also participate in Socratic seminars themselves. Since 1987, groups of teachers from D.C. elementary and secondary schools have met five to six times a year to do just that. The teachers repeatedly praise the renewed spirit and authentic experience of being in a learning community, rather than merely talking about creating one. They, like their students, “learn to think critically and analytically and to solve problems that are important to them” (Barth 1990).

As seminar leaders in their own classrooms, these adults have gained confidence in their abilities as teachers. At first, they report, the necessary letting go makes them feel as though the discussion might get out of control. Because they do not have predetermined questions with acknowledged answers, they must

accept student responses, develop follow-up questions, and keep track of students who may be having side conversations. At the same time, they must listen intently and help students make connections and ask questions. This requires agility, but the payoff is well worth it.

The power of seminar participation was demonstrated dramatically at an action lab at ASCD's 1992 Annual Conference in Washington, D.C. Twenty-five conferees were trained in Socratic dialogue. They then observed 20 students from D.C. public schools in a Socratic seminar. Both students and conferees read "Marriage Is a Private Affair," a short story by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. Both groups had the same opening questions; and both groups thought, talked, and constructed meaning together about the roles and responsibilities of parents and children. Significantly, the conferees commented that the students demonstrated intellectual and emotional insights that they, as adults, had overlooked.

Revitalizing the Teaching Climate

As the process of Socratic seminars spills out of the formal seminar, it alters the whole school's instructional climate. Not only are students acquiring information in a different way, but they also are doing so at the high end of the thinking/reasoning process. Students who trust their own reasoning test better. And students whose schooling is connected to their experiences are more actively engaged in their own learning.

Because the meat of seminars are the big questions of life, students, like their adult counterparts, are involved in making decisions about how to live their lives. They are encouraged to practice habits of mind and heart that further the individual and society. As a

result, the school fulfills its primary purpose: preparing thoughtful citizens for active involvement in a democratic society. ■

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