

Socratic Seminar

Purpose

Socratic Seminars promote thinking, meaning-making, and the ability to debate, use evidence, and build on one another's thinking. When well designed and implemented, the seminar provides an active role for every student, engages students in complex thinking about rich content, and teaches students discussion skills.

Materials

- Provocative question for discussion, chosen beforehand
- Associated text(s)
- Anchor Chart for protocol norms

Procedure

1. Select a significant piece of text or collection of short texts related to the current focus of study. This may be an excerpt from a book or an article from a magazine, journal, or newspaper. It might also be a poem, short story, or personal memoir. The text needs to be rich with possibilities for diverse points of view.
2. Develop an open-ended, provocative question as the starting point for the seminar discussion. The question should be worded to elicit differing perspectives and complex thinking. Students may also generate questions to discuss.
3. Students prepare for the seminar by reading the chosen piece of text in an active manner that helps them build background knowledge for participation in the discussion. The completion of the pre-seminar task is the student's "ticket" to participate in the seminar. The pre-seminar task could easily incorporate work on reading strategies. For example, students might be asked to read the article in advance and to text-code by underlining important information, putting question marks by segments they wonder about and exclamation points next to parts that surprise them.
4. Once the seminar begins, all students should be involved and should make sure others in the group are drawn into the discussion.
5. Begin the discussion with the open-ended question designed to provoke inquiry and diverse perspectives. The teacher may pose follow-up questions.
6. The discussion proceeds until you call time. At that time, the group debriefs their process; if using a Fishbowl (see Fishbowl entry and variations that follow), the outer circle members give their feedback sheets to the inner group students.
7. Protocol norms: Students...
 - Respect other students. (Exhibit open-mindedness and value others' contributions.)
 - Are active listeners. (Build on one another's ideas by referring to them.)
 - Stay focused on the topic.
 - Make specific references to the text. (Use examples from the text to explain their points.)
 - Give input. (Ensure participation.)

continued

- Ask questions. (Clarifying questions and probing questions that push the conversation further and deeper when appropriate.)

Variations

- Combine with the Fishbowl protocol. When it is time for the seminar, students are divided into two groups. One group forms the inner circle (the “fish”) that will be discussing the text. The other group forms the outer circle; they will give feedback on content, contributions, and group skills. (Note: “Fishbowls” may be used with other instructional practices such as peer critiques, literature circles, or group work. If the number of students in the seminar is small, a Fishbowl does not need to be used.) Each person in the outer circle is asked to observe one of the students in the inner circle. Criteria or a rubric for the observations should be developed by/shared with students in advance: see the following example.

Did the student...	Consistently	Occasionally	Not This Time	Notes/Comments
Respond to other students' comments in a respectful way?				
Listen attentively without interruption?				
Make eye contact with peers?				
Exhibit preparation for the seminar?				
Reference the text to support response?				
Participate in the discussion?				
Ask clarifying or probing questions?				

- Provide sentence stems that allow students to interact positively and thoughtfully with one another: “I’d like to build on that thought...” “Could you tell me more?” “May I finish my thought?”

References

Israel, E. (2002). Examining multiple perspectives in literature. In *Inquiry and the literary text: Constructing discussions in the English Classroom*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.