Socratic Seminars: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in Middle and High School

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&

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AGENDA

What is Socratic Seminar?
Facilitating the Inner Circle
Facilitating the Outer Circle
The Seminar Process
Why do Socratic Seminar?
Socratic Seminar in All Subject Areas
Assessments & Materials
What is Socratic Seminar

- A Seminar is a question-focused, student-dominated, and teacher facilitated discussion, concerning key ideas and texts
- Named after Socrates, well-known for his open-ended dialogues
- It can be as formal or informal as you want
How it works

✿ A Socratic Seminar consists of two halves: an “inner circle” and “outer circle”

✿ The inner circle asks and answers questions and discusses a text

✿ The outer circle records information and takes notes on the inner circle’s progress
The purpose of Socratic Seminar

- Has a different purpose than direct instruction
- More student ownership
- Allows for sharing of interpretations and ideas
- Learning how to think out loud about a text
What a Seminar is NOT

- A debate (competitive dialogue)
- Rehearsed student speaking
- A roundabout way of arriving at a teacher’s prized understanding
- A more lively and engaging teaching of content
How I introduced it to my students

A “Socratic Seminar” is a student only discussion. You ask the questions, and you answer them.

The purpose is to help each other understand the text. This is an opinion based discussion. This is NOT a debate. Because this is not a debate, you are encouraged to begin your sentences with “in my opinion,” “I think that,” or “What if.”

You help each other to better understand the text by asking each other thoughtful questions. These questions should be designed to have others talk about them, not to stump your classmates.
How I introduced it to my students

- How is it different from a normal class period?
  - Organization of the room: in a circle - see and hear everyone
  - Students talk more freely and openly - don’t raise your hand
  - Wait your turn to talk - wait time/silence is ok
  - No side conversation - listen to each other
  - More open, fun conversation
  - Eyes on whoever is talking
  - Stay on topic and answer/respond to each other
  - Get everyone involved
  - Talk loud enough for everyone to hear you
  - Its ok to “pass” or not contribute to one of the points
Facilitating the inner circle
Facilitating the Inner Circle
Division of Groups

∗ Groups should be unpredictable and as heterogeneous as possible

∗ Students location in the inner circle can be chosen by student or teacher

∗ Feel free to move students around in the circle to ensure the group works to the best of it’s ability
Facilitating the Inner Circle
The Initial Question

* A good question: based in opinion, focused on the meaning the writer is trying to convey, and has multiple answers that may conflict

* Provide sentence starters to all or some students

* The first question should be more specific with general follow-up questions
Facilitating the Inner Circle
Keeping the discussion going and focused

* Break the habits of traditional discussions
  * Sit within the inner circle
  * Outer circle feedback
  * No need to have students raise hands— they often come up with a system of their own
Facilitating the Inner Circle
Knowing what questions to ask

* A well-placed teacher question can stimulate great dialogue; a poorly placed one can hinder dialogue and leave students feeling misinformed

• Plan ten to fifteen

• Use three types of questions: knowledge based, interpretive, and evaluative
Facilitating the Inner Circle

Knowing what questions to ask

* Knowledge questions: ask students to refer to the text and find examples

- “What does the author say?”
- “Can you prove your ideas using the text?”

- Follow up with a question that requires them to do something with that factual information

  - Moving to the higher level questioning
Facilitating the Inner Circle
Knowing what questions to ask

* Interpretive questions: ask students to describe what the author is trying to convey

  • “What does this author mean when she says.....?”

  • Multiple answer questions that students explain to the group the reasons for their opinions the text.
Facilitating the Inner Circle
Knowing what questions to ask

* Evaluative questions: ask students to step outside the text and consider the implications of what is being described.

  - “How would you personally handle a situation similar to the one being described by this author?”
  - “How is this concept important in our own lives?”
  - “Why is this idea something we should care about?”

* Open-ended and intended to solicit personal opinions to springboard further discussion.

* Used after a lower-risk question (Fact/Interpretive)
Facilitating the outer circle
Facilitating the Outer Circle
Explaining their role

- Introduce as a police dramas: one-way mirror
- Focus on behaviors and how ideas are presented
- Use a player/coach analogy
- Hint- let them pick their partner ahead of time (helps with management)
Facilitating the Outer Circle
Half-Time

* Coaching minute - coach shares notes taken during the discussion with their individual player

Speaks in the discussion:

Looks at the person who is speaking:

Refers to the text:

Asks a new question:

Asks a clarifying question:

Responds to another speaker:

Interrupts another speaker:

Engages in side conversation:

DURING the discussion: What has your partner done well so far?
Facilitating the Outer Circle
Sharing whole group feedback

✱ Ask students to share positive feedback or suggestions they have for the full group

✱ Ways to start the conversation:
  • The first few Seminars- Go around the circle and offer initial comments: maybe three strengths and one area for improvement
  • Write their suggestion anonymously

✱ PRAISE and MODEL!
Facilitating the Outer Circle
Ratings and Goals

✱ Rate the quality of the inner circle’s performance on a scale of one to ten: ask several students to give a one-sentence explanation of their rating.

✱ Create a clear and specific goal to work on during their inner circle discussion
**Socratic Seminar Discussion**

Directions: When you finish reading, respond to at least 3 of the sentence starters below. Be ready to discuss your thoughts or concerns with the group during the discussion. Reoccurring themes heard during discussion will be discussed at the end of our presentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence Starter</th>
<th>Response Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m concerned about...</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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# Direct Variation - Socratic Seminar Discussion

Directions: When you finish your review, reflect on how prepared you feel for the test tomorrow. Respond to at least 3 of the sentence starters below. Be ready to discuss your thoughts or concerns with your classmates during the discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I’m confused or have a question about...</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m wondering if...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’d like to talk to my peers about...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is similar to what I know about...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This could be applied to the outside world by...</td>
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</tr>
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<td>The big ideas seem to be...</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I could help someone else...</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Interpreting Graphs
Lab Data
Sticky Notes
Carousel
Image Inferences
Classroom Procedures
Primary Documents
The Seminar Process

1. Student evaluation of the seminar after a “half time”

2. Inner Circle discussion on the historical fiction novel *Chains* by Laurie Halse Anderson

3. Outer Circle coach role
Why do socratic seminar?
Try it!

- Read your selection on the benefits of Socratic Seminar
Why do Socratic Seminars?

- Improves student preparation for class and decreases student absence
- Leadership and maturity arise from surprising sources
- Creates learning that students find more meaningful and applicable to their lives and future
- They bring all the areas of the curriculum and instruction together into a cohesive whole
- Teachers can integrate their curriculum into a seamless package in which students continuously build and develop a variety of skills
- Builds skills in the areas of reading, listening, reflection, critical thinking, and participation
How Seminar helped my students...

“Socratic Seminar helped me understand the book more because if I had a question about what I read, when it was my turn to talk I would ask my question and get a better understanding. Another way that it helped me was because I got to hear what other people thought of the book and if I was wrong about something someone would tell me how I was wrong.”

• From a former S.S. participant
How Seminar helped my students...

“Socratic Seminar allowed me to hear other people’s opinions which forced me to be open minded and see the story through different perspectives. Also it helped me with making inferences about the book. Which was especially helpful since I suck at reading between the lines. Last and most importantly, it made me into an active learning. I participated in discussions and if I missed something I was able to catch up with everyone else, which meant I always knew what was going on in the story.”

• From a former S.S. participant
Think-Pair-Share

• How can you implement Socratic Seminar into your content area for the upcoming year?
• Develop a few topics within your content area
Socratic Seminar in All Subject Areas
Why use Socratic seminar in all subject areas

- It addresses literacy standards, reading strategies and questioning skills for your content area
- It doesn’t have to be a long seminar - it can just be an introduction activity to the lesson
- It’s about the text selection process
Math

• Instead of: Taking notes to introduce a topic
• Try: Read and discuss a children’s story or current issue article to introduce a math concept
• Instead of: Giving a test review guide and going over it as a full class with teacher providing answers
• Try: Reviewing math concepts or questions students have before a test with students being the expert
Pre-Seminar Work: “Sir Cumference and the Dragon of Pi”

Directions: Read each of these questions. As much as possible, use evidence from the text to support your answers.

1. What was the author’s purpose for writing this book? How do you know?

2. Who is the author’s audience for this book? How do you know?

3. How would this book change if the author’s audience would have been adults?

4. These are the names of some of the characters in this book. Complete the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Name</th>
<th>Corresponding Math Term</th>
<th>Definition of Math Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sir Cumference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radius</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lady Di of Ameter</td>
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<td>Geo of Metry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sym of Metry</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

5. Radius’s cousin, Lady Fingers (Pinky), needs a math name. What math name would you give her and why?

6. What 3 character traits does Radius display in this book? (Remember to use examples from the text to support your answer.)
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 

7. How does Radius use math to help his father?

8. Predict what would have happened if Radius had given his father the wrong dose of medicine.

9. Create one question you could ask someone about this book.  
   ____________________________________________
Science

• Instead of: Giving a safety lecture & quiz
  • Try: Reading an article about examples of unsafe practices, discuss in S.S. and then create the safety rules as a class

• Instead of: Lecturing on how human’s activities cause changes in environments
  • Try: Using S.S. to investigate where environments have been changed and how we should help environments
# Socratic Seminar Lesson Plan—Grade 6 Environmental Science

Choose one or more of the following text(s):

- *Baltimore Checkerspot Restoration Project Officially Launches at the Baltimore Zoo* ([http://users.sitestar.net/~jmfarren/Checkerspots.html](http://users.sitestar.net/~jmfarren/Checkerspots.html))
- *Orange, Black, and Rare All Over* ([http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/12/AR2006061201350.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/12/AR2006061201350.html))
- Additional resources from subscription databases such as SIRS Discoverer on the Web, SIRS Knowledge Source, Thomson Gale’s Student Resource Center, etc. as needed

**Indicator(s):** Recognize and explain how human activities can accelerate or magnify many naturally occurring changes.

**Objective(s):** Identify and describe how human activities produce changes in natural processes (Loss of habitat)

- Participate in group discussions on scientific topics by restating or summarizing accurately what others have said, asking for clarification or elaboration, and expressing alternative positions

### Time Required:
45 minutes

### Materials:
- For the teacher:
  - Socratic Seminar Record Sheet
- For each student:
  - Copy of selected text(s)
  - Rules for a Good Fishbowl Discussion
  - Fishbowl Discussion: Overview
  - For each participant:
    - Teacher’s Evaluation of Participant’s Performance
  - For each coach:
    - Coach’s Evaluation of Participant’s Performance

### Pre-Seminar Activities:
Participants and coaches will meet for a pre-conference to discuss the participant’s goals for the discussion.

### Essential or Opening Question:
What is the best way to protect the Baltimore Checkerspot Butterfly?

### Additional Questions:
- Why is it important to protect the Baltimore Checkerspot Butterfly?
- What are some of the reasons for the decline of the Baltimore Checkerspot Butterfly?
- What strategies can be used to protect the Baltimore Checkerspot Butterfly?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of each of these strategies?
- What factors must be considered when choosing a strategy to protect endangered or threatened species?

### Post Seminar Activities:
The teacher will thank students for their participation and summarize the main ideas and concepts examined during the discussion.

Coaches provide feedback to the participants during a post-conference to acknowledge strengths and identify weaknesses.

### Assessment Options:
The teacher will evaluate participants and coaches using rubric provided.

If time permits, students may write a paragraph or complete an exit ticket to explain what they learned from the seminar.
Social Studies

• Instead of: Looking at a concept or discussing a period of time from an outsider’s lens
  • Try: Reading a text that puts the student into that context (Primary Document) or ask the student to think about application today (Current Event)

• Instead of: Explaining the three branches of the government and defining democracy
  • Try: Evaluating a President’s opinion on the importance of democracy and the value of a democratic society
Social Studies

- Post on the board and then state the focus question “Why does FDR feel democracy is vital to America’s past, present, and future?”
- Give students time to think about the question, formulate ideas and respond.
- Remind students to refer to the text using the paragraph numbers so that classmates can follow along and respond appropriately.
- Let the discussion lead itself, but if it needs redirecting refer to the attached “Questions for Discussion”.
- Be sure to ask the following questions throughout the discussion
  - Where did you find that in the text?
  - How do you know that?
  - How does what “x” said relate to what “y” said?
Language Arts

• Instead of: Analyzing a poem independently and annotating the text (look at pg 4 in back of packet)
  
• Try: Using S.S. to hear multiple opinions and annotate together (way to also teach annotation)

• Instead of: Giving students questions to check if they read or understand a novel

• Try: Using S.S. to allow student to discuss their thoughts while they read
**Socratic Seminar Preparation**

Look your reading guide and pick 3 questions that could generate a good discussion. They should start with “What” “Why” or “How”. Then make one general comment, connection, or prediction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter:</th>
<th>Focus: (Circle One)</th>
<th>Question/Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What</td>
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<td>Comment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prediction</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Suggested topics: British arriving, Hangings, Isabel’s response to Ruth getting sold, The legal system (in response to Colonel Regan & the judge at her trial), The prison conditions & treatment of criminals, Branding
Electives

• Instead of: Discussing a piece of art as a class, raising hands, and hearing from a selected group of students

• Try: Using S.S. to preview a piece of art first and brainstorm their own thoughts before connecting with the author’s thoughts

• Try: Investigating a piece of art and discussing a potential title for the piece using evidence based arguments (EBA)
SAMPLE SOCRATIC SEMINAR
EXAMINING A PAINTING

[ON BOARD: "I see..." "I observe...", "I notice..."]

30 Minutes: Pre-Seminar
1. Point out phrases on the board and explain how they are to be used.
2. Distribute copies of the painting.
3. 2-3 minutes for silent observations. Suggest to students that they may want to list observations.
5. List observations on chart paper.

10 Minutes: Biography of the Painter

30 Minutes: Seminar
Opening Question: What would be a good title for this painting?

30 Minutes: Post-Seminar
Give actual title.
1. Distribute paper.
2. Write opinion: Is this title appropriate? Support your answer.

10 Minutes: Sharing of Written Responses

Title of Seminar: _____________________________
Date: _____________  Class/Level: _______________

Main Concepts/Issues:

Preliminary Activities:

Seminar:
Opening:
Core:
Closing:

Post Activities:
ASSESSMENTS AND MATERIALS
Resources


*http://www.nwabr.org/education/pdfs/PRIMER/PrimerPieces/SocSem.pdf*

*http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/practice/instruction/theories/miscideas/socratic/*
Facilitating the Outer Circle:

- Explaining the roles of the outer circle on day one
  - Think of police dramas: a one-way mirror that allows people to observer but not join in on the discussion
  - Focus on behaviors and how ideas are presented: who speaks the most, who speaks the least, who asks the best questions, how does the group include others, etc
  - Focus on a “player”, taking on the role of a coach
- Sharing feedback process
  - To get students comfortable sharing feedback, you could go around the circle and offer initial comments: maybe three strengths and one area for improvement
  - To encourage honest feedback (if they are struggling or uncomfortable): write a suggestion anonymously and the teacher can read them to the group
  - PRAISE and MODEL! Praise students that offer insightful comments. Model appropriate ways to give each type of feedback
  - Lead a discussion of some of their feedback: the inner circle’s strengths and weaknesses as well as suggestions for improvement
  - To improve quality of feedback: after the whole seminar process has finished, have each student write a letter about how helpful the feedback they received was to them. What comments were helpful, which were not?
- Ratings and Goals
  - You could have the outer circle rate the quality of the inner circle’s performance on a scale of one to ten: ask several students to give a one-sentence explanation of their rating.
    - This gives immediate feedback on the overall quality to the inner circle
    - Helps them track their performance and growth
  - Then the outer circle can create a clear and specific goal to work on during their inner circle discussion: a measurable goal
    - During the second outer circle discussion, they can address how the inner circle did on their goal: possibly keep track of the goals they set for themselves to track growth
- Behavior problem alternative assignment: write a letter to the teacher focusing on observing and commenting on the inner circles discussion (what would they have added, what positives did they notice, suggestions they have, etc). Only the teacher gets to read this and it usually will make the student realize how much they could have shared with the group if they were included in it.

Challenges:

- Coaching students in learning the ‘moves’ of good discussion: how to move the talk beyond superficial, unconnected, and individual talk; to sustained, thought-provoking, collaborative, and ultimately illuminating dialogue
  - At first the teacher must explicitly model and coach, treating seminar as if it were a new game on the fields outside to be learned
  - Sit within the inner circle as a participant to model the questions and kind of behavior you are looking for, provide verbal praise to the students who take that initial leap.
  - Let the feedback from the outer circle bring up some of the concerns and solutions, this gives students the ownership in helping one another
- Breaking the habit of significant control over classroom talk
  - Biting your tongue during conversation- noting where the conversation goes and doesn’t go, and giving feedback later.
  - Jump in only to redirect the conversation or throw out another question.
- Student silence when a question is first asked: wait time
  - Let them persist in the silence, look away or down at your notes
• They might be uncomfortable, cannot identify or make connections with the text, text is too
difficult or did not spend enough time. Ask them what is wrong and try to work through it.
• A quick reminder, if needed, that this is their Seminar. If the question isn’t helping them, they can
ask a different question
• Students who are eager to use their newfound freedom saying everything that pops in their head
and not explaining or connecting with it
  • Reminder that their is a goal here, and the goal requires learning to control some impulses: the
aim is understanding
  • Just as in sports, we don’t aimlessly kick or throw the ball, so, too, in Seminar talk must be
purposeful
  • Start an ante system for student contribution- they only get three chips and then they need to
wait until everyone else has contributed before they can again
• Losing your bearing as a teacher: misjudging success or failure by basing your evaluation too much
on your own feelings of being in or out of control
  • Often the best seminars feel out of control
  • Seek feedback from students, videotape, and student work to test your perceptions againsts the
evidence

Why do Seminar:
• Improves student preparation for class and decreases student absence
• Leadership and maturity arise from surprising sources
• Creates learning that students find more meaningful and applicable to their lives and future
• They bring all the areas of the curriculum and instruction together into a cohesive whole
  • teachers can integrate their curriculum into a seamless package in which students continuously
build and develop a variety of skills
• Builds skills in the areas of reading, listening, reflection, critical thinking, and participation

Critical Thinking
• Must be viewed as a process
  • analogy- we have moved from simply assigning writing to teaching writing, focusing on the
process rather than just the product. They brainstorm and pre-write to generate ideas, draft
their ideas, and then revise and edit to improve the quality. Critical thinking is no different, it is
about the process of thinking.
  • Challenges students to revise and improve their ideas for the benefit of their own understanding
and the understanding of others
  • A way to encourage students to view critical thinking as a lifelong, life-actualizing process

Critical Reading
• Moving students beyond basic reading comprehension and into higher-order thinking is critical to
our curricula
• Requires students to think about what the text could mean and relate it to other works or
experiences they are familiar with
• Skills of critical reading are developed in the course of Seminar: these skills can then be applied
in other types of readings (such as standardized tests)
  • identify new vocabulary words, underline key phrases, note repetition of words, phrases, and
structure, and jot down questions that help them to better explore meaning

Speaking
• Learn that all contributions, even the ones that appear tangential or erroneous on the surface,
can help the group develop their ideas and move toward their discovery of meaning
  • any idea could be the spark that aides in finding new meaning
• Students learn to say what they think or feel and use evidence to defend their position with
references to textual evidence
Listening
• What they hear with their ears allows them to listen with their minds
• They see and understand how detrimental poor listening skills can be to the quality of discussion and act quickly to encourage a solution to the problem
• Once students learn to open their minds to the views of others, they begin to realize that their own ideas can be expanded

Writing Skills
• After experience with Seminars, students are able to produce writing that is more insightful, relevant, and thought-provoking than their peers who have not benefited from exposure to Seminars
  • It hits all the critical skills needed to write analytical essays

Critical Reflection
• Students develop the ability to evaluate the quality of discussion not only in others but also in themselves
• Through the experience of reflecting, assessing, and establishing goals, students develop confidence in both their abilities and their learning
• Reflective thinking also helps draw all these various skills and curricula into a cohesive, unified whole inking learning to personal experience and to each student’s future

Social Skills
• Seminars are not only a way to understand text, but they are a way to understand people
  • Team-Building Skills
    • Through mutual inquiry in a cooperative setting, leaders and learners alike apply knowledge, making reasoned connections within themselves, with other group members, and with the text
    • Learn to voice their opinions and ideas in a positive, respectful, and cooperative manner
  • Conflict Resolution
    • Helps build respect and understanding for students and their ideas and teachers participants to listen and accept multiple view points
    • Guides students to develop respectful, tactful, and kinder attitudes and behaviors: especially when they do not agree with another’s opinions
  • Community-Building Skills
    • Students learn to be accepting of people, opinions, and ideas different from their own
    • The frequency of classroom disruptions, misbehavior, and uncooperative attitudes appears to decrease

References:


Further Reading:


http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/practice/instruction/theories/miscideas/socratic/
### Socratic Seminar Discussion

Directions: When you finish reading, respond to at least 3 of the sentence starters below. Be ready to discuss your thoughts or concerns with the group during the discussion. Reoccurring themes heard during discussion will be discussed at the end of our presentation.

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</table>
Socratic Seminar Observation Form

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:

Looks at the person who is speaking:

Refers to their notes or the book:

Asks a new question:

Asks a clarifying questions:

Responds to another speaker:

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Interrupts another speaker:

Engages in side conversation:

HALF TIME REPORT: What has your partner done well so far?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

HALF TIME REPORT: What are suggestions you have for your partner?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________
# Socratic Seminar Observation Form

**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:

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

## Looks at the person who is speaking:

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

## Refers to their notes or the book:

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

## Asks a new question:

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

## Asks a clarifying question:

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

## Responds to another speaker:

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

## Interrupts another speaker:

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

## Engages in side conversation:

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

## HALF TIME REPORT: What has your partner done well so far?

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

## HALF TIME REPORT: What are suggestions you have for your partner?

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Exceeds</th>
<th>Meets</th>
<th>Approaching</th>
<th>Below</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respects the purpose and norms of seminar (balancing group &amp; personal inquiry into important issues, constantly referring to text).</td>
<td></td>
<td>Obeys norms and displays good seminar etiquette (referring to text, noting when others want to speak, etc.).</td>
<td>May be unaware of seminar norms and practices.</td>
<td>Does not obey seminar norms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectively contributes to deepen and broaden the conversation.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Contributes to the discussion in helpful ways: doesn’t dominate, is positive, etc.</td>
<td>Infrequently contributes.</td>
<td>Does not obey seminar norms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes helpful steps to refocus or redirect conversation.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Makes regular efforts to be helpful in facilitating the discussion, and is generally effective.</td>
<td>Plays no active facilitation role of any kind.</td>
<td>Overlooks the contributions made by some participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes steps to involve reticent participants and to insure that unnoticed points are attended to.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Does not typically take a leadership role but is effective when does so.</td>
<td>Does not attempt to lead the discussion.</td>
<td>Does not listen appropriately, as reflected in questions or comments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is always attentive to others’ comments and questions.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Generally responds appropriately to ideas and questions offered by other participants.</td>
<td>Is inconsistent in terms of overall attentiveness.</td>
<td>Does not listen appropriately, as reflected in questions or comments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connects own responses to others’ comments and questions to deepen the conversation.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Responses involve mostly accurate recall of what was said, and by whom.</td>
<td>Does not often listen carefully to what was previously said before speaking.</td>
<td>May or may not be aware that body language suggests a lack of listening to others or care for the discussion in general.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has read the text carefully and offers great insight and understanding of the characters, plot, ideas, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Has read the text and understood it: grasps the main ideas, can offer reasonable interpretations, can find topics discussed in the text.</td>
<td>Has difficulty understanding the text or may not have read the text.</td>
<td>Is generally unable to make adequate meaning of the text or does not regularly read the text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comes very prepared with thoughtful seed questions, notes, reactions and text references.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Has come prepared with relevant questions and ideas regarding the text.</td>
<td>Has not put enough disciplined and focused effort into preparing for seminar.</td>
<td>Has generally come to class unprepared.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Exceeds</th>
<th>Meets</th>
<th>Approaching</th>
<th>Below</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coaching</td>
<td></td>
<td>Attempts to maintain attention on coaching but gets slightly distracted.</td>
<td>Sometimes is focused on coaching but is regularly distracted.</td>
<td>Regularly distracts others during coaching with talking and interruptions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Exceeds</th>
<th>Meets</th>
<th>Approaching</th>
<th>Below</th>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Participation:</th>
<th>100% Exceeds 95%</th>
<th>90% Meets 82%</th>
<th>75% Approaching 67%</th>
<th>60% Below</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Leadership:</td>
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<td>75% Approaching 67%</td>
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<td>90% Meets 82%</td>
<td>75% Approaching 67%</td>
<td>60% Below</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall Average Grade: ____________________________
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Names &amp; Running Record</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good etiquette</td>
<td>Infrequent Dominates Random Silly</td>
<td>Refocuses Redirect Involves others</td>
<td>Overlooks others No attempt Talks over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deepens &amp; broadens</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Socratic Seminar: The Outer Circle**

For outer circle members the observation role is just as important as the members of the inner-circle. We must constantly be aware of how our conversation is going… and next round you will have a chance to be in the inner circle. Below is a list of possible outer circle roles and their assignments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>Takes notes and prepares a summary that discusses strengths and weakness of the dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent Contributor</td>
<td>What would you say if you were in the inner circle?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referencing Text Tallyer</td>
<td>Counts how many times each member references the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment Tallyer</td>
<td>Records how many times each person speaks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadower</td>
<td>Evaluates a member of the inner circle on the following criteria. DID THE MEMBER:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Speak loudly and clearly?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cite reasons and evidence for our statements?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Use the text to find support?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Listen to others respectfully?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Stick with the subject?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Talk to the whole group and not as side conversation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Paraphrase accurately?</td>
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<td>• Avoid inappropriate language?</td>
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<td>• Ask for help to clear confusion?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Support others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Avoid hostile exchanges?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Questions in a civil manner?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Seem prepared?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Act as a positive role model?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Empowering Students with Socratic Seminars

Matt Copeland and Chris Goering
Ad Astra Consulting, Inc.
http://www.socraticseminar.com

What does Socratic mean?
The word “Socratic” comes from the name Socrates (ca. 470-399 B.C.), a Classical Greek philosopher who developed a Theory of Knowledge.

What was Socrates' Theory of Knowledge?
Socrates believed that the answers to all human questions and problems reside within us. Unfortunately, as human beings we are often unaware of the answers and solutions we possess. Socrates was convinced that the surest way to discover those answers and attain reliable knowledge was through the practice of disciplined conversation. He called this method the dialectic.

What does dialectic mean?
Dialectic is the art or practice of examining opinions or ideas logically, often by the method of question and answer, so as to determine their validity.

How did Socrates use the dialectic?
Socrates believed that through the process of dialogue, where all parties to the conversation were forced to clarify their ideas, the final outcome of the conversation would be a clear statement of what was meant. The technique appears simple but it is intensely rigorous. Socrates would feign ignorance about a subject and try to draw out from the other person his fullest possible knowledge about it. Socrates’ assumption was that by progressively correcting incomplete or inaccurate notions through discussion, one could coax the truth out of anyone.

What is a Socratic seminar?
A Socratic seminar is a process to try to understand information by creating dialectic in class in regards to a specific text. In a Socratic seminar, participants seek deeper understanding of complex ideas in the text through thoughtful dialogue, rather than by memorizing bits of information. A Socratic seminar is not debate. The goal of this activity is to have participants work together to construct meaning and arrive at an answer, not for one student or one group to “win the argument.”

How does a Socratic seminar work?
The ritualistic structure of a Socratic seminar is one that appears complex to participants at first, but ultimately that structure is what provides the students’ growth and ownership of the conversation. The basic procedure for a Socratic seminar is as follows:
1. On the day before a Socratic seminar is scheduled, the teacher hands out a short passage of text.
2. That night at home, students spend time reading, analyzing, and taking notes over the section of text.
3. At the beginning of class the next day, students are randomly divided into two concentric circles: an inner circle and an outer circle.
4. Students in the inner circle read the passage aloud and then engage in a discussion of the text for approximately ten minutes, while the outer circle observes the human behavior and performance of the inner circle.
5. Following this discussion of the text, the outer circle then assesses the inner circle’s performance and offers ten minutes of feedback for the inner circle.
6. Students in the inner and outer circle now exchange roles and positions within the classroom.
7. The new inner circle (the students who began in the outer circle) holds a ten-minute discussion and then receives ten minutes of feedback from the new outer circle.

Of course there are many variations to the time limits of each aspect of Socratic seminar, but maintaining the discussion-feedback-discussion-feedback pattern is essential.

**The Text:** Socratic seminar texts are chosen for their richness in ideas, issues, and values and their ability to stimulate extended, thoughtful dialogue. A seminar text can be drawn from readings in literature, history, science, math, health, and philosophy or from works of art or music. A good text raises important questions in the participants' minds, questions for which there are no right or wrong answers. At the end of a successful Socratic seminar, participants often leave with more questions than they brought with them. (This is a good thing!)

**The Opening Question:** A Socratic seminar opens with a question either posed by the leader or solicited from participants. An opening question has no right answer; instead it reflects a genuine curiosity on the part of the questioner. A good opening question leads participants back to the text as they speculate, evaluate, define, and clarify the issues involved. Responses to the opening question generate new questions from the leader and participants, leading to new responses. In this way, the line of inquiry in a Socratic seminar evolves on the spot rather than being pre-determined by the leader.

**The Teacher:** The teacher’s role in this process is four fold: to select the text for discussion, to keep the discussion of the inner circle focused and moving, to direct the feedback offered by the outer circle, and to assess the individual student and the group’s performance.

First, selecting a quality piece of text is crucial to the success of a seminar. The text should be insightful, thought provoking, and relevant to the lives of students.

Second, teachers should strive to interrupt the discussion of the inner circle as infrequently as possible. The teacher’s job is to act as a facilitator or coach for the discussion, not as the discussion’s leader. For example, if the discussion begins to drift off-topic the teacher might pose a question to the group to help refocus and stimulate additional conversation. Or if the comments of one student need to be clarified or repeated for the group’s understanding, the teacher should assist in that endeavor.

Third, teachers should guide the discussion of the outer circle as they provide feedback and constructive criticism for the inner circle. One of the most successful ways to accomplish this process is to simply go around the circle and ask for initial observations. Once each student has offered an observation, the teacher can highlight particular points made and ask the group to
brainstorm/predict solutions to any obstacle or problems noted following the cycle of reflective learning.

And finally, the teacher should assess each individual student and the group’s performance as a whole in some manner, whether formally or informally. The teacher may use a rubric and/or take on the task of scorekeeper or mapmaker (see below) but should also offer students verbal feedback at the conclusion of the seminar.

**The Leader** (sometimes this is the teacher, oftentimes it is NOT): In a Socratic seminar, the leader plays a dual role as leader and participant. The seminar leader consciously demonstrates habits of mind that lead to a thoughtful exploration of the ideas in the text by keeping the discussion focused on the text, asking follow-up questions, helping participants clarify their positions when arguments become confused, and involving reluctant participants while restraining their more vocal peers.

As a seminar participant, the leader actively engages in the group's exploration of the text. To do this effectively, the leader must know the text well enough to anticipate varied interpretations and recognize important possibilities in each. The leader must also be patient enough to allow participants' understandings to evolve and be willing to help participants explore non-traditional insights and unexpected interpretations.

Assuming this dual role of leader and participant is easier if the opening question is one that truly interests the leader as well as the participants. Oftentimes, the role of the leader will move between participants within a group quite frequently and naturally.

**The Participants:** In a Socratic seminar, participants carry the burden of responsibility for the quality of the seminar. Good seminars occur when participants study the text closely in advance, listen actively, share their ideas and questions in response to the ideas and questions of others, and search for evidence in the text to support their ideas. Eventually, when participants realize that the leader is not looking for right answers but is encouraging them to think out loud and to exchange ideas openly, they discover the excitement of exploring important issues through shared inquiry. This excitement creates willing participants, eager to examine ideas in a rigorous, thoughtful manner.

**Top-10 Suggestions 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 a subject"; your goal is to understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in the text.
2. Do not participate if you are not prepared. A seminar should not be a bull session.
3. Do not stay confused; ask for clarification.
4. Stick to the point currently under discussion; make notes about ideas you want to return to.
5. Don't raise hands; take turns speaking.
7. Speak up so that all can hear you.
8. Talk to each other, not just to the leader or teacher.
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.
For tomorrow you need to have read and interacted with the following work by marking your questions and reactions in the margin next to the text. Some people think of this as having a dialogue or conversation with the actual words on the page. It is extremely effective to use different colors to mark different ideas in order to organize your thoughts. Things you should consider doing include:

- circling and then looking up any vocabulary words that you do not know
- underlining key phrases
- keeping track of the story or idea as it unfolds
- noting word patterns, repetitions, or anything that strikes as confusing or important
- writing down questions

STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING
by Robert Frost

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

1923
**Socratic Seminar Feedback Form**

| Name __________________________ | Hr _____ | Date __________ |

1. Rate the Inner Circle’s performance on the following criteria: (circle the appropriate number)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dig below the surface meaning?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speak loudly and clearly?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cite reasons and evidence for their statements?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use the text to find support?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listen to others respectfully?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stick with the subject?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>talk to each other, not just the leader?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paraphrase accurately?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avoid inappropriate language?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>support each other?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>question others in a civil manner?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seem prepared?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make sure questions were understood?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Name specific persons who did one or more of the above criteria well.

3. What was the most interesting question asked?

4. What was the most interesting idea to come from a participant?

5. What was the best thing you observed?

6. What was the most troubling thing you observed?

7. How could this troubling thing be corrected or improved?
Leading the Discussion of the Outside Circle

The Wheel of Reflective Learning

**Step 1 – Learning Experience**

For this activity the learning experience to be reflected upon is the discussion of the inner circle. The outer circle will then be using their observations of the inner circle as a springboard for reflection and a method to establish goals for their own turn in the inner circle.

**Step 2 – Reflection**

Go around the outer circle and have each student offer his or her initial observations on the performance of the inner circle. Everyone should have an opinion and observations to share, therefore everyone should speak, even if it something simple such as “I think everyone did a great job.”

After each student has contributed some information, the teacher can then lead the outer circle in a closer examination of some of those observations and focus critical attention on specific occurrences/behaviors the students and/or the teacher witnessed.

**Step 3 – Self-Assessment**

Self-Assessment can be done in many ways. However, one of the quickest and easiest ways is to simply have each student rate the performance of the inner circle on a scale from one to ten. Explanations of those ratings can be given and debated as time permits.

**Step 4 – Goal Setting**

After the outer circle has reflected upon the discussion of the inner circle and offered a quick assessment of their performance, students should brainstorm possible solutions to the problems encountered by the inner circle and establish goals for their own discussion before beginning.
Choices in Assessment

**Scorekeeper** – a method by which one person records tally marks for each student’s participation in the inner circle. A student may be awarded one tally for answering a text-based question, two tallies for asking an insightful question, three tallies for contributing meaningful information, etc. etc. The weakness to this method of assessment is that it is fairly subjective in nature.

**Mapmaker** – a method of assessment that maps the physical course of the conversation. This can be useful to identify patterns of communication and quantity of participation. However, it fails to document quality of participation.
Student Comments about Socratic Seminars

“Socratic seminars have given me the opportunity to sit down and talk about a piece of schoolwork among friends and see meaning and purpose. They are the best experience I have had in high school.”

“All the seminars throughout the semester have everyone change for the better.”

“I am definitely more confident now than I was at the beginning of the year.”

“Socratic seminars have helped me focus on how people think and how they’ve helped me understand what the author is trying to convey to people.”

“After participating in Socratic seminars I am no longer afraid to speak my mind and let my classmates know how I feel.”

“Socratic seminars have helped me dig below the surface of literature. They also help me to understand how people think differently.”

“Although I didn’t like them at first, I have come to like Socratic seminars and believe that every English class should have them.”

“Through Socratic seminars I learned something about another person that I would have never learned about in any other class.”

“I think Socratic seminars are absolutely genius. They are a fun way to learn important and valuable lessons.”

“By doing these seminars I think my writing has improved because I try to look at topics from different angles.”

“I think later in life I will remember things I learned from Socratic seminars. I’ve learned to be patient and cooperative with others. I’ve also come to realize that looking deeper into people is good.”

“All the Socratic seminars we have done as a class have been very enlightening and helpful toward everyone’s attitude and feelings from expressing what they think about things.”

“I think the skills that I have accomplished through these Socratic seminars are going to be a big part of my future.”

“Socratic seminars always teach me about things in life and just get me to think more and question the things that are going on in my life.”

“Socratic seminars have helped me to develop life-long skills by helping to learn to work together to find the meaning of things.”
“Socratic seminars help me to look at myself and my life differently.”

“Not only have I expanded in skills such as digging below surface meaning and analyzing the pieces we were working on, but I learned to listen patiently to others and to accept viewpoints that were different from my own.”

“Through Socratic seminars, I have learned how to be more open-minded and opinionated in group discussions. Some people actually want to hear what I have to say.”

“These Socratic seminars helped me to dig deep in my thoughts and pull out the real meaning of these pieces. I have found that these seminars have helped to bring the class together and helped to let us get to know one another.”

“These Socratic seminars have a great importance, especially for me because I have always wanted to find a way to open up to people. I used to ask myself, “Who I am?” Just this year I have become comfortable with myself. These seminars helped me to tell myself that it is okay to say what you truly feel. I can now sit down and be excited to learn about what a certain piece of literature means.”

“Socratic seminars have helped me look for a deeper meaning in movies, writing, and everyday life. I used to take things as they were—black and white, no colors or reasons.”

“Teachers always read something, tell you what it means and that’s the end. But with Socratic seminars we actually have a chance to form our own opinions and with the help of our peers can come to a conclusion over what the piece means.”

“Socratic seminars have been very important to me. They have opened my eyes and my ears. I have discovered that people do have ideas different than mine and they can be just as correct as mine. I have used Socratic seminars as a way to voice my opinion and gain knowledge through others. I have already developed a better personal life thanks to these Socratic seminars. I have listened and actually paid attention to what my friends and family have said and have developed a much better relationship with them.”

“The whole Socratic seminar thing has made me a better person and it has made this class more fun. Before believe it or not I was kind of shy and it was Socratic seminars that got me over that.”

“I think Socratic seminars are great because the whole process teaches basic skills: digging below the surface, listening skills, speaking skills, patience, and to see things from other perspectives. Socratic seminars have really taught me to look into things I don’t understand (not only writing) because in most cases, if examined closely enough, everything makes sense.”

“Because of our Socratic seminars, I often find myself listening more closely to song lyrics and I have gained a greater appreciation for paintings and poetry.”
Socratic Seminar Resources

Print Media:

Websites:
Socratic Seminar Society <http://www.socratic.org/>
- Probably the best “starting point” for information about Socratic seminars, how they work, and how they can be used in the classroom.
Socratic Seminar Resources @ Web English Teacher <http://www.webenglishteacher.com/socratic.html>
- A great page of links to all sorts of examples, explanations, assessment tools, etc.
Socratic Seminars Northwest <http://www.socraticseminars.com/>
- A good overview of Socratic seminars and a very helpful selected bibliography.
AVID Socratic Seminars <http://www.maxlow.net/avid/socsem/socraticseminars.html>
- Another good overview of Socratic seminars and five selections of text (with opening questions) that work well to engage students.
Touchstones Discussion Project <http://www.touchstones.org>
- A Maryland company that produces and sells materials to implement Socratic seminars at all grade levels and in all content areas.
“The Dream is the Truth: Empowering Students with the Help of Socratic Seminars”<http://www.secondaryenglish.com/dream_is_the_truth.htm>
- An article that explains the qualitative benefits developed in students through the use of Socratic seminars in my classroom.
Ad Astera Consulting, Inc. <www.socraticseminar.com>
- A local resource for all of your in-service and/or workshop needs. These guys (and girl) are simply the best available!!
The following ideas, roles, criteria, and scoring strategies can be used to assess and improve the quality of any student group discussion. They are designed to help teachers enable students to become increasingly self-regulating and self-disciplined about their seminar work.

*A seminar is devoid of any intention to add to collectible stores of information; it has no relation to newness or oldness of knowledge. One becomes intent on thinking things anew rather than thinking new things.*

**What is a seminar?**

A seminar is a genuine discussion. As the opening quote suggests, a seminar is meant to be a different kind of class (or instructional strategy). The seminar is designed to enable students to explore a text, a problem, an experience; it is not a more conversational form of teacher-led instruction. Rather, it is the students’ opportunity to ask and consider questions and explore each others’ answers. In short, it becomes the student’s opportunity and responsibility to develop habits and skills that are traditionally reserved for the teacher.

The seminar experience rolls ‘content’ and ‘process’ into one. The student not only learns more about an idea or text, the student learns how to discuss it: the student gains practice in leading discussions, listening for insights in the comments of others, proposing alternative paths of conversation, insuring that quiet or “weird” voices are heard, and how to help talk move beyond superficial but unconnected sharing to sustained and thought-provoking dialogue.
**What a seminar isn’t.** A seminar can perhaps be better understood by considering what it is not: it is not training; it is not interactive lecturing; it is not canned student speaking (like the 19th century ‘recitation.’) A seminar is neither a debate nor a teacher led “class discussion” (where “discussion” means students taking turns sharing thoughts, feelings, and reactions). Rather, the seminar is a collective inquiry into questions and issues, typically prompted by a reading or shared experience. A key aim is to develop everyone’s understanding of the issues – not to be confused with “answering” the teacher’s questions. But it also aims at everyone’s self-understanding – through speaking, idea testing, listening, and reflection. The purpose is to ‘uncover’ not ‘cover’ a subject.

The teacher may well have to learn and practice new habits, therefore. In a seminar, the teacher becomes a mature co-colleague in the conversation (after some initial training and modeling). The great challenge for the teacher is to break habits – to very self-consciously try to stop managing all the talk and leading students to an answer. The seminar leader’s job is more like that of a counselor, therapist, or spiritual leader: to keep the important issues alive and to keep important voices, perspectives or past strands of talk from getting lost. Initially one must direct and train. But once students have grasped the new purpose, routines, and norms at work, the teacher can become less of a “teacher” and more like a coach as students manage their “team” performance. In advanced seminars, the teacher becomes even less obtrusive – more like the referee.

The aim of a seminar is not to replace or jazz up instruction, then, but to supplement it. The seminar works best as a precursor to or synthesizing experience of traditional didactic teaching and skill coaching. The seminar presents students with chances to explore the meaning of the work (assignments, lessons, discrete learnings) that make up their formal instruction. A seminar works best when the issues arise “naturally” out of prior work and experience.

“What is my job?” Students must come to know that their job is different. It is not to sit passively and await instruction or answers, or only to say whatever pops into their mind. Their job is to come to a common and an individual understanding of what something means. In the broadest sense, the goal is to make sense of a ‘text’ – be the text a book, a story heard, a video, or a shared experience; and to bring the whole
group along on the quest for meaning as much as possible – what we like to call *Intellectual Outward Bound*. This student freedom and responsibility takes some getting used to. Habits and expectations run deep: students will typically glance toward the teacher during each lull, to find out the next “move” in the conversation (even if the teacher has worked hard to shed the mantle of “traffic cop” and authority). A key understanding occurs when a student realizes that the seminar is only as engaging and effective as what each person puts into it.

Many teachers report happily that good seminars often improve student preparation for class and decrease student absence. A good seminar often becomes as engaging and compelling as team sports or putting on a play: the talk becomes so important that to get a later summary just won’t do. Leadership and maturity often arise from surprising sources, too. Learners who may not have been effective or outgoing in a teacher-led class may well shine as seminar leaders. Alas, the opposite happens, too: seemingly bright and able students may become sadly timid and anxious when the Teacher is no longer the All-Knowing Arbiter of Truth. Be prepared, too, for losing your bearings as a teacher, especially at first. You may misjudge success or failure by basing your evaluation too much on your own feelings of being in or out of control of the process. Often the best seminars feel out of control as teachers shed the role of tour director; discussions that seemed to go well may only have felt that way because it was a smooth flow toward good answers. So, seek feedback from students, videotape, and student work to test your perceptions against the evidence.

Certain texts, questions, or problems lend themselves more than others to seminar work. So-called ‘great books’ are ideal for seminars, as many learn in college: they are ‘great’ precisely because they raise as many questions as they answer; we project different meanings into the text, leading to lively argument; and they focus on ‘big idea’ questions. Organizing a seminar around provocative “essential” questions and texts that offer different compelling perspectives on those questions is thus an effective entry point: students come to see quickly that the text is a means to an end, that the ideas come to life in a free-wheeling dialogue, and that a good text profits from re-reading and re-thinking.
The seminar can be as loose or structured as a facilitator desires. But with pre-college students, being clear about the forms and rituals of seminar is useful, especially at first, since a new form and function is being tried out. Deliberate training in the new roles is therefore vital. Below, the reader will find examples of how more explicit structures -- i.e. roles, rules, and relationships -- can be designed to make the conversation more deliberately productive and focused. (A full set of seminar rubrics is available in a separate handout). But no set of rules can substitute for your sound judgment, good ears and eyes, and tact. For, at bottom, the seminar is co-operative learning at its best: finding whatever ways we can to insure that everyone feels included and competent as a seminar member.
SEMINAR DESIGN & TACTICS

1. FACILITATING QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED AT OPPORTUNE TIMES – AND LEARNED BY STUDENTS

The questions below are not just your facilitative “moves”. Students should be trained to use these strategies, to see them as their moves, on the field of play, as it were. These vital roles involve some unnatural habits. Make them explicit; get everyone to be meta-cognitive about them, even if it seems awkward at first. Try assigning the roles for a period of time to different students. Of course, there needs to be a modeling of them, feedback about their use, and incentives for using them if they are to “stick.”

a. What question are we trying to answer? Why?
b. Could you give me an example or a metaphor to explain that?
c. Can you find that in the text? Where does the reading support you?
d. What are you assuming in that argument?
e. But what about…? (That seems at odds with what we said before, what the author said here, etc.)
f. How does this relate to… (what was said before, read last week, etc.)
g. Do we need to modify or rephrase the question (or answer) we are working on?
h. What do you mean by _____ (key words)?
i. I think we are lost. Could someone tell me where we are, where we are going, help me find some "landmarks"?
j. (To a quiet but clearly engaged member:) Bob, what do you think? (Or) Is there someone who hasn't yet spoken who might have something to say at this point?
2. ROLES TO BE PRACTICED & USED

These roles, once understood and practiced, become very useful not only in managing the seminar but in prescribing guidance for specific areas of student weakness in seminar. Thus, overly-dominant students can be assigned listening roles for 10 minutes, for example. Or, with large classes and a fair number of quiet speakers, the class can be divided in half (with the talkative ones in one group). While one half conducts the discussion, the other half can take on listening roles, etc.

As Speaker

Explorer  Let's try a new path or perspective...
Gadfly  Everyone seems to be too easily content with saying...
Sherlock Holmes  I think we have overlooked an important clue (comment/bit of text).
Librarian  Here's a passage in the text that supports your point...
Matchmaker  What you are saying is a lot like what Sue said earlier...
Judge Judy  Let's see what the argument is between you two and try to settle it...
Will Rogers  Let's find a way to make her/his seemingly odd/unpleasant/incorrect comment more plausible or helpful...

As Listener

Journalist  Summarize the important points briefly
Map-maker  Make a visual chart of paths and terrain covered in the conversation, noting major "landmarks" and "twists and turns"
Shadow  Listen to and observe one person for a fixed period of time, noting their comments and behavior (effective in large classes and for listening skill practice)
Referee  Judge which "moves" in the discussion seem warranted or unwarranted (in terms of content) and exemplary of or outside the "rules" of good seminar behavior (in terms of process)
Coach  Diagnose the overall "play" and propose some new ones, improvements in performance, strategies, etc.
How did you feel about today's discussion?

**Class' treatment of issues**

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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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*Quantity of your own participation, as compared with your usual performance*

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*Quality of your own participation*

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*Your own interest in the conversation*

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*The class' interest, reflected in intensity of conversation and % of participation*

<table>
<thead>
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*Complexity of discussion*

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*Degree of your own understanding of material*

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*Facilitator's Success*

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<table>
<thead>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Too Little Control</th>
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</thead>
</table>

| Showed Great | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Showed Too Little Respect for Others |

Comments (including your view as to the high and low points):

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1. A modification of a claim by Eva Brann in *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*.
2. See the writings of Mortimer Adler on this subject. See, for example, *The Paideia Proposal* and *How To Talk, How to Listen*. 