

Socratic Seminars are the result of the work of Mortimer Adler, Director of the Institute for Philosophical Research in Chicago. Adler published *The Paideia Proposal* (1982) and *Paideia Problems and Possibilities* (1983) in which he argued that education should be rooted in three goals: the acquisition of knowledge, the development of intellectual skills, and the enlarged understanding of ideas and values. The first goal can be accomplished through textbooks and didactic teaching in the content areas. The second goal can be developed through coaching, exercises, and supervised practice. The third goal can be achieved through Socratic Questioning and Active Participation using books (not textbooks), other works of art, or involvement in artistic activities (*Paideia Proposal* 23). The seminar begins with a teacher's question but is entirely different from the Socratic questioning style which many teachers already employ.

Teaching by discussion imposes still other requirements. For older children, it calls for more than a fifty-minute class period. It calls for a room in which the participants in the discussion sit around a table instead of in rows. The teacher is one of the participants, not the principal performer standing up in front of the group.

The teacher's role in discussion is to keep it going along fruitful lines—by moderating, guiding, correcting, leading, and arguing like one more *student!* The teacher is first among equals. All must have the sense that they are participating as equals, as is the case in a genuine conversation. (*Paideia Proposal* 54)

The seminar is more than a common classroom discussion in that it is focused on a text—book, painting, poem, film clip, scientific hypothesis, etc. The Socratic Seminar is also a performance assessment, and as such, it begins with *outcomes*. Numerous critical thinking skills are addressed through the seminar method including analysis of text, synthesis of ideas, evaluation of concepts, and inferential reasoning. Of course, speaking and listening skills are developed as well. Socratic Seminars also include a written dimension. Students can write about the ideas presented or evaluate the quality of the seminar itself (participation, quality of comments, insights, new ideas). These activities can be used by all disciplines as teachers engage in discussing and evaluating concepts and texts in all content areas be they musical scores, paintings, mathematical theorems, or scientific experiments.

Three Kinds of Teaching and Learning

These three columns do not correspond to separate courses or disciplines, and one kind of teaching or learning is not confined to any one class.

COLUMN ONE	COLUMN TWO	COLUMN THREE
<p>Acquisition of Organized Knowledge by means of: Didactic Instruction, Discovery Learning, Textbooks, and other aids in these content areas: Language and Literature Mathematics Natural Science History Geography Social Studies</p>	<p>Development of Intellectual Skills (Skills of Learning) by means of: Coaching and Supervised Practice in the operations of: reading, writing, speaking, listening, calculating, problem-solving, observing, measuring, estimating, exercising critical judgement, performing in the fine arts</p>	<p>Enlarged Understanding of Ideas, Values, and Issues by means of: Socratic Questioning in seminar discussions of: imaginative and expository literature, works of visual and musical art, mathematical theorems, scientific inquiry</p>

What to Do

1. Choose a text. Good texts are ones that interest the students. Paragraphs and lines (or portions of a score or painting) need to be easily identified and referenced.
2. Design possible opening questions. Good opening questions:
 - o arise from genuine interest or curiosity on the part of the teacher,
 - o are open to interpretation (no right or wrong answer),
 - o foster analysis and a greater understanding of the text,
 - o are supportable by the text (answered by reference to the text),
 - o are framed in such a way that they generate dialogue from the students.
3. Teach any background information necessary for a good understanding of the text. This prevents the need for the teacher to interrupt the discussion to clarify or provide additional information.

4. Have the students put their desks in circle so that they can see each other. Provide an empty desk for the "hot seat."
5. Choose an *outer circle* to critique, trouble-shoot, record main and dropped ideas, journal on what they heard, etc. Students who didn't do the necessary reading or randomly chosen students make up the outer circle. These students may sit in the "hot seat" if they want to participate.
6.
 - A. Start by explaining the Socratic Seminar to the students. Explain that the conversation is theirs, and that your question is a starting point which they can move away from as they pose ideas and questions that are more interesting to them as long as the new ideas and questions can be discussed in terms of the text.
 - B. Tell the students to direct their comments *to other students* and explain to them that you will not comment on what they say, since this will cause them to talk to you rather than to each other. It may help if you look down or avoid eye contact until the discussion takes off on its own.
 - C. Encourage the students to think before they talk, try to comment, or add on to what others have said. Listen to others.
7. Toss out the question.
 - . Students have learned to be passive, and this activity can be risky for some students, so it may take time for some groups to catch on. The conversation is likely to have stops and starts, but *it is crucial that the teacher not step in and try to rescue the conversation*. If the conversation goes dead, wait. Students will find the silence unbearable before the teacher does. Your silence also indicates your level of commitment to the activity.
 - A. If students ask you a question, throw it out to the group or ask the questioner what his/her opinion is. Answer factual questions only *if there is no way around it*.
 - B. Teacher Behavior
 - Keep students from having side conversations.
 - Ask students to cite support from the text of the conversation begins to wander.
 - Invite students to participate.
 - Keep conversations from becoming debate or debasement of others.
 - Ask students to question their assumptions.
 - Manipulate the amount of participation. For example, if only a few students are speaking, the teacher might say, "Everyone who has spoken so far, look at the clock, and don't jump in for five minutes." Or if one gender is dominating the conversation, ask for the other to speak for the next five minutes.

- Use the *outer circle* to your advantage if the conversation is truly dying out prematurely. Ask the students sitting there to summarize or comment on what they have heard. Ask them to re-introduce the points they thought were especially good or prematurely dropped. This strategy can often reignite the conversation.
8. End the seminar when it feels done. With an experienced group, you might ask the students, or a student might suggest it. If things go really well, a student may suggest another poem, text, or section to discuss which correlates well with the original text.
 9. The Critique Go around the circle and ask each student about the experience. What was good about it? What was not so good? What could be improved for the next time? Let the *outer circle* discuss the group dynamics, but be careful that they focus their comments on group rather than individual behaviors.

Extension Activities

Socratic Seminars are good preparation for individual explication or a comparison/contrast essay. Students can journal about the texts discussed.

DIALOGUE AND DEBATE

Dialogue is collaborative. Multiple sides work towards 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 view.

Debate affirms a participant's point of view.

Dialogue reveals assumptions for reevaluation.

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 the reflections of others will help improve it rather than threaten it.

In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against a challenge to show that it is right.

In dialogue, one searches for the strengths in all positions.

In debate, one searches for the weaknesses in the other positions.

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 workable solutions.

Debate assumes a single right answer that someone already has.

Dialogue remains open-ended.

Debate demands a conclusion.

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LISTENING AND SPEAKING IN A SEMINAR

One goal of seminars is to understand the ideas and thoughts of others through asking questions and listening to answers. This means that seminar participants must practice how to agree and disagree. Participants must be able to disagree without being disagreeable. In order to do so, the participants can use the following suggested ways of responding as a way of framing their thoughts before they speak. Speaking and responding in a calm, collaborative manner is essential to good discussion and dialogue.

1. I agree with _____ because, but I want to add another reason why I think _____ is true. (Give another reason.) _____
2. I disagree with _____ because _____
3. I'm not sure why _____ said _____. Can you reword your comments to help me understand?
4. I understand your point, _____, but I want to add/disagree/give another side: _____
5. This is what I think you are saying. _____
_____ Is that correct?

SEMINAR PLANNING FORM

Title of Seminar _____ Date _____ Level _____			
Main Concepts/Issues	Preliminary Activities	Seminar	Post Activities
		Opening:	
		Core:	
		Closing:	

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.
4. "Round Robin" observing using phrases on the board.
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

SEMINAR RATING CHART

For _____

Date _____

Positive Behaviors

- 1. I came prepared for the seminar.
- 2. I was courteous to the other students.
- 3. I paused and thought before speaking.
- 4. I listened to others tell their opinions.

- 5. I kept an open mind for opinions different from my own.
- 6. I acted as a positive role model for other students.
- 7. I built on what was said just before I gave my opinion.
- 8. I used fixed examples from the text to support statements.
- 9. I felt comfortable speaking in the seminar.
- 10. I gave my opinions clearly.

Negative Behaviors

- 11. I interrupted others.
- 12. I acted silly.
- 13. I did not look at the person who was speaking.
- 14. I talked off the topic.
- 15. I talked too much or not at all

SOCRATIC SEMINAR OBSERVATION FORM

Observer _____ Date _____

Reading Item _____

Opening Question _____

Persons Observed	Uses Text	Listens +/o/-	Responds to Quest.	Paraphrases	Asks Quest.	Defers	Comments - Numbers or words

Comments - Use these numbers for comments.

1. Needs to speak more.
2. Playful
3. Calls out, interrupts.
4. Plays with name card and other things.
5. Needs to listen more carefully- asks for repeated comments.
6. Has an excellent idea.
7. Asks good questions.
8. Outstanding participation- includes responding, asking questions, paraphrasing, and deferring.

What is the best idea you heard in the seminar? _____

How would you rate the seminar? (Check One)

- Excellent (Everyone participated, listened, had good ideas, did not interrupt.)
- Good (Generally, everyone participated but the seminar could have better ideas and behavior.)
- Fair (Side talk, interruptions, students distracted.)
- Poor (Lots of side talk, interruptions, and rude behavior.)

How many times did the facilitator have to stop the seminar? _____

FACILITATOR'S EVALUATION SHEET

Date _____ Name _____ Group _____ Reading Item _____

	Yes	No	N/A
1. Were the participants engaged early?			
2. Did you make sure the questions were understood?			
3. Did you ask questions that led to further questions?			
4. Did you use the answers as the basis of follow-up questions?			

5. Did you allow for discussion of disagreement?			
6. Did you listen carefully to participants' questions?			
7. Did you accept participants' answers without judgement?			
8. Did you keep attention on ideas in the text/item being discussed?			
9. Did you behave as a model of seminar participation?			
10. Did you correct mis-readings of the text?			
11. Did you allow time (pauses) for thinking?			
12. Did you draw out reasons and implications?			
13. Did you or did not reach closure?			

In the course of the seminar:

What was the most interesting question?

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

What was the best thing you observed?

What was the most troubling thing you observed?

What do you think should be done differently in the next seminar?

SEMINAR PLANNING FORM

Title of Seminar _____ Date _____ Level _____

Main Concepts/Issues	Preliminary Activities	Seminar	Post Activities
		Opening: Core: Closing:	

SEMINAR RUBRIC

Oral Presentation

1. Addresses the question using evidence from the text. Cites examples, passages, characters from the text to support answers. Comments show that the student has read the text, understood it, and is making connections between the text and ideas generated by the seminar.
2. Makes relevant comments during the seminar which show response to the previous speaker's ideas. Helps to enlarge understanding of the text and ideas generated in the seminar.
3. Takes the initiative in participating, does not have to be prompted.
4. May ask questions to clarify and deepen the discussion of ideas.

Other Presentation

1. Is on time for the seminar.
2. Shows attentiveness through body language: sitting up straight, looking at the speaker, giving the speaker the floor.
3. Does not belittle or criticize others' comments.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA FOR SOCRATIC SEMINARS

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Unsatisfactory
Conduct	Demonstrates respect for learning process, has patience with different opinions and complexity, shows initiative by asking others for clarification, brings others into the conversation, moves conversation forward, speaks to all participants, avoids talking too much.	Generally shows composure but may display impatience with contradictory or confusing ideas, comments but does not necessarily encourage others to participate, may tend to address only the teacher or get into debates.	Participates and expresses a belief that his ideas are important in understanding the text, may make insightful comments but is either too forceful or too shy and does not contribute to the progress of conversation, tends to debate not discuss.	Displays little respect for the learning process, argumentative, takes advantage of minor distractions, uses inappropriate language, speaks to individuals rather than ideas, arrives unprepared without notes, a pencil, and perhaps even the text.

Speaking/Reasoning	Understands question before answering, cites evidence from text, expresses thoughts in complete sentences, logical and insightful, moves conversation forward, makes connections between ideas, resolves apparent contradictory ideas, considers others' viewpoints not only his/her own, avoids bad logic.	Responds to questions voluntarily, comments show an appreciation for the text but not an appreciation for the subtler points within it, comments logical but not connected to other speakers, ideas interesting enough that others respond to them.	Responds to questions but may have to be called upon, has read the text but not put much effort into preparing questions and ideas for the seminar, comments take details into account but may not flow logically in conversation.	Extremely reluctant to participate even when called upon, comments illogical and meaningless, may mumble or express incomplete ideas, little or no account taken of previous comments or important ideas in the text.
Listening	Pays attention to details, writes down questions, responses take into account all participants, demonstrates that s/he has kept up, points out bad logic, overcomes	Generally pays attention and responds thoughtfully to ideas and questions of other participants and the teacher, absorption in own ideas may distract	Appears to find some ideas unimportant while responding to others, may have to have questions repeated while not having confusing comments restated, takes few notes	Appears uninvolved in the seminar, comments display complete misinterpretation of questions or comments of other participants.

	distractions.	the participant from the ideas of others.	during the seminar.	
Reading	Thoroughly familiar with text, has notations and questions in the margins, key words, phrases, and ideas are underlined, possible contradictions identified, pronounces words correctly.	Has read the text and comes with some ideas from it but these may not be written out in advance, good understanding of the vocabulary but may mispronounce some new or foreign words.	Appears to have read or skimmed the text but has not marked the text or made meaningful notes or questions, shows difficulty with vocabulary, mispronounces important words, key concepts misunderstood, little evidence of serious reflection prior to the seminar.	Student is unprepared for the seminar, important words, phrases, ideas in the text are unfamiliar, no notes or questions marked in the text, no attempt made to get help with difficult material.