



Introduction to Socratic Seminars

Challenging Students to Think for Themselves

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ELEMENTS OF SOCRATIC SEMINARS

Socrates believed that enabling students to think for themselves was more important than filling their heads with "right" answers. In a Socratic Seminar, participants seek deeper understanding of complex ideas through rigorously thoughtful dialogue, rather than by memorizing bits of information or meeting arbitrary demands for "coverage". A Socratic Seminar fosters active learning as participants explore and evaluate the ideas, issues, and values in a particular text. A good seminar consists of four interdependent elements: (1) the text being considered, (2) the questions raised, (3) the seminar leader, and (4) the participants. A closer look at each of these elements helps explain the unique character of a Socratic Seminar.

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.

THE QUESTION

A Socratic Seminar opens with a question either posed by the leader or solicited from participants as they acquire more experience in seminars. 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 predetermined by the leader.

THE LEADER

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 which truly interests the leader as well as the participants.

THE PARTICIPANTS

In a Socratic Seminar, participants share with the leader the 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. Participants acquire good seminar behaviors through participating in seminars and reflecting on them afterward. After each seminar, the leader and participants discuss the experience and identify ways of improving the next seminar. Before each new seminar, the leader also offers coaching and practice in specific habits of mind that improve reading, thinking, and discussing. 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.

Dialogue and Debate

- 1
 - Dialogue is collaborative: multiple sides work toward shared understanding.
 - Debate is oppositional: two opposing sides try to prove each other wrong.
- 2
 - 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.
- 3
 - Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.
 - Debate affirms a participant's point of view.
- 4
 - Dialogue reveals assumptions for examination and reevaluation.
 - Debate defends assumptions as truth.
- 5
 - Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: openness to being wrong and an openness to change.
 - Debate creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right.
- 6
 - In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, expecting that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than threaten it.
 - In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.
- 7
 - Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.
 - Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.
- 8
 - In dialogue, one searches for strengths in all positions.
 - In debate, one searches for weaknesses in the other position.
- 9
 - Dialogue respects all the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend.
 - Debate rebuts contrary positions and may belittle or deprecate other participants.
- 10
 - Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to a greater understanding.
 - Debate assumes a single right answer that somebody already has.
- 11
 - Dialogue remains open-ended.
 - Debate demands a conclusion.

Questioning Guide

1. **REMEMBER: (Knowledge)**
 name describe match list recall
 identify define repeat state
 memorize relate label record

2. **SHOW UNDERSTANDING: (Comprehension)**
 tell infer extend rewrite restate
 recognize review summarize discuss explain
 locate generalize express report find
 paraphrase give examples

3. **USE UNDERSTANDING: (Application)**
 demonstrate operate use illustrate
 discover dramatize imply compute
 translate solve practice apply
 schedule change interpret relate
 pretend prepare

4. **EXAMINE: (Analysis)**
 debate compare categorize criticize separate
 diagram question analyze experiment outline
 distinguish inventory differentiate break down divide
 select discriminate point out

5. **CREATE: (Synthesis)**
 suppose devise plan create design
 formulate modify construct draw propose
 organize assemble write compose arrange
 combine compare compile generate revise

6. **DECIDE: (Evaluation)**
 select value justify assess
 summarize measure predict decide
 evaluate judge rate choose
 conclude compare contrast estimate

SUPPORTIVE EVIDENCE:

Prove your answer

Give reasons for your answers.

Support your answer.

Why or why not?

Explain your answer.

Why do you think or feel that way?

SERIALIZED QUESTIONING PRACTICE

The purpose of serialized questions is to help your partner explore his or her own thoughts about the issue and build a response, not to ELICIT a "right" answer.

- Neither the questioner nor the responder knows in advance what the questions or answers will be nor where they will lead.
- Don't look for or expect "right" answers.
- In the practice session, try to ask serialized questions only.
- Base each new question on some element in your partner's previous response-an idea, a word, an issue-that suggests a deeper line of inquiry.
- Your partner's answer to that question determines your next question.
- Ask questions that lead your partner to talk about ideas:
- Who? What? When? questions often lead to dead ends. Why? How? questions may be more fruitful.
- Ask questions that call for applications and extensions of an idea.
- In general, avoid Yes/No questions.

SERIALIZED QUESTIONING EXAMPLE

"Man is a rational animal who always loses his temper

when called upon to act in accordance with the dictates of reason "

Questioner: What does he mean by *rational*?

Responder: I think he means logical.

Questioner: How is *logical* different than *rational*?

Responder: One way is by using steps.

Questioner: Explain how using *steps* is *rational*.

Responder: It is reasonable to use steps.

Questioner: Can you give examples when to be *reasonable* uses steps?

From *Poor Richard's Almanac* by Benjamin Franklin

1. Ill customs and bad advice are seldom forgotten.
2. One good husband is worth two good wives: the scarcer things are, the more they're valued.
3. Hope and minnows are bait for people and big fish.
4. Declaiming against pride is not always a sign of humility.
5. Neglect kills injuries; revenge increases them.
6. Fish and visitors stink after three days.
7. Doing an injury puts you below your enemy. Revenging one makes you just even. Forgiving it sets you above.
8. Many foxes grow grey, but few grow good.
9. There's none deceived but one who trusts.
10. Eat to please yourself, but dress to please others.
11. Search others for their virtues, yourself for your vices.
12. None are deceived but they who confide.
13. Different religions, like different clocks, may all be near the matter, even though they don't quite agree.
14. Content makes a poor person rich; discontent makes a rich person poor.
15. Nine persons in ten are suicides.

Salvador Late or Early
Sandra Cisneros

Salvador with eyes the color of caterpillar, Salvador of the crooked hair and crooked teeth,
Salvador whose name the teacher cannot remember, is a boy who is no one's friend, runs along
somewhere in that vague direction where the homes are the color of bad weather, lives behind a raw
wood doorway, shakes the sleepy brothers awake, ties their shoes, combs their hair with water, feeds
5 them milk and corn flakes from a tin cup in the dim dark of the morning.

Salvador, late or early, sooner or later arrives with the string of younger brothers ready. Helps
his mama, who is busy with the business of the baby. Tugs the arms of Cecilio, Arturito, makes them
hurry, because today, like yesterday, Arturito has dropped the cigar box of crayons, has let go the
hundred little fingers of red, green, yellow, blue, and nub of black sticks that tumble and spill over and
10 beyond the asphalt puddles until the crossing-guard lady holds back the blur of traffic for Salvador to
collect them again.

Salvador inside that wrinkled shirt, inside the throat that must clear itself and apologize each
time it speaks, inside that forty-pound body of boy with its geography of scars, its history of hurt,
limbs stuffed with feathers and rags, in what part of the eyes, in what part of the heart, in that cage of
15 the chest where something throbs with both fists and knows only what Salvador knows, inside that
body too small to contain the hundred balloons of happiness, the single guitar of grief, is a boy like
any other disappearing out the door, beside the schoolyard gate, where he has told his brothers they
must wait. Collects the hands of Cecilio and Arturito, scuttles off dodging the many schoolyard
colors, the elbows and wrists crisscrossing, the several shoes running. Grows small and smaller to the
20 eye, dissolves into the bright horizon, flutters in the air before disappearing like a memory of kites.

Socratic Seminar Observation Form

Observer: _____ Seminar Text: _____

Date: _____

1. What did you observe about how the participants used the text during the seminar?
2. What was the most interesting question posed by a participant during the seminar?
3. What questions would you like to ask the participants about the seminar?
4. What things did the leader do to get participants engaged in the discussion? Did they work? Why or Why not?
5. What questions would you like to ask the leader about the seminar?

About Revenge by Francis Bacon

Revenge is a sort of savage justice. The more people try to take revenge, the more the law
5 should punish them. When a man commits a crime, he breaks the law. But when the injured person
takes revenge, the person destroys law itself. In taking revenge, a person does indeed get even with
his enemy. But when one refuses to take revenge, he shows that he is better than his enemy. King
Solomon, I am sure, said it is glorious for a person to forget an injury.

Whatever is past is gone and can't be changed. Wise people know they have enough to do in
10 the present and with whatever might happen in the future. They don't spend their time taking
revenge. People who spend their time worrying about past injuries just waste their time. Also, no
person hurts another person just to hurt him. Rather, it is done for his profit or his own pleasure or his
honor or for some other reason he might have. So why should I be angry with someone for loving
himself better than he loves me? Suppose someone hurts me because he is evil. Isn't that just like a
15 thorn or briar which scratches me because it can't do anything else?

Revenge is most allowable when there is no specific law to correct an injury. However, one
must then be careful that the kind of revenge one takes does not break another law. Some people,
when they get even, want their enemy to know that it will happen. This is a more generous way of
acting. Not letting your enemy know you are going to get even is a cowardly thing to do. It is like
20 killing at night from ambush.

There was an Italian ruler, Cosimo de Medici, who said the following to his friends who
might betray or injure him: "We read," he said, "that we are commanded to forgive our enemies. But
we never read that we are commanded to forgive our friends." I think, however, that the spirit of
what Job said is truer. He said, "Shall we receive good from God and not also be willing to accept the
25 evil"? The same is true, in part, about friends.

What is certain about planning to get even is that one's own wounds remain open. If one
didn't spend one's time trying to take revenge, those injuries would heal and be forgotten. Public or
state revenges are, for the most part, good - as in the case of the murderers of Julius Caesar. Private
revenges are, however, not good. People who take revenge live the life of witches. They cause
30 trouble to others and come to a bad end.

THE BEAR AND THE CROW

The Bear was on his way to town. He was dressed in his finest coat and vest. He was wearing his best derby hat and his shiniest shoes.

5 “How grand I look,” said the Bear to himself. “The townsfolk will be impressed. My clothes are at the height of fashion.”

 “Forgive me for listening,” said a Crow, who was sitting on the branch of a tree, “but I must disagree. Your clothes are *not* at the height of fashion. I have just flown in from town. I can tell you exactly how
10 the gentlemen are dressed there.”

 “Do tell me!” cried the Bear. “I am so eager to wear the most proper attire!”

 “This year,” said the Crow, “the gentlemen are not wearing hats. They all have frying pans on their heads. They are not wearing coats and
15 vests. They are covering themselves with bed sheets. They are not wearing shoes. They are putting paper bags on their feet.”

 “Oh, dear,” cried the Bear, “my clothes are completely wrong!”

 The Bear hurried home. He took off his coat and vest and hat and shoes. He put a frying pan on his head. He wrapped himself in a bed
20 sheet. He stuffed his feet into large paper bags and rushed off toward the town.

 When the Bear arrived on Main Street, the people giggled and smirked and pointed their fingers.

 “What a ridiculous Bear!” they said.

25 The embarrassed Bear turned around and ran home. On the way he met the Crow again.

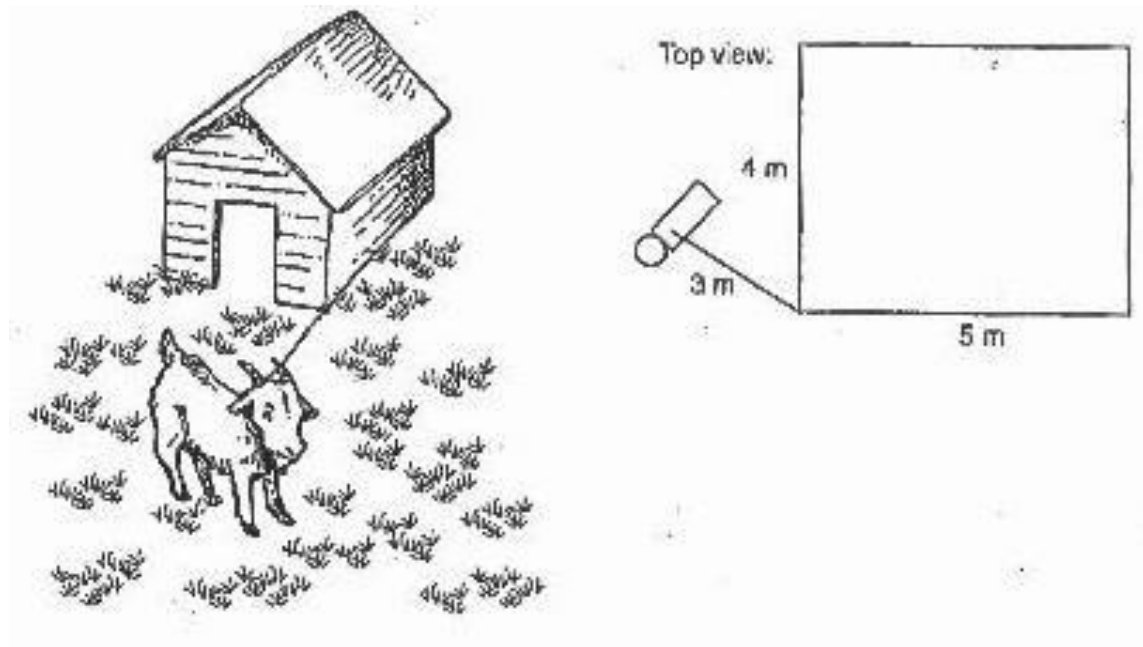
 “Crow, you did not tell me the truth!” cried the Bear.

 “I told you many things,” said the Crow, as he flew out of the tree, “but never once did I tell you that I was telling you the truth!”

30 Even though the Crow was high in the sky, the Bear could still hear the shrill sound of his cackling laughter.

Grass for Goats

The Jacobsens chain their goat to the corner of a shed that is 5 meters by 4 meters. The chain is 3 meters long. The chain is attached to the corner of the shed at ground level. What is the area of grass that the goat can reach?



The Physics, Bk. II, Ch, 8, by Aristotle

5 Some serious people say that nature does not have purposes. That is,
that nature does not work for goals. They say that things happen because hot
is hot, and cold is cold. For example, rain doesn't come so that corn will
grow and people will eat and prosper. Rather, it rains because water heated
by the sun rises from the earth by evaporation and then, chilled by the
10 atmosphere, becomes water again and falls as rain. Sometimes that is good
for a farmer; sometimes it is not.

 They make the same claim about each living thing. It just so happens,
they say, that the teeth that are good for cutting are in the front of our
15 mouths, and the teeth that are good for grinding what has already been cut
are at the back of our mouths. It turns out well, but why should we think
there is any purpose in it? After all, mere coincidence or chance might have
brought about this arrangement of teeth in some living thing, and because of
this the living thing was able to survive. This, however, is a bad argument.
20 Mere coincidence or chance is not like that. What happens always, or
almost always is not a matter of coincidence. It is a matter of how things
naturally are.

 Yet, many people wonder how nature can have purposes. They say
25 that there is a great difference between the way human beings make things,
and what happens naturally. They admit that when a carpenter makes a
table, he has a purpose in mind. But oak trees, they say, just grow.

 This opinion does not make sense. When I make something, I desire,
30 and I choose, and I arrange things. Now think of a bird's nest, or a spider's
web. If I were making those things would I make them differently? How do
plants know to grow their roots down rather than up in order to find food?

 Don't worry because you don't see birds, spiders and plants trying to
35 choose. Sometimes the goal and the choice are not separate from what
happens. If nature wanted to make boats, it would make them the same way
we make them. The maker doesn't have to be separate from the thing made.
Think of a doctor doctoring himself. Nature is like that.

Micro-Seminar Leader Groups

1. DON'T try to come up with an opening question at first.
2. Spend at least half your time examining the text closely, identifying and discussing its key ideas, issues, and values. Try these sentence frames to stimulate your thinking:
 - What puzzles me is . . .
 - I'd like to talk with people about. . .
 - I'm confused about. . .
 - This is similar to what I know about. . .
 - The big ideas seem to be. . .
 - I have questions about. . .
 - One way to use this idea might be . . .
 - Another point of view is . . .
 - I've got it. It means. . .
3. Convert some of the ideas, issues, and values into questions that have no "right" answers but are likely to lead participants back to the text for discussion.
4. Select an opening question or opening strategy for your micro-seminar. You might all agree to try the same question, or each of you might choose a different opening strategy for comparison.

A good opening question in a seminar:

- Arises from *genuine curiosity* on the part of the leader
- Has no single or "right" answer
- Is framed to generate discussion leading to greater understanding of the ideas in the text
- Can best be answered *by reference to the text*

Techniques for Expanding Questioning¹

1. Why do you say that?
2. What do you mean by that word?
 - *slave* or *servant* -How are they different?
3. Point to a word. What does that word mean?
4. Refer to a specific word in the text. How does that fit?
5. Have them defend their position.
 - How do you support that from the text?
6. If you think they are wrong in their use of a word:
 - Ask why they use _____?
7. Is that the author's intent?
 - Use a similar word (i.e., servant/employee) -Does it fit?
8. If they are rattling on, slow them down with
 - I don't quite follow you.
9. Why do you say _____? (use a specific word)
10. If they are puzzled, ask what puzzles them.
11. Use an example to illustrate the polar positions.
12. Involve other students in a response:
 - What do you think about _____?
 - Do you agree with that?
13. When an answer is muddled:
 - Look for the reason, ask about it.
 - Repeat the point to the student.
 - Use the basic concept again in a question.

¹ Adapted from Weiss

Socratic Seminar: *The Pledge of Allegiance*

1. Arrange the classroom as a circle.
2. Introduce Socratic Seminars to students as a way to talk and work together to understand different kinds of texts.
3. Distribute and discuss “Dialogue and Debate”. Emphasize that Socratic Seminars are based on dialogue.
4. Assign the following prep work for *The Pledge of Allegiance*, or one of your own.
 - Read the text carefully, like you would a love letter or a recipe.
 - Working in pairs and using a dictionary, define the following terms: pledge, allegiance, republic, nation, indivisible, liberty, justice.
5. Set the following ground rules for the seminar, or ones of your own.
 - Only one person talking at a time.
 - No hand raising, this is a conversation.
 - Be respectful of others and their thoughts.
 - Base your thoughts on something in the text.
6. Begin the seminar with the following opening question, or one of your own.
 - How is *The Pledge of Allegiance* a duty, a dream, and a goal?
7. Facilitate the dialogue by using “Serialized Questioning” during the seminar i.e. by “clicking on” parts of the students’ responses.
8. After bringing the seminar to a close, engage students in writing their responses to the following questions for reflection, or ones of your own.
 - How was today’s Socratic Seminar the same as and different from other discussions we have had in this class?
 - How did your understanding of *The Pledge of Allegiance* change?
 - On a scale of 1 to 10, how well did we do in following the ground rules?
9. Have students verbally share their reflections around the circle.
10. Good luck and have fun!

The Pledge of Allegiance

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United

States of America and to the Republic for

which it stands; one Nation under God,

Indivisible, With Liberty and Justice for all.

The Evolution of the Pledge of Allegiance

The original version, from August 1892, was:

I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands; one Nation indivisible, With Liberty and Justice for all.

The second version, from October 1892, was:

I pledge allegiance to my Flag and to the Republic for which it stands; one Nation indivisible, With Liberty and Justice for all.

The third version, from 1923, was:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States and to the Republic for which it stands; one Nation indivisible, With Liberty and Justice for all.

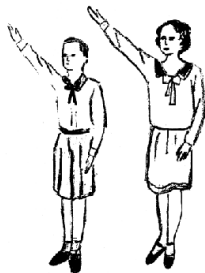
The fourth version, from 1924, was:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands; one Nation indivisible, With Liberty and Justice for all.

The fifth version, from 1954, is:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands; one Nation under God, indivisible, With Liberty and Justice for all.

Until WWII the pledge was recited using the salute shown below:



Resources Books for Socratic Seminars

About the *Approach* of Socratic Seminars

The Habit of Thought

By Michael Strong

Socratic Seminars in the Block

By Wanda H. Ball and Pam Brewer

Socratic Seminars and Literature Circles for Middle and High School English

By Victor J. Moeller and Marc V. Moeller

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

By Matt Copeland

For *Texts* to be used in Socratic Seminars

Citizens of the World: Readings in Human Rights (and other books)

Published by the Great Books Foundation

www.greatbooks.org

Various Touchstones Books (including Touchpebbles)

Published by Touchstones

www.touchstones.org

Active Thinking Through Dialogue in the Elementary and Secondary Grades

Published by the National Paideia Center

www.paideia.org