

*Socratic*

*Seminars*



# The Vision

- Socrates believed that enabling students to *think for themselves* was more important than filling their heads with *“right answers.”*



# The Vision

- Participants seek **deeper understanding** of complex ideas through rigorously thoughtful **dialogue**, rather than by memorizing bits of information.



# What are Socratic Seminars?

- **Highly motivating** form of intellectual and scholarly discourse.



# What are Socratic Seminars?

- Usually range from 30-50 minutes
  - An effective Socratic Seminar creates **dialogue** as opposed to debate.



# Starting Dialogue

- **Asking questions** is the key!
- A leader prompts the use of dialogue
  - Participants learn to be less attached to their ideas and less reliant on persuasion for influencing opinions.
- Dialogue is a skill of collaboration that enables groups to **create collective thinking.**



# Starting Dialogue

- When groups begin to use dialogue with discussion, the two practices need to be **defined** and **differentiated**.
- The most productive discourse will *flow back and forth* from one to the other, from **inquiry** to **advocacy**.



# Starting Dialogue

- **Students** must risk making mistakes in order to learn how to learn to think critically, and work collaboratively.
- **Teachers** support this risk-taking when they take their own risks in learning how to improve themselves as teachers.





# Discussion & Dialogue

- **Discussion** in the dictionary is *"a close examination of a subject with interchange of opinions, sometimes using argument, in an effort to reach an agreement."*



# Discussion & Dialogue

- **Dialogue** is *"an interchange of ideas especially when open and frank and seeking mutual understanding."*
  - *It is a collective inquiry in which we suspend opinions, share openly, and think creatively about difficult issues.*

***Effective groups need to use both dialogue and discussion***

# Dialogue is NOT Debate!



# Debate

- Is **oppositional**
- One listens to **counter arguments.**
- **Affirms** participant's points of view.
- **Defends** assumptions as truth
- **Creates a close-minded attitude**

# Dialogue

- Is **collaborative**
- One listens to find **common ground**
- **Enlarges** points of view
- **Reveals** assumptions for **re-evaluation**
- **Creates an open-minded attitude**

# Debate

- Defends thinking to show that it is right.
- Calls for investing in one's beliefs.
- One searches for weaknesses
- Rebuts contrary positions and may belittle others
- Debate assumes a single right answer
- Demands a conclusion

# Dialogue

- Expects other's reflections will improve their own thinking
- Temporarily suspending one's beliefs
- Searches for strengths
- Respects others and seeks not to alienate
- Assumes that cooperation can lead to greater understanding
- Remains open-ended

# Four Elements

- An effective seminar consists of four interdependent elements:
  1. the **text** being considered
  2. the **questions** raised
  3. the seminar **leader**, and
  4. the **participants**



# The Text

- A seminar text can be drawn from readings in literature, history, science, math, health, and philosophy or from works of art or music.



# The Text

- Socratic Seminar texts are chosen for their **richness in ideas, issues, and values**, and their ability to stimulate extended, thoughtful dialogue.





# The Question

- An opening question **has no right answer**
  - *It reflects a genuine curiosity on the part of the leader.*

***Should human embryos be cloned in order to save lives?***



# The Question

- An effective 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**
  - The line of inquiry evolves **on the spot** rather than being predetermined by the leader.



# The Leader

- Plays a **dual role** as leader and participant
  - **Consciously leads** a thoughtful exploration of the ideas in the text.
  - **As a seminar participant,** actively engages in the group's exploration of the text.



# The Leader

- Helps participants **clarify** their positions when arguments become confused
- Involves **reluctant participants** while restraining their more vocal peers



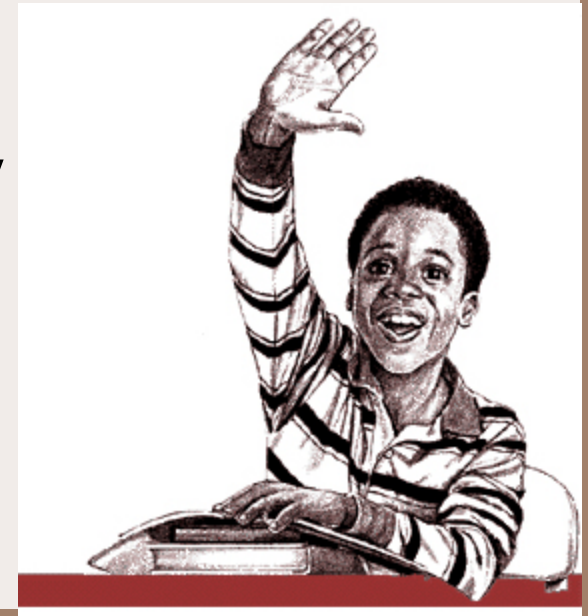
# The Leader

- Must be **patient** enough to allow participants' understandings to evolve
- Be willing to help participants explore **non-traditional insights** and unexpected interpretations



# The Participants

- **Share responsibility** for the quality of the seminar.
- **Most effective** when participants:
  - study the text closely **in advance**
  - listen **actively**



# The Participants

- **Most effective** when participants:
  - **share** their ideas and questions in response to others
  - search for **evidence in the text** to support their ideas



# Designing the Best

- Seminars in which something **new** and **unexpected** is discovered.
- *Seminar is approached as a **joint search**.*





# Designing the Best

- At the end of a successful Socratic Seminar, participants often **leave with more questions** than they brought with them.



# Benefits include:

- Time to engage in **in-depth** discussions, problem solving, and clarification of ideas
- Building a strong, **collaborative** work culture
- **Enhanced knowledge** and research base
- **Increased success** for all students
- Teaching **respect** for diverse ideas, people, and practices
- Creating a **positive learning environment** for all students



# Conducting a “Fishbowl”

- A strategy to use when you have a **LARGE class** (over 25 students)
- Divide the class into “**Inner**” and “**Outer**” circles



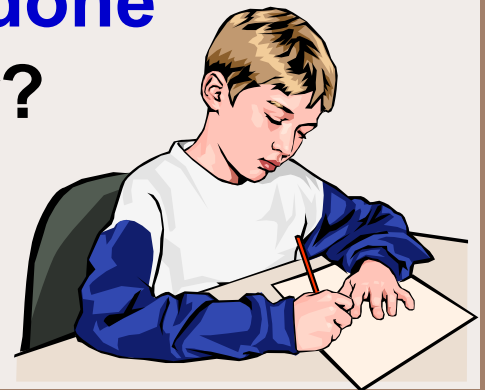
# Conducting a “Fishbowl”

- **Inner circle** = active participants
- **Outer circle** = students observe 2-3 active participants for:
  - New ideas
  - Question asked
  - Referred to text
  - Positive comments
  - Negative Behavior
  - Side conversations



# Observer Write-up

- 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?
- What do you **wish** you had said?



# Tips for Teachers

## Before the seminar:

- Read the text **CAREFULLY**
  - Focus on possible provocative questions
  - Select short passages for special attention
  - Identify tough vocabulary words
- Choose an **introductory question** in advance
  - Broad, open-ended, provocative



# Guidelines for Questioning

**Learning occurs based on the kinds of questions asked**

- **Develop opening, core, and closing questions before the seminar**
  - **Non-judgmental and derived from the text**
  - **Questions that raise questions**
- **Avoid using YES/NO questions**



# Guidelines for Questioning

- Ask hypothetical questions
- Ask questions with no right or wrong answers
- Continue to ask “why?”
  - Probe the responses of the participants with further questioning
- Allow yourself to both guide the discussion but to go with it as well





# Example Questions

- *By what reasoning did you come to that conclusion?*
- *What would you say to someone who said \_\_\_?*
- *Are the reasons adequate? Why?*
- *What led you to that belief?*
- *How does that apply to this case?*
- *What would change your mind?*
- *Who is in the position to know if that is so?*
- *Why did you say “they?”*
- *What view would be in opposition to what you are saying?*



# Tips for Teachers

## Before the seminar:

- Tell students the reading assignment will be followed by a Socratic Seminar



# Tips for Teachers

- **Review & post rules**
  - Listen carefully
  - Speak clearly - one person at a time
  - Participate openly
  - Value others opinions, but refer to text when defending your position
  - Avoid side conversations
  - Give others your respect - accept answers without judgement



# Tips for Teachers

- **Review & post seminar procedures**
  - **Respond** to the opening question
  - **Examine the text** to support your answer
    - *“I agree with... but would like to add...”*
    - *“I disagree with...because...”*
    - *“I am confused by...”*



# Tips for Teachers

## During the seminar:

- Begin with an opening question that has **NO right answer**
  - *“What is meant by...”*
  - *“What is the title, theme and tone of the reading..?”*
  - *“What is your own interpretation of the reading...?”*
- Teacher **listens HARD**, follows each answer, if necessary, with another question.



# Tips for Teachers

- **Keep students focused**

- Teacher's role is to **facilitate**
- Ask students to **clarify** a viewpoint
- Ask students about **implications**
- Encourage students to **paraphrase** other's responses
  - *“Nicole, what did you understand Carmen to say?”*
- Insist on standards of **rigor** - a good seminar is **NOT** a “bull session...”

**QUIET  
PLEASE**



# Tips for Teachers

- **Allow for pauses**
  - Silent moments for thinking
- **As a leader, take notes**
  - Sum up what you've heard at the end of the session



# Tips for Teachers



- **Conduct a debriefing**
  - Have students write a **reflection**
  - **Debrief** the topic
    - *“If you have changed your mind about a particular point or issue, what made you change it????”*
  - **Debrief the PROCESS**
    - What **seminar guidelines** observed
    - What **social skills** did the group exhibit
    - What might the **group goal** be for the NEXT seminar



# Tips for Teachers



- **Assessing students**
  - Many teachers choose NOT to assign a grade to a student for **PERFORAMNCE** in a seminar because
    - *They want student to **speak out of interest** in the text, NOT for a grade*
    - *They **don't want** students to equate lots of talking with a good grade and reflective silence with a poor grade.*
    - If you DO choose to assess student participation, there are **rubrics on the CD**

# Tips for Teachers

- **Assessing students**
  - Most teacher prefer to assign a culminating written assignment or essay on the topic



**Designed by**

**The AVID Team**

