

# Socratic Seminar

## *A Reading and Discussion Strategy*

### **Description:**

Based on the Socratic method, the primary functions of this strategy are to encourage respectful patterns of dialogue and to gain a deeper understanding of the text.

**SOCRATIC SEMINAR** is a dialogue, not a debate. It is designed to help students develop higher order thinking skills through discussion, questioning and efforts to define abstract concepts like truth, justice, beauty and equality.

### **Guidelines:**

**SOCRATIC SEMINAR** can be used with part of a longer expository text (social studies, health, science) to explore a particular question. It can be used on a short piece as the main discussion. The seminar discussion is based on a text that the entire class has read, and the seminar question comes directly from that text. Depending on the study habits of the students, the teacher may assign the reading as homework or read it together in class.

A critical guideline is that, if you have never tried a **SOCRATIC SEMINAR** before, during your prep period you might visit a colleague who is having one. Otherwise, read **all** of the information about this strategy several times. Be aware that it takes several tries with a class before it really starts to fall into place.

### **Advance Preparations:**

- 1) The ideal size for **SOCRATIC SEMINAR** is 13-15 students. Since that size is a **rare** amount in most schools, here are several options for how to set up the classroom prior to a seminar. **Adapt the seminar steps, handouts and procedures to the option you choose.**

- **Option One** — Set up the room with two concentric circles.
  - The inner circle should have 13-15 desks, including one for the teacher to fill the role of **facilitator**. The role for students in the inner circle is to **discuss** the text and the seminar question(s). Leave one empty desk in the inner circle — a hot seat for anyone in the outer circle to come and ask a burning question or to make a burning comment. The person in the hot seat must leave after the comment is made so that another person may come in.
  - The outer circle should have the rest of the desks set up facing the backs of the inner circle. The role of the outer circle is to **observe** students in the inner circle as they discuss. Therefore, the outer circle is engaged in analysis of the discussion itself. (See Tally Sheet handout.)
- **Option Two** — Set up the chairs in one huge circle and allow all students to discuss the seminar question(s). Some students feel left out by Option One

above, so Option Two is a possible solution. Its success depends on how much students listen respectfully to a speaker. After discussion of the seminar question(s), all students also participate in the analysis of the discussion process. This option allows everyone in the seminar to see one another and helps to develop a community of talkers and listeners in class. Students are graded on their advance preparation for the seminar, not on discussion. They do not HAVE to talk.

- **Option Three** — Set up the chairs in one huge circle. Have students count off ONE-TWO, ONE-TWO. Students who are ONE's will discuss; students who are TWO's will observe the discussion, performing the duties of the outer circle in Option One above. No one sits with a back to someone else; a sense of community may more easily be fostered in this setting. When students become more comfortable with the seminar format after 2-3 experiences with it, switch the roles of discussor and observer after 10 minutes so that all students do both during the period. **Hint:** Observers are assigned someone across from them, not next to them.
- 2) The facilitator/teacher prepares potential questions for discussion. Ideally, the class comes up with the one central abstract question. The teacher has back-up questions ready.
  - 3) Students are instructed to read the piece the night before the seminar. They need copies to mark up, or need to use binder paper as substitute space for margin notes. Students are instructed to mark up the piece as follows (**see** student handout):
    - Underline unfamiliar words. Try to figure out what they mean.
    - Write down questions that occur to you about things you don't understand, or about things you want to discuss.
    - Underline things you think are particularly important, and write why in the margin.
    - Write notes about what the reading section makes you think of, perhaps another text or event in your life.
    - Write your personal reaction to the text, whether you agree or disagree with the authors and why.
    - In the margin write a short paraphrase of any sentence or concept that seems more difficult. This way you will be able to remember it more easily later.

***On the day of the seminar — STEPS:***

- 1) The room is arranged in one or two circles, depending on which option above that the teacher has chosen.
- 2) Students take up positions in the circle(s), either randomly or by teacher assignment.
- 3) Using the **Student Handout on Socratic Seminar**, the teacher and students review orally the procedures and roles that will be used.
- 4) For 10-20 minutes the seminar occurs. The time limit depends on the group and how well the seminar progresses. Timing may be more critical during the class' first effort.

***Post-Seminar/The Critique:***

*Choose the seminar critiquing activity that works for you —*

- For 10-15 minutes students process in writing how the seminar went. (See handout **EVALUATION of DISCUSSION**.)
- Ask every member of the seminar to think of both a positive aspect of the seminar and an aspect of the seminar which could be improved. Then go around the circle and ask each person to share one, or both, of their observations. This works with both inner and outer circles as well as a full class circle.
- Combine both the written and discussion methods above. How much you can accomplish depends on how long the period is. Feedback and debriefing works best if it happens directly after the seminar.

*Collect the pre-seminar written work, the evaluative written work and tally sheets.*

***Variations, Other Activities and CIM Spinoffs:***

- 1) Before starting the actual seminar, have the entire class write on two questions and then have half the class discuss one question while the other half watches. After 10 minutes or so, switch who is discussing and who is observing and discuss the other question. This will only work if there is enough left for the second group to discuss.
- 2) After the seminar and its debriefing is completed, using the seminar's central question as a topic, have students write an **expository** or **persuasive** essay. Take this through the writing process and then turn these writings into **CIM speeches**.

**GOALS:**

- To engage in dialogue, not debate, about abstract concepts
- To be able to disagree politely with one another
- To reason collectively and build on each other's ideas
- To refine your abstract thinking and logical reasoning
- To analyze a group discussion

**PROCEDURES** to use **as you read** the material the night before Socratic Seminar.

- Underline unfamiliar words. Try to figure out what they mean.
- Write down questions that occur to you about things you don't understand, or about things you want to discuss.
- Underline things you think are particularly important, and write why in the margin.
- Write notes about what the passage makes you think of, perhaps another text or event in your life.
- Write your personal reaction to the text, whether you agree or disagree with the author and why.
- Write a short paraphrase in the margin by any sentence or concept that seems more difficult. This way you will be able to remember it more easily later.

**Some DEFINITIONS:**

- **DIALOGUE** — An exchange of ideas in which there is no intention to reach a decision.
- **DISCUSSION** — An exchange of ideas in which there is an intention to reach a decision or conclusion.
- **DEBATE** — An interplay wherein one idea is proved correct and all opposing viewpoints are undermined.
- **DEGRADE** — An attack on another individual or concept through insult or challenge.

**POINTERS to follow during Socratic seminar:**

- Use "I" messages.  
Examples: I disagree because...

I believe that...

What I've heard so far is...

- Wait until others have spoken before you speak again.
- Speak to each other, not the facilitator who is busy taking notes.
- Invite others to speak.

Examples: Susana, what do you think?

Damon, I saw you nod your head. Do you agree?

- Summarize every 7-10 minutes.
- Ask each other questions and follow up questions.

Examples: Could you explain....?

What do you think...?

I didn't hear all that. Could you repeat it?

- **Respect each other.**
- Be open to changing your mind.
- Build on each other's ideas.
- **Use the text to prove your point.**
- Make connections with other material or with your own life.
- Listen to each other.
- Remember that there might be lulls in discussion. This is okay until someone comes up with another idea.
- Come back to the main question.
- You may pass if called on to speak, except during the seminar critique.
- **There is no ONE right answer.**

### **FINAL POINTER —**

When we discuss our dialogue process, tell us what you **saw** and **heard** rather than sharing your **judgment** about someone's actions or words. Give feedback that will help your classmates become better at discussions, not hurt their feelings or silence them.

### **ROLES for Members of Inner and Outer Circles:**

- **Discussion Group** — Discuss the question(s) and use the text to support your answers. If you do not have a new point to say, it's okay to summarize, or ask a

question, or make a connection with your own life or something else you have read. Build off something that someone else said. If you have spoken a lot, try being silent or ask a question of someone you haven't heard from.

- **Observation Group** — Your role is essential. Getting better at discussion requires paying attention to the process. Your feedback will help the discussion get better next time. Each student in the outer circle will be assigned to observe the person directly in front of you in the inner circle. Use the tally sheet to help you focus. But listen to the entire dialogue and not just your subject. You are primarily an observer, but if you are just dying to say something, you may get up and move to the hot seat in the inner circle. Wait to be recognized, then add your comment and return to your observation seat in the outer circle.
- **Facilitator** — The teacher acts as facilitator. But I will not call on students to speak; ***you call on each other***. My task is to take notes on the dialogue, so my head will be down much of the time. Occasionally I will ask you to go around the circle and explore the meaning of something else you have brought up. I may also stop the discussion periodically and ask you to summarize what has been said. At the end of the discussion I will ask you to reflect on how the seminar went.

## EVALUATION OF DISCUSSION

Consider the following elements of the seminar:

relevance  
questions that probe

depth  
participation

logic  
variety of viewpoints

citation of text  
responding

synthesis  
scope

clarity  
respect

### 1. **Observers and Participants:**

Write a 1/2-page evaluation about how the group did, considering the criteria above and the goals of Socratic Seminar. Think also about the following--

Did the conversation make sense?

How deep did it go?

Were there any missed opportunities to go further?

Did people respond well to each other?

What kinds of questions were asked?

Did everyone participate?

Were their different points of view?

Was the text cited often?

Were connections to personal lives made?

Were you satisfied with conclusions reached?

What did you learn from listening?

Did the dialogue lead you to change your mind about anything?

### 2. Write another 1/2 page as observer or participant.

**Observers:** Looking at the tally sheet and goals of seminar and above criteria—how did your subject do? Discuss her/his strengths and any suggestions you might have.

**Participants:** Recall your own observations and participation. Scan your observer's tally sheet. Discuss your involvement, reflecting on the criteria and questions above. Include what you could do next time to improve your participation or discussion skills.