

Socratic Seminar: Creating the Active Classroom



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Agenda - What's in it for you?

- ▶ Write into the day
- ▶ What's a Socratic Seminar?
- ▶ How do I use them in my classroom?
- ▶ Practice
- ▶ Write out the day

Goal: Be able to implement SS into my instruction.

Sacred Writing Time

Take a few minutes and, in a brief paragraph or collection of ideas, address two questions:

1. What have been your experiences with Socratic Seminars? Positive? Negative?
2. What excites/frustrates/scares you about blending student writing and reading?

Sacred Writing Time

Take a few minutes and, in a brief paragraph or collection of ideas, address two questions:

1. What have been your experiences with Socratic Seminars?
2. What excites/frustrates/scares you about student writing/thinking?

So what do you think?

For me → **limited thinking**

Talking about the **plot** of a book instead of the **argument** of a book.

What do I like or dislike about a text.

Shallow/surface reading/discussion/writing of/about a text.

Lack of passion/thoughtfulness in responses

I found myself bored with their observations/critiques.

Reading and writing shouldn't be disparate tasks.

My journey

- Refusal to be bored in my own classroom
- 2% become English majors
- Donald Murray reminds us that “Students will write well only when they speak in their own voice, and that voice can only be authoritative and honest when the student speaks of his own concerns in his own way.”
- *“Dream no small dreams for they have no power to move the hearts of men.”* — Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

Socratic Seminar

- Student driven dialogue where students ask and answer questions designed to develop a deeper understanding of an issue.

SS Benefits

- Student led
 - Guided by teacher created and/or student created questions, but dominated by student ideas and voices
- No hand holding
- Problem Solving and Critical Thinking are built in
 - Focused on dialogue vs debate, questioning and coming to a group consensus or at least asking interesting, knotty questions
- Develops nuance in students' thoughts
 - Focused on getting to the big why, universal nouns
- Celebrates students' voices by making them the focus of the class
- Creates fodder for writing
 - Often used as pre-thinking before writing an argument or a synthesis paper

Three parts to the SS

- Prep
- Participation
- Follow- up

Prep

- Teacher: choosing a text, creating questions or not, letting students establishing expectations, providing mentors
- Students: read/annotate the text, generate observations/questions, choosing texts

Choosing the text(s)

Look for something that resonates with students

- Current events
 - Kaepernick
 - Serena Williams
 - Cultural appropriation and Halloween costumes
- Gut punch stories/articles/videos
 - “The Ones Who Walk Away” - LeGuin
 - “Island of Plenty” - Montgomery
- What you’re already reading in class
- Supplements of what you’re reading in class
 - *Antigone* - excerpts from Gandhi, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” “Civil Disobedience,” Op-ed about the Tsarnaev brothers’ burial decision/Bin Laden’s burial

Socratic Seminar How to - Prep

- Teach your unit how you would normally teach it
- SS covers “big questions” or extends conversation beyond what we talked about in class
 - “We’ve talked about what I want to talk about; now it’s your turn.”
 - Have former students demo the socratic
- Give students time to prep
 - Questions in class or a few nights to answer
 - Synthesis - look at each piece day by day or jigsaw

Creating the Questions

- Students need to know how to delve deeply into a text
 - Universal nouns - education, power, gender, race, morals, ethics, technology
 - Claim, Evidence, **Warrant** - 'so what' question
 - Informational text
 - Rhetorical situation, SOAPStone and appeals
 - Fiction
 - Critical theory, 3x3 thinking, LIE questions
- **English teachers do this stuff naturally; students don't.****

LIE questions - students create at least three questions

Literal - what's literally in the text

Interpretative questions - what does this mean?

Evaluative questions - does this still apply to society?

Literal questions

- For these questions, there *is* a correct answer, but we may need to look it up in a reference source. These questions are often about words or allusions that you may not know. You may also ask questions about plot/quotes that you just did not understand and want clarified.
- Ex: What is a “milquetoast?” What is the Faust legend about? (From *How to Read Literature like a Professor*)

Interpretative questions

- I: These questions are *about* the characters/events in the story, but the answer cannot just be looked up. There may be multiple correct answers, and they must be deduced from looking at the clues the author has provided in the text and your own analysis and reading memory.
- Ex: Why is the time of midnight chosen for Cinderella's spell ending? How could it be significant that Cinderella has a stepmother and not a mother? What is the purpose of the extreme violence of the birds pecking out the stepsister's eyes at the end of the story? How can Cinderella's slippers being glass be symbolic?

Evaluative questions

- E: These questions are about ideas/themes that are presented in the story, but the questions are applied outside of the story.
- Ex: Where else in our culture do we see the “rags to riches,” Cinderella storyline, and why is it so pervasive? Do we still accept as a society that a “happily ever after” for a woman is simply marrying well? Is it demeaning, as the story suggests, to live a life of servitude?

3X3

Don't tell me the story; tell me about the story

Literal vs abstract writing

Stories are about the abstract: “*War and Peace* is many things. It is a war novel, a family saga, a love story. But at its core it is a book about people trying to find their footing in a ruptured world. It is a novel about human beings attempting to create a meaningful life for themselves in a country being torn apart by war, social change, and spiritual confusion.”

Andrew Kaufman, Tolstoy scholar and author of *Give War and Peace a Chance*.

3X3

Boil it down:

- First, write down the plot or storyline in three sentences, each with three words. Here's a take on a familiar story.

Pigs build houses.

Wolf threatens pigs.

One pig wins.

3X3

Then, transform the sentences to show the *meaning*, the *relevance*, the extension of the idea. Don't tell me the story; tell me about the story.

Pigs build houses. →	Need creates solutions.
Wolf threatens pigs. →	Outsider threatens survival.
One pig wins. →	Foresight saves day.
Pigs build houses. →	People seek security.
Wolf threatens them. →	Outside forces threaten.
One pig wins →	Smart ones win.

Frozen

Literal	Meaning
Elsa restrains magic	Control necessitates isolation
Power bursts forth	Falsehoods eventually falter
Love balances magic	True connection emancipates

Frozen: 3x3 sentence creation marries the literal to the abstract

Literal	Meaning
Elsa restrains magic	Control necessitates isolation

In *Frozen*, the steps Elsa takes to restrain her magic illustrate the basic human need to control that which they don't understand by isolating the perceived threat from society. -- this can become a question or an observation
Does this idea hold true in other areas of our lives?

Socratic Seminar How to - Day Of

Two circles

- Inside
 - Observations
 - Moderator**
 - Dialogue Cards/WN page - accountable talk
- Outside circle
 - Back channels (v28k1)
 - Notes
 - Observations
- Possible problems?

Socratic Seminar How to - Day Of

- Quality vs. Quantity
- Participation
- Don't rescue
- Timer (18 minutes is a good start)
 - Think about how many people are in your groups
- Questions on board
- Absentee/non-participant makeups
- I would only offer feedback on the first one/no grade
- What do I do while the kids are talking?

Socratic Seminar How to - Follow up

- Debriefs in between and after
 - What worked, what didn't, what burning ideas do you still have?
- Writing - at home or the next day in class
- Spark ideas for next writing
 - Argument, synthesis, research
 - Great for counter-argument practice

Concerns

- ▶ How do I keep kids engaged?
- ▶ Quiet kids?
- ▶ Respectful kids?
 - ▶ Community building
- ▶ Talk too much-ers?
- ▶ Giving up control

8th grade teacher testimonial

- ▶ I was worried about whether or not my students were mature enough to engage in this level of academic discussion maturely and effectively. I was concerned about students taking over the discussion and talking over one another. While I trusted that my students would not overtly say anything unkind or disrespectful, I was especially concerned about the tone that students might use when someone disagreed with them. I did not want anyone to leave my classroom feeling that their input was not valued or important. (I think maybe the day we spent preparing and the quick mock seminar helped students understand exactly what was expected because none of this happened. None. I also think my students rose to the occasion simply because I was asking them to engage in a type of discussion that required a higher level of trust and responsibility.)

8th grade teacher testimonial

- ▶ I wanted to make sure that I was asking the students to do something that would be valuable and beneficial. Wasting class time on activities that ultimately don't do anything is such a pet peeve of mine. I hate when I feel that students could have slept in an extra 47 minutes because nothing of value happened in my class (I'm not certain this makes sense to anyone who is not in my head.). This was absolutely the most ridiculous fear I had going into this. The students were working with the texts and listening to each other at a level I did not expect. Next year, we are doing this at least once in each unit. It was excellent!

Questions?

Let's try one

Text - take about ten minutes and read through the text; making notes/observations/questions as you go

- Serena Williams
- “Island of Plenty” - we'll have to read online
- “Joyas Voladoras”

Let's try one

Inside circle of about seven

Outside circle of about seven

Go to backchannelchat.com and
enter the code v28k1

Credits - rough...sorry.

1. *Writing with Mentors*
2. “Three Teachers Talk”
3. Harkness - Jodi Rice
4. LIE questions - Sarah Esberger
5. 3x3 and SOAPSTone- techniques/slides shared by a peer at 2015 APSI; the slides didn't come with a citation - she just found them and adopted them.