

Socratic Seminar – Teaching Strategy

Quick Overview

Students use a structured, text-centered discussion to work through a central question or source. They build knowledge and understanding collaboratively with the support, but not direct instruction, from the facilitating teacher.

Skill Objective

Students will...

- Practice civil discourse and active listening to peers
- Approach one central question with a range of ideas and questions related to one central theme

Content Objective

Students will...

- Dive deeply into one single topic from a wide range of perspectives
- Demonstrate content literacy through thoughtful comments and questions

Civics Skills Connection

Dialogic/Collaborative Learning:

- **Deep thinking and justifying responses:** Centers on reasoned deliberation and critical questioning.
- **Verbal sharing/engagement:** Develops oral reasoning, civic virtues like humility and respect, and independent thinking.
- **Collaboration and communication:** Encourages students to explore diverse perspectives and construct knowledge collectively.

Prep ahead

- Students should have background knowledge on the topic to be covered, and previous time set aside to engage with the text to be discussed. This strategy does not lend itself well to initial exposure.
- Students should have the text they are discussing in front of them with their notes or annotations ready to reference.
- Consider using the customization “Option 1: Legislate It” as a pre-activity to have students create their own rules of engagement on top of the guidelines the instructor provides.
- Teacher determines the central question that students will use a central source or text to consider. A central question is one that is open-ended, text-dependent, and aligned to the lesson’s core ideas. The question should be debatable, allow for multiple defensible interpretations, and require students to use evidence from the text.

- Physically set up the room to be conducive to a full-group discussion.

Strategy Steps

1. Share baseline rules with the group:
 - Be respectful and productive in interactions with classmates.
 - Refer to the text as often as possible to back up claims.
 - Allow others to share their ideas fully and completely before responding.
 - Be mindful of your speaking time and invite quieter classmates to join in the discussion.
 - Students should support their opinions with evidence from the text.
2. Students come up with and agree to their own rules of engagement for the discussion. Encourage students to reflect on the goals of a Socratic seminar and what rules or roles might be helpful for their group to have in place to make it work smoothly.
3. Share the open-ended, central question for students to engage with, and invite a student to speak first on the topic.
4. Students take turns responding to the initial question and sharing their insights. Additional comments might include building on other's responses, challenging ideas, or posing further questions to the group.
5. A student or teacher facilitator can guide the conversation to ensure key points are addressed. Facilitator comments should encourage students to think more deeply, examine assumptions, and analyze the implications of their ideas.
6. Facilitators keep the following best practices in mind:
 - Silence does not mean that students are not doing it "right." Instead, allow silences to be broken naturally as students take ownership over the success of the discussion.
 - In cases where the discussion lags, get things back on track with suggestions to pick up the conversation:
 - i. What evidence from the text supports the claim made most recently?
 - ii. What alternatives are there to that interpretation?
 - iii. Does anyone have evidence that could help or challenge this position?
 - Some students may need to be encouraged to speak up, while others may need to give space to their classmates. The facilitator should gently monitor both of these situations so that all voices can be heard at least once.
7. The facilitator should signal when time is coming to a close and transition the group to reflect on their conversation.
 - Students discuss their learning, the effectiveness of the dialogue, and how their understanding changed throughout the conversation.

Customizations

- **Option 1: Write about it**
 - On their own, students write about one aspect of the discussion substance and one aspect of its procedure for homework. They consider what they learned, and how their view of the text changed based on the discussion. They also consider the process of learning and how they would approach the next Socratic seminar either differently or the same way.
- **Option 2: Digitize it**
 - Students might not have gotten a chance to say everything in the discussion, or they might have new ideas once the discussion concludes. Use an online forum on your LMS to set up a continuation of the conversation online, following the same rules of productive engagement that you used in person. Have students contribute 1-2 times in the thread over the next week to maintain momentum and give students another space to deepen knowledge.
 - ***Teacher Note:*** This enables quiet students who are more comfortable communicating in writing to share their thoughts more directly. It also provides a space for students to practice good, productive conversation-making in a digital environment.