

Popcorn Reading:

Popcorn reading gets the students involved in **reflection**, **discussion** and **evaluation** of the subject.

Socrates believed that the job of the teacher was to question rather than to tell. In fact, he believed that people are all born with a subconscious, but thorough, knowledge of these ideas and that teacher inquiry can transmit this knowledge into students' conscious minds.

In Socratic seminar training, teachers practice with colleagues, taking turns facilitating discussion. This type of training focuses on the students, allowing them to develop a powerful voice and to become agents of their own education.”

When teachers introduce the technique to their students, they often find that children have as much trepidation about this new method as their teachers. Nevertheless, most students quickly acclimate themselves to the standard procedure for seminar.

Standard Procedure

Reflection

After reading a thoughtful essay, short story, novel, newspaper article, or historical document, students spend several minutes writing an answer to a provocative question.

For example, students might deliberate over one of the following questions:

- Of the 12 major characters, who is most responsible for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet?
- Would Gardner equate the value of athletic skill with that of intrapersonal intelligence?
- How would Rawls view the decision to drop the atom bomb on Japanese cities?
- Is zero a number?
- Does Mark Twain believe that Huck Finn makes ethical decisions?
- Do the members of Pecola Breedlove family love each other?
- Would the writer of "Wisdom and Knowledge" conclude that wisdom can be taught?
- Is Dave Barry funny in his essay about war?
- Does Richard Rodriguez contradict himself on bilingual education in *Hunger for Memory*?
- Which is better art—the painting by Picasso or the painting by Jackson Pollock?
- (Using the number line as a focus) Did human beings invent mathematics or discover it?

Discussion

After allowing sufficient time for written reflection, the teacher asks the seminar question again, telling students they may begin the seminar when they feel comfortable. After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, students hazard to answer the question aloud, and then other students in turn respond to the idea, creating an evolving web of thought as the discussion develops.

For the next forty minutes or so, the students who are arranged in a circle collectively answer the question. The teacher comments only occasionally, summarizing the group's ideas, asking for textual support and definitions of terms, and posing further questions based on the students' comments.

Because Socratic seminar aims to develop the students' ideas, the teacher talks only when the students have been silent for more than 10 full seconds. For many novice seminar leaders, this wait time is painful. Once students become comfortable with the format, however, such silence is rare. As a skilled facilitator, the teacher supports students in their exploration of abstract values and principles, allowing them to use the examined reading as a launch pad for higher level thinking. Within reason, teachers need not worry about the seminar going off track, as the students will explore the ideas they find interesting and applicable to their own lives.

Because it promotes student centered inquiry, Socratic seminar restricts the teacher from offering his ideas about the central document. Teachers may use the method didactically, but only when they inform their students of their intention beforehand. Otherwise, students find the value of their intellectual exploration nullified by a teacher's right answer at the end of a session.

By encouraging children to pursue a collectively reasoned judgment rather than a single, correct answer, seminar teaches them to be comfortable with ambiguity, thereby preparing them for the real-life complexities of citizenship, relationships, and the workplace.

Evaluation

When the class period draws to an end, the teacher ends the seminar, leaving the last 8 to 10 minutes of class to process and evaluate the discussion. After identifying the strengths of their performance, the students offer suggestions for improving future seminars.

Over time, the class collects these indicators of success to create an evolving rubric for excellence in seminar that allows each participant to gauge personal and group achievement. Because they create the guidelines for themselves, they are more likely to follow them.

After each discussion, students write self-evaluations in their Socratic seminar notebooks at home, tracking the development of their thinking, speaking, and social skills. At the end of the year, students write about the effect of the method on their maturity—and their intellectual and social development. Often students notice that they have become more civil in the way they treat one another and that everyone seems to respect everyone else. By June students have participated in 15-20 seminars, on; or two per unit of instruction. They consistently credit the method for making them better thinkers and more articulate speakers and for bringing the curriculum to life. Indeed, even if he did swallow hemlock, Socrates lives in the American classroom; multitudes of highly engaged students are happy he does. •

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