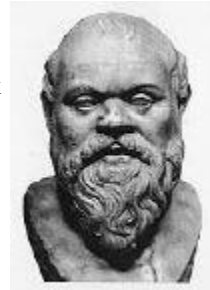


Socratic Seminars

What does *Socratic* mean?

Socratic comes from the name Socrates. Socrates (ca. 470-399 B.C.) was a Classical Greek philosopher who developed a Theory of Knowledge.



What was Socrates' Theory of Knowledge?

Socrates was convinced that the surest way to attain reliable knowledge was through the practice of disciplined conversation. He called this method *dialectic*.

What does *dialectic* mean?

di-a-*lec*-tic (noun) means the art or practice of examining opinions or ideas logically, often by the method of question and answer, so as to determine their validity.

How did Socrates use the dialectic?

He would begin with a discussion of the obvious aspects of any problem. Socrates believed that through the process of dialogue, where all parties to the conversation were forced to clarify their ideas, the final outcome of the conversation would be a clear statement of what was meant. The technique appears simple but it is intensely rigorous. Socrates would feign ignorance about a subject and try to draw out from the other person his fullest possible knowledge about it. His assumption was that by progressively correcting incomplete or inaccurate notions, one could coax the truth out of anyone. The basis for this assumption was an individual's capacity for recognizing lurking contradictions. If the human mind was incapable of knowing something, Socrates wanted to demonstrate that, too. Some dialogues, therefore, end inconclusively.

What is a Socratic Seminar?

A Socratic Seminar is method to try to understand information by creating a dialectic in class in regards to a specific text. In a Socratic Seminar, participants seek deeper understanding of complex ideas in the text through rigorously thoughtful dialogue, rather than by memorizing bits of information.

The Text: Socratic Seminar texts are chosen for their richness in ideas, issues, and values and their ability to stimulate extended, thoughtful dialogue. A seminar text can be drawn from readings in literature, history, science, math, health, and philosophy or from works of art or music. A good text raises important questions in the participants' minds, questions for which there are no right or wrong answers. At the end of a successful Socratic Seminar participants often leave with more questions than they brought with them.

The Question: A Socratic Seminar opens with a question either posed by the leader or solicited from participants as they acquire more experience in seminars. An opening question has no right answer, instead it reflects a genuine curiosity on the part of the questioner. A good 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 from the leader and participants, leading to new responses. In this way, the line of inquiry in a Socratic Seminar evolves on the spot rather than being pre-determined by the leader.

The Leader: In a Socratic Seminar, the leader plays a dual role as leader and participant. The seminar leader consciously demonstrates habits of mind that lead to a thoughtful exploration of the ideas in the text by keeping the discussion focused on the text, asking follow-up questions, helping participants clarify their positions when arguments become confused, and involving reluctant participants while restraining their more vocal peers.

As a seminar participant, the leader actively engages in the group's exploration of the text. To do this effectively, the leader must know the text well enough to anticipate varied interpretations and recognize important possibilities in each. The leader must also be patient enough to allow

participants' understandings to evolve and be willing to help participants explore non-traditional insights and unexpected interpretations.

Assuming this dual role of leader and participant is easier if the opening question is one which truly interests the leader as well as the participants.

The Participants: In a Socratic Seminar, participants carry the burden of responsibility for the quality of the seminar. Good seminars occur when participants study the text closely in advance, listen actively, share their ideas and questions in response to the ideas and questions of others, and search for evidence in the text to support their ideas. Eventually, when participants realize that the leader is not looking for right answers but is encouraging them to think out loud and to exchange ideas openly, they discover the excitement of exploring important issues through shared inquiry. This excitement creates willing participants, eager to examine ideas in a rigorous, thoughtful manner.

Guidelines for Participants in a Socratic Seminar

1. Refer to the text when needed during the discussion. A seminar is not a test of memory. You are not "learning a subject"; your goal is to understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in the text.
2. It's OK to "pass" when asked to contribute.
3. Do not participate if you are not prepared. A seminar should not be a bull session.
4. Do not stay confused; ask for clarification.
5. Stick to the point currently under discussion; make notes about ideas you want to come back to.
6. Don't raise hands; take turns speaking.
7. Listen carefully.
8. Speak up so that all can hear you.
9. Talk to each other, not just to the leader or teacher.
10. Discuss ideas rather than each other's opinions.
11. You are responsible for the seminar, even if you don't know it or admit it.

Expectations of Participants in a Socratic Seminar

Did the Participants...

- Speak loudly and clearly?
- Cite reasons and evidence for their statements?
- Use the text to find support?
- Listen to others respectfully?
- Stick with the subject?
- Talk to each other, not just to the leader?
- Paraphrase accurately?
- Avoid inappropriate language (slang, technical terms, sloppy diction, etc.)?
- Ask for help to clear up confusion?
- Support each other?
- Avoid hostile exchanges?
- Question others in a civil manner?
- Seem prepared?

What is the difference between dialogue and debate?

- Dialogue is collaborative: multiple sides work toward shared understanding.
Debate is oppositional: two opposing sides try to prove each other wrong.



- In dialogue, one listens to understand, to make meaning, and to find common ground.
In debate, one listens to find flaws, to spot differences, and to counter arguments.
- Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.
Debate defends assumptions as truth.
- Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.
Debate creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right.
- In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, expecting that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than threaten it.
In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.
- Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.
Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.
- In dialogue, one searches for strengths in all positions.
In debate, one searches for weaknesses in the other position.
- Dialogue respects all the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend.
Debate rebuts contrary positions and may belittle or deprecate other participants.
- Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to a greater understanding.
Debate assumes a single right answer that somebody already has.
- Dialogue remains open-ended.
Debate demands a conclusion.



Dialogue is characterized by:

- suspending judgment
 - examining our own work without defensiveness
 - exposing our reasoning and looking for limits to it
 - communicating our underlying assumptions
 - exploring viewpoints more broadly and deeply
- being open to disconfirming data
 - approaching someone who sees a problem differently not as an adversary, but as a colleague in common pursuit of better solution.

Sample questions that demonstrate constructive participation in Socratic Seminars.

Here is my view and how I arrived at it. How does it sound to you?

Do you see gaps in my reasoning?

Do you have different data?

Do you have different conclusions?

How did you arrive at your view?

Are you taking into account something different from what I have considered?

Source: Jeannie Murphy. "Professional Development: Socratic Seminars." Regions 8 and 11 Professional Development Consortia, Los Angeles County Office of Education 6 Dec.2000<<http://www.lacoe.edu/pdc/professional/socratic.html>>