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Socratic seminar guidelines

Socrates & His Socratic SeminarOriginal Artwork of wayseekerComing meeting is a start. Sticking together is progress. Working together is success. —Henry FordThis famous quote about teamwork by Henry Ford effectively sums up the work of Socratic Seminar – to bring together a group of people, teach them how to interact, and thereby open up new worlds of understanding that were previously out of reach. Literature volumes have been written about Socratic seminar (see the link to the right), but much of this material, which is filled with valuable historical material and background research, makes it difficult to get the practical tools and information one needs to implement the approach directly. This article, based on my own years of using Socratic Seminar in my classes, is designed to present the activity in simple and practical terms. By including notes, reflections, creative options and links to my own original files for real-time use, I hope this will help you quickly maximize the potential value of Socratic Seminar and adapt the wide options to your individual needs. Look at that! Original artwork by wayseekerContentsNote: If you are already familiar with the basics of Socratic seminar, I suggest you go to practical tips for running a good Socratic seminar. What is Socratic Seminar? Socratic Seminar is based on an intellectual tradition generally associated with the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates who lived during the fifth century B.C.E. Socrates believed that the best way to achieve understanding came from developing and pursuing insightful questions. Socratic Seminar establishes a framework for holding discussions centered on this ideal, while promoting equal participation among all members of the group. With this in mind, the leader of a Socratic Seminar assumes the role of facilitator rather than direct instructor, giving participants a rich opportunity to discover independent inductive discoveries. Traditionally, Socratic Seminar is used to consider literature and art, but it can easily be adapted to discuss almost anything a group of people might want to consider: music, a sculpture, a news article, a historical primary source, and even a scientific experiment. In addition, Socratic Seminar is effective for discussions with people of virtually any age, kindergarten to promote to adult book clubs. Benefits of Socratic Seminar: Places the participants responsible for their own learning, facilitating self-directed discovery teaches the importance of personal responsibility, because the success of the discussion depends on good and actively engaged participants teaching participants to become familiar in relevant terminology offers numerous opportunities to learn and practice respectful group interaction provides opportunities for those who speak too much to listen provides opportunities for those who speak too little to build the courage to share challenges of Socratic seminar: can be uncomfortable for those who find public speaking difficult can challenge discussion leaders (especially teachers) in their ability to let go of direct control over the flow of Conversation Teaching Seminar and running a large Socratic DiscussionNOTE : Since Socratic Seminar can be used by a wide range of people for discussions around a wide range of topics, I will refer to the story, novel, artwork, composition or whatever could be studied as the piece and those involved in the discussion as participants. Basic overview of Socratic seminar structure:Participants prepare a piece for discussion (is always about analysis, although it can also include other tasks) Participants sit in a circle for thirty minutes to an hour and discuss the piece The discussion leader and participants reflect on the success of the discussion Simple Annotation Demonstration VideoPreparing for Socratic Seminar: Preliminary AnalysisRegardless of the form the piece under study takes—short story , artwork, musical composition, etc. preparation will always involve the participants completing a close analysis of the piece. With text-based pieces, with the participants annotating the text is a good idea. This is also the point in the process where the conversation leader can provide more specific directions, questions and relevant analytical vocabulary that will focus the participants' attention on certain elements of the piece under investigation. The methods of doing this vary widely, but any method that helps the participants develop a strong familiarity with the details and subtleties of the piece will be useful. The preparatory process will also include the development of discussion questions. Either the discussion leader, the participants, or both can participate in this part of the process. Each approach has different strengths and weaknesses:Question Development ApproachAdvantagesDisadvantagesLeader-Developed QuestionsTightly controlled focusSeverely limits participant inquiryParticipant-Developed QuestionsWide open opportunities for independent inquiryControl requires well-trained participantsBothCan achieve a good balance of controlled focus and independent inquiry stifles participant's individualThe very best conversations I have experienced in my lessons, stemmed from the preparation based solely on questions developed by the participants. I was able to start the conversation and sit through the whole class without speaking. Invariably, the participants discovered important ideas that never occurred to me if I had tried to take more control. So I am always insisting on independence participant. However, achieving this takes a long time and I have found that questions developed by leaders are for both modeling making questions and sending the conversation to essential concepts. However, I try to do this as rarely as possible and constantly phase it out as time passes. Socratic Seminar QuestionsOriginal Artwork by wayseekerFREE Practical ResourcesI have a variety of professional resources to make this happen to your students at Newfangled Notions.The General Guidelines HandoutCovers the Basic Behavioral Expectations Overviews of the 5 Essential Socra The Question Development Page Student Worksheet Provides a clear organization for developing questions Creates an easy-to-follow procedure for asking questions The Feedback Flip ChartHelps in creating a clear path of expectations for students Offering real-time feedback about The progress of the discussion The Short Form Data CollectorHelps in setting qualitative levels for student comments Offers students with real-time individual feedback Contains full instructions for everything! Preparing for Socratic Seminar: The Socratic Seminar QuestionsNote: The information below is available on a printable handout I created for distribution to participants. Close-Ended Questions :Write a question that comes directly from the text of the book and has a clear and correct answer. Open-Ended Questions (questions about inference and opinion): Write an insightful question about the text that requires a lot of inference to answer. This is a question that does not have a definitive correct answer but is more about opinion, evidence, and evidence. Proposed Voice: What do you think about ...? Proposed Voice: Why...? Literary Analysis Questions (look at structure): Write a question about the author's style and the way the text is written. This is a question about how or why the text was written the way it was. Proposed Voice: Why did the author...? Connection questions: Write a question that connects the text to the world. You do this in three ways: text-to-world, text-to-yourself, and text-to-text. Examples include asking questions that connect the text to modern society or current world events, asking questions that relate to the text to us and our lives today, and asking questions that relate to text to another book, film or TV show. Proposed Voice: How is [something from the text] like ...? Universal theme question (how does this text reflect the human experience?): Write a question about a theme of the text that will encourage a group discussion on the universality of the text. These questions go for the deeper meaning of the text and try to help us understand what the about how we should live our lives and what is real to us as human beings. Proposed Voice: What does this piece have to say about... (love, war, power, etc.)? Understanding how to make up for these questions takes time, time, experience. The leader must model this process extensively and repeatedly with different examples of the type of piece being studied. With small changes, these core call types designed around the study of literature can be changed to function for almost anything. Only the literary analysis question would really require change. It can easily be re-framed as creator analysis. So, instead of Why did the author....? it becomes, Why did the artist ...? or Why did the designer of the experiment ...? or Why did the composer ...? Leading Socratic Seminar DiscussionsStep 1: Preparation CheckThe discussion leader starts by checking who is prepared and notes this in the discussion file. Ideally, this is done orally on the honor system by simply asking the participants. Are you prepared today? My students have been surprisingly honest about this. Of course, more direct accountability is sometimes necessary, so visually checking for notes and questions or even collecting them in advance are also possibilities. Step 2: Drawing up guidelinesThese are the guidelines I propose for the participants in my Socratic Seminars (you use the handout I use to summarize these here) ? Participants, should refer directly to the text where possible. ... can always pass when asked to speak. ... are not allowed to speak as unprepared.... follow-up questions should clarify when they are confused. ... Stay focused on the current conversation: Take notes if something unrelated comes up so it can be discussed later. ... speak out if they have something to say – don't raise your hands. ... should always look at the speaker and listen carefully. ... need to speak so that everyone can hear. ... need to talk to each other, not the leader. ... must recognize that the quality of this discussion depends on each of you individually–your participation makes the discussion a success. Leaders should listen CarefullyAl looking for reactions that stray away from direct ties to the piece. While some wandering is beneficial, the discussion should always be relevant. It is the leader's responsibility to direct the conversation back to the play when it strays too far from the mark. Practical tips for running a good discussionModeling: As much as I hate to do this, I interrupt quite often in the first few discussions of a group. In addition to simple correction and training in the overall process, participants should see clear examples of high-quality questions and answers. Sometimes I'll provide them myself, but I prefer to recognize when a participant has done something right and specifically articulate why I felt it was well done, encouraging other participants to imitate it. As the participants learn, I speak less and less. Helping people who talk too much to talk less! Original illustration by wayseekerHelp those who don't talk enough to talk anymore! Original artwork by wayseekerBalancing Participation: In the first discussion of a group, three to five people will monopolize the conversation right away. This is natural, but far from ideal. Ideally, the conversation will be evenly distributed among all participants. Those who naturally dominate should be encouraged to listen first and speak later. Those who rarely speak should be encouraged to participate at least once. Try some of the following ideas to support this: Limit those who often speak to a certain number of questions and answers. Once they reach the limit, they can't talk. Limit a certain number of questions and answers to all participants. Purposefully interrupt towards the end of the discussion period and directly ask those who have not spoken if they share a question (some will, some will not). Some will eventually learn to ask to volunteer independently. Note that those who talk a lot will get frustrated when they reach their limit and can no longer speak. Dealing with this is good for them as they will be forced to learn to listen. The uncomfortable silences that will ensue are also good for everyone, because the responsibility for entertaining the conversation will now fall to those hesitant to speak. Eventually, someone will build up the courage to speak and the discussion will continue. The leader must resist the temptation to save the participants from the uncomfortable silences! Smile at them and wait. As the group becomes more and more comfortable with this kind of discussion, the conversation will begin to even matter more naturally, while those who are more resistant are more willing to participate and those who speak too much become aware of the need to withhold their participation and wait for a time when they really have something important to say. The process takes time and a lot of repetition, but the results are powerful. Data Tracking in Socratic Seminar DiscussionData Tracking in Socratic Seminar Discussion Whether your discussion is designed to be reviewed or simply to deepen the conversation, it is useful to keep track of questions and answers. This data can then be used to reflect on the changing habits of individual participants and the success of different discussions in general. I use a spreadsheet that tracks answers, high-quality answers, questions, high-quality questions, follow-up questions, distractions and preparation (see the side note to download this form). Because I am a teacher, I use this information for both evaluating the success of the discussion and for assessing students. Early on, their figures are largely based on basic participation, as time passes, I raise the bar and start basing figures on the number of high-quality questions and answers that a particular student contributes. My definitions of what high quality also means changes about increasingly complex as students learn. Advanced Data TrackingI has also developed a comprehensive advanced data management system for Socratic Discussion at Newfangled Notions. Features include:Define a clear path of flat expectations for student responses To Easily follow students' comments Give real-time, individualized performance feedback Auto-calculate grades based on continuous data entry Complete customization of the rating system, including differentiation Encourage effective discussion with grade-based incentives Direct generate charts based on discussion data Let students create goals using individualized data charts Use the teacher's graph data to schedule instruction Analyze student progress toward common core standards , most participants, regardless of age, will tend to develop questions that lack depth. A lack of depth in questions leads to a lack of depth in the general conversation. Even good questions are no guarantee. Without training, most people respond to questions with one to two sentences, not fully explaining or providing evidence to support their answers. Again, remember that leaders regularly need to model the kind of response they're looking for and point out very clearly when the participants have given the kind of response that reaches the goals of the discussion, and point out the finer details of why those statements achieve those goals. At first, high-quality questions can simply be questions that are wide enough to open a window for a conversation. Ultimately, they may become questions that use the relevant terminology or present challenging observations and considerations about the given piece being studied in study. High quality comments start by providing some sort of explanation for someone's statement. Ultimately, they may contain expectations for the use of relevant terminology and a thorough explanation of reasoning and evidence. Reflecting on Socratic seminar discussions When the discussion is over, it is important that the leader and participants reflect on how things have gone so that adjustments can be made to future Socratic seminars. Using my discussion tracking form, I take notes on who speaks too often, who doesn't speak enough, and my general sense of the quality of the conversation. Based on this data, I make decisions about where to re-teach or reframe some of the demand development and response skills. Pointing out the fluency of the participant with relevant vocabulary is always a factor to consider here as well. All this is done with the understanding that discussions only improve adjustments are being made. It is also a smart idea to let participants think about their own learning at this stage. This allows them to become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses in group discussions. Socratic Socratic BlogOriginal Artwork by wayseekerThe Socratic Blog: Using technology to expand discussionOnce students become familiar with the Socratic Seminar process, can be transferred into an online blog discussion with great ease using the same general rules and questions approach. While I wouldn't use this solely because the social skills that are in face-to-face discussion are very important, it does provide an opportunity for those who speak in public find it difficult to fully participate in the conversation. Here are some other benefits of this approach: It allows for more carefully crafted comments. It continuously records comments in detail for subsequent analysis and assessment. It is not limited by time in the same way as a live discussion. It offers participants the opportunity to practice articulating ideas in written form, which, although similar, is a fundamentally different skill. Socratic SeminarOriginal Artwork by wayseekerConclusionThis process is a perpetual work in progress and the dynamics are very different from group to group and piece to piece. With the repetition of effectively led discussions over time, however, the conversation of the participants will continue to be more balanced, more insightful, and more independent. There's nothing quite like the experience of watching a discussion group run yourself and discover ideas you would never have imagined without setting them loose to explore it on their own! Commentswayseeker (author) from Colorado on May 17, 2014: Lisa, My sincere thanks for this encouragement. I relied on this heavily this year, and felt better about what students gained from the literature we read this year than in any of my previous years of teaching. I'm always amazed at how well the students relate to what I would have wanted them to talk about if I were to guide them by exploring it on their own. It's a bit scary sometimes - letting them have so much control - but I'm sure it's the way to true learning for them. My background is actually much more musical than it is art, but I have the drawings. I actually plan on expanding this stuff in the summer to incorporate more detailed information (probably other related hubs) along with a link to a site where people can get some practical tools to make it work inside their classrooms. Thanks again, and enjoy retirement! BertLisaKeating on May 15, 2014: I just stopped teaching. I gave ap language and composition in high school. We used Socratic Seminars a lot in the way you describe it here. It's great when you do this with high school students. They will be so much more prepared for in-depth analysis if they high school. I assume with your art background you drew the pictures? Nice work. Great hub.wayseeker (author) from Colorado on October 29, 2012:Travel_man1371.Sincere thanks for the high praise. I use this this this year more than ever before, and will soon update this Hub which brings another layer of subtlety to its use. Many thanks for your interest in my work.wayseekerIrene Alcalá from Bicol, Philippines on October 24, 2012: Thank you for having the best teacher on HubPages. You should be commended for taking a higher level on this writing site.wayseeker (author) from Colorado on May 16, 2012: Eliza & KittyJJ.Thanks so much for dropping in and taking the time to read! Good writing to you!wayseekerAnn Leung from San Jose, California on May 16, 2012: A very interesting topic and a very informative hub. I especially like your drawings. Lisa McKnight from London on May 16, 2012: Excellent hub wayseeker. I love the layout and the thorough explanations and materials to go to.wayseeker (author) from Colorado on May 15, 2012: Allie, thank you very much for taking the time to read and share this around. I hope it serves to deepen the conversation of your students – it has certainly helped mine. I've also seen this work very well in smaller groups. Understanding the approach to the questions is what seems to make the biggest difference.wayseekeralliemacab from Scotland on May 15, 2012: An interesting approach and one that I will share with my colleagues and students. I think my students would benefit from reading this as they run their own discussion groups to complement teaching seminars and lectures. As you mentioned above, this is ideal for discussing literature. Voted and awesome.wayseeker (author) from Colorado on May 12, 2012: Wow! This is very encouraging, TFScientist. It means a lot that there are some people out there who would find this valuable enough to use and distribute in this way. I found this approach so great for slow-moving students than surface-level discussions in more in-depth insights. The encouragement I have received here has made me cook up a number of other related ideas for hubs on education. Thanks for the support, and I hope it proves valuable to you, your colleagues, and your students.wayseekerRhys Baker from Peterborough, UK on May 12, 2012: I am making this required reading for my one level students. I occasionally put them to deliver parts of the syllabus as the teacher of the class and they would benefit from the advice in this hub. It has also given me a few ideas to refresh my own education. Thanks for sharing this wonderful resource. I agree with Robin's comments. Voted interesting and useful. I also shared with my teacher friends!wayseeker (author) from Colorado on May 11, 2012: Nasty, Thank you very much for your consistent support - it means a great deal. This was fun to make, and I enjoy coming up with artwork that is writing I especially like it when it works, because it looks like this is a did.My best for you, and happy writing!wayseekerNare writelwayseekerNare on May 11, 2012: This is so excellent wayseeker! I especially love the pictures you did, so artistic and engaging. The style also fits very well with the subject! Good job mate !wayseeker (author) from Colorado on May 10, 2012: Summerberrie, Thanks for your thoughts. Your encouragement towards the artwork is particularly meaningful to me as I wonder sometimes if the drawings I put together are a bit too wacky. Your thoughts bring me confidence - thanks!wayseekerwayseeker (author) from Colorado on May 10, 2012: Robin, there are definitely days when I wonder if there is all that much wisdom there to share! However, I hope this proves a useful tool, and I sincerely appreciate that you take the time to read.wayseekerwayseeker (author) from Colorado on May 10, 2012: Sandra,Sincere thanks for taking the time to read. A lot of the work of my class revolves around this approach, and I found it something that the students really enjoy. I'd like to see it used more broadly as well. Thanks again, wayseekersummerberrie on May 10, 2012:Wayseeker, this is such a wonderful hub. I wish I had this well when I was teaching. Your artwork just blew me away-just loved it!wayseeker (author) from Colorado on May 09, 2012:Simone, You loved Socratic Seminar? Shocking! As always, I sincerely appreciate your support and your willingness to take the time to read. I hope this is a resource that will be valuable to many people as time passes – it's certainly a wonderful way to explore literature and art!wayseekerwayseeker (author) from Colorado on May 9, 2012:Stephanie, Believe me, I understand your pain. Students are definitely trained these days to look for the right answer and then stop. Socratic Seminar just won't work when that approach. However, it is also a great tool to teach them a new way of thinking. If your kids aren't reading and preparing at home, I suggest to try it with something very short and high interest that can be read together in class with enough time left to prepare questions before class ends. This way you both make sure that everyone has in fact done the job and put your hands in the mix while they are preparing questions. It is clear that this is not ideal, but it will fill the preparatory work for them again and allow them to experience the discussion well. Once they discover that they're really left alone in terms of directing the conversation, my students have always started developing a sense of empowerment about it that they seem to enjoy, and it also moves them a little to think a little higher. Once the thing gets moving a bit, there are usually a few insightful kids who really elevate the discussion, but the rest follow them as soon as they have a chance. Finally, as soon as get to like it, I think the preparatory work can come with more success – although never as good as any of us would lucky, and thank you very much for reading!wayseekerwayseeker (author) from Colorado on May 9, 2012: Marcy, So glad this will work! It turned out a little longer that I might prefer, but there was just too much information to cover. Yet it is much less cumbersome than any other place where I have discussed this approach. Thanks for sharing this with your classes, and I wish you lots of great discussions!wayseekerRobin Edmondson from San Francisco on May 09, 2012: You are a great teacher and we are so lucky that you share your wisdom with us! I would definitely use this in class and plan to include it in our discussions at home. Any teacher would be happy with this guide! Thank you! Sandra Busby from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA on May 9, 2012: This is such a very important tool that I bookmark it for future reference. As a teacher, I especially appreciate this technique and would like to see it used more. Thank you so much for such a beautiful description. Simone Haruko Smith from San Francisco on May 09, 2012:Wayseeker, your Hubs are the best! What a wonderful guide to one of my favorite discussion/class formats. Thank you so much for creating the source! Stephanie Bradberry of New Jersey on May 9, 2012:I love the Socratic method. Unfortunately, every time I try, it explodes in my face. The main reason... your 'Close Study' section. After no real answers to the opening questions, I'm left with the big question, So, how many people actually read the selection? of and only a few hands go up. I dare not ask: How many have a close reading and annotated? of the few who have read. Even if we spend a few days at work, my students just want information that they can sometimes parrot back. But I will keep trying! Marcy Goodfiesch of Planet Earth on May 9, 2012: This is perfect! I've been looking for a short but thorough way to explain this to students who will be asked to participate in these types of discussions. Thank you! I will share this with my lessons!wayseeker (author) from Colorado on May 9, 2012: Buckleupdorothy, Thank you very much! I've found it so invaluable for my lessons. I hope it can deepen the work for many students everywhere. I sincerely appreciate the shares as well. Good writing to you, wayseekerbuckleupdorothy from Istanbul, Turkey on May 09, 2012: LOVE this! Voted, shared, and will be passed on to my other education friends and colleagues. Colleagues.

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