

Socratic Seminars

Some 2400 years ago, Socrates walked the streets of Athens surrounded by a group of pupils who hoped to enrich their understanding of the meaning of life and find solutions to its many problems. They learned through dialogue with their teacher, rather than by passively listening to his expertise. What he taught them was how to question — how to use inquiry to empower themselves.

In contrast to the modern teacher, he did not question them in order to find out what they already knew, or seek to embarrass them by exposing what they did not know. Instead, he allowed them to synthesize the opinions of their "classmates" and draw connections to their own beliefs and experiences.

In similar fashion, in the Socratic Seminar, the modern teacher gathers his pupils in groups of 10 to 25 to dialogue on a select textual passage or open-ended question. The subject matter may be from any discipline. Students are given several minutes to analyze the passage thoroughly. Drawing the students directly to the text, the teacher opens with a question concerning a specific line or author's word choice. Students then dialogue rather than debate as they answer the teacher's question and formulate their own questions of each other. Their questions are meant to deepen understanding rather than to challenge another's beliefs. Students, through practice, analyze inferences, implications, and assumptions in the text. They seek clarification of others' statements, rather than jump to conclusions. The teacher re-enters the dialogue only as co-learner, also searching for deeper meaning rather than playing the devil's advocate.

Ideally, the Socratic method also creates better citizens. The seminar can only be successful if the participants listen attentively to their classmates and appreciate exactly what they hear. As all students, as well as the teacher, engage in discussion as equals, the ideal democratic forum based on mutual respect is created.

A Socratic Seminar is:

1. A dialogue modeled after Mortimer Adler's *Paideia Proposal*.
2. A strenuous practice in careful reading, thinking, listening, and speaking skills.
3. A search for an enlarged understanding of a specific statement or reading.
4. An open-ended forum for valued opinion with supporting arguments.
5. A forum where all participants, including the teacher, are equals. A reminder that ideas are the property of all human beings.

What a Socratic Seminar is not:

1. A question and answer session in which the teacher attempts to cover the syllabus or extract correct answers.

2. An attempt at adding to the students' storehouses of factual knowledge.
3. A competition for the right answers with students looking to please the teacher.
4. A bull session which strays in any direction from the text.
5. An elitist debate between the smartest students in the class.

Basic Differences Between Dialogue and Debate:

<u>Dialogue</u>	<u>Debate</u>
Collaborative:	Oppositional:
Goal is understanding	Goal is proving the other side wrong
Listening for deeper meaning	Listening for flaws
Re-evaluating assumptions	Defending assumptions
Open-minded	Close-minded
Temporarily suspending belief	All-out defending of belief
Searching for strength in all positions	Searching for weakness in opposition
Open-ended	Demands closure

Three Simple Rules:

1. **Listen** — No one may speak while someone else is speaking. The other's sentence must be completed.
2. **Build** — Speakers must attempt to build on others' comments rather than debate or contradict. Questioning politely is a civil way to disagree.
3. **Refer to the Text** — As often as possible, speakers must refer to a specific section of the text being used rather than making general comments or observations.