

Socratic Seminars

by Charles Ames Fischer

Socratic Seminar—A seminar in which the authority lies with the group itself. There is no central authority.

1. Socratic Seminars are NOT discussions. In a discussion people throw out opinions and ideas and hope they stick. A Socratic Seminar is a quest for truth built stone by stone through evidence and reason.

Discussion	Socratic Seminar
“I think” statements prevail.	“The evidence suggests to me” prevails.
Is opinion.	Requires proof.
Mostly statements (static).	Mostly questions (dynamic).
Often has an “opinion bully”.	Must use the whole group.
Leader usually has agenda.	Leader has opening question.
Usually has curricular goal.	Goal is to cooperatively seek truth. Connections to the curriculum will be byproducts of the seminar.

2. Quick Start:

- Require students to speak at least once
- Keep track of who speaks (and more possibly)
- Require students to bring in or write at least one useful, open question
- Try using tickets to enter class
- Have the students speak one at a time
- Start with Dr. Seuss!
- Teach about types of questions (see below)
- Teach types of reading

3. Push their attention span; there is an intellectual threshold to push past. The best way I have to explain this is simply that some ideas seem to be locked away and can only be reached by a certain amount of work. Interestingly, the threshold to a new idea seems to occur just around when we want to give up. If we do quit, then we stop short of a truly remarkable “Eureka!” moment. **I have found that many Eureka moments occur around the 70-minute mark. In order to be the most effective, Socratic Seminars should be eighty to ninety minutes long.**

4. Choose provocative pieces that are tied to the curriculum. For example, if you are studying World War II, find a poem from a vet. or a quote from a holocaust survivor. Then let the piece and the seminar determine what it means and how it's valuable.

5. DO NOT encourage certain ideas. Let the students learn how to weigh the truth of something. Encourage students elsewhere or after the seminar. This means no extra eye contact, little or no facial expression, and so on. You will encourage something without even meaning to. **Could you use drama for this?**

6. DO NOT have the last word on anything, especially at the very end of a seminar. This teaches the students that your opinion is the one that really matters and that their whole discussion was “nice” but not terribly important.

7. DO NOT rephrase what a student is saying or has said. I'm never a fan of this practice because you are literally stealing the child's words. Let them struggle. Practice patience. Also, if you rephrase, you add authority to the comment. If you need to rephrase for some reason, ask the child to say it again, shorten it, etc.

8. BE CAREFUL about qualitative statements such as, “That was a good question.” You set yourself up as the judge and authority.

9. You can really encourage students by explaining to them that what the text means is really up to them and the work they put into it.

10. You'll know a great seminar when you yourself are challenged in participating, when you also aren't “sure” of the answer and can only put forth your view—just like your students. So, choose pieces that you don't know much about. Model a healthy academic struggle.

11. Use the seminar to learn more about you, your teaching, them and their learning. For example, if the students read a text and “don't get it” as far as you are concerned, then reflect on why. What skill(s) were they lacking? Again DO NOT “solve” the situation by giving the answer. Reflect, reflect, reflect. I personally think Socratic Seminars are some of the best professional development available.

12. If you think there is a right answer to the text you've chosen, choose something else. Your job as a Socratic Seminar facilitator is to NOT have an agenda. Once you have a specific agenda (other than “this will work well”) you have lost the seminar.

13. Troubleshooting:

Quiet Students—give all the students two pennies and tell them that when they speak they must put their penny in a basket or jar. By the end of the seminar they must get rid of their pennies. This will give the quiet students something tactile to constantly remind them.

Talkative Students—give all the students 5 pennies and tell them they can only speak that many times.

Students Not Listening to Each Other—require that each person who speaks must first reiterate what the previous speaker stated. Have them use names and compliments: “It was great what John just said about...”

14. Don’t be afraid to make procedural comments such as, “It seems that we are repeating what has already been established. Unless there is a new point, perhaps we should move to a new question.”

15. Types of Questions:

Closed—has a definite answer: “When was the Civil War?”

Open—an open question has no direct or definite answer: “Why did the Civil War start?”

Leading—has an answer implied or embedded in the question: “Don’t you think it happened because of slavery?” Instead of asking a leading question and “fishing” for the answer, just say what you want them to learn and then ask a useful question.

Shallow—probes only to find surface answer(s): “How was slavery involved in the war?”

Deep—probes for a root philosophical answer: “Why do humans fight wars? Do other species engage in wars?”

Thinking—not to be answered, but to be *thought* about. State it ahead of time: “This is a thinking question, What would you be willing to fight for?”

16. Texts to Try:

- picture books (Dr. Seuss!)
- fine art (Dali and Escher have worked well) and photographs
- riddles (Not recommended because there usually is a right answer)
- poems / lyrics (Great choices, but often very hard)
- ***picture book without words (I personally want to try this)***
- questions: “Do you believe in fate?”

17. Stuff to Try:

- Keep track of the types of comments made. I usually track Statements (S), Procedural comments (P), Questions (Q), and volunteers to read (R).
- Go through a text literally word by word and decode the meaning.
- Give out conflicting sources in the same seminar.
- Leave the end off something, have a seminar and reach an interpretation, then give them the “real” ending. How does it change their view?
- Use 1 text, but tell them different sources. Give out a poem & tell half the class it was written by a holocaust survivor, the other half a Nazi soldier.
- Add prewriting and postwriting activities.
- **Practice asking Deep, Open, Useful questions. Most students don’t actually know how! You could actually graph depth...**
- Try having the students raise their hands to speak.
- Have the students take notes while listening.
- Have a few seminars in a series.
- Repeat the same topic and dig deeper.

18. Things to Look for:

Eye Contact—Students who are unsure of themselves or what they’re about to say, or who are seeking your approval, will make repeated eye contact. If you want, simply tell them to speak to the group.

Hesitation—Many students will start to say something and will give up. Don’t let them. In my experience those comments are often the best because they were so radical that the child felt afraid to say something.

Rephrasing—A student can sound really intelligent and can really impress you if you don’t realize that s/he is only restating what others have said.

Economy/Hearing Yourself Think—Many students talk a lot but don’t say much. This is often a sign that they need to work on language. Yet, some students need to hear themselves talk in order to get an idea out.

Favoritism—Are certain ideas dropped simply because of who said them?

Not Pursuing—This happens all the time. A question will get things started, but then another question steers the group, and another, and another. Soon you've talked for an hour without anything conclusive. Steer the back as necessary, not to pursue an agenda, but to pursue an idea until a conclusive result is reached. **Teach them to pursue truth like hounds!**

19. Preemptions

Clarity of language, along with refinement. Watch for preemptions. Things like “This isn't very good, but...” “I know this isn't right, but...”

20. Coyote Teaching

21. Appendices

1. some of my favorite novels
2. some of my favorite short stories
3. favorite quotes
4. favorite questions
5. sorted by academic area

22. Types of Reading

23. Introduction

1. 3: beginner: How to start, intermediate: Trial and error, advanced: focus
2. differences between SS and other things
3. my personal journey
4. Prof. Dev.
5. Value

24. Part 1: Getting Started

1. Advocating for them
2. Scheduling
3. Connecting to curriculum & goals
4. How to dive in
5. Tracking & assessment

25. Interruptions

1. bathroom breaks
2. separating out people