Socratic method

This article explains the history and theory of the Socratic method of teaching, which emphasizes teacher-student dialogue. The article offers suggestions for creating Socratic circles and Socratic seminars and provides resources for further reading.

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Developed from Plato’s Socratic Dialogues, the Socratic method of teaching is a student-centered approach that challenges learners to develop their critical thinking skills and engage in analytic discussion. The Socratic method can be used at any grade level and with all subject areas, and lessons can be adapted to fit a changing society.

History of the Socratic method

An ancient form of discourse, the Socratic method is over 2400 years old and is reportedly founded on Socrates’ belief that lecture was not an effective method of teaching all students. According to Matt Copeland, Socrates valued the knowledge and understanding already present within people and thought that using this knowledge could potentially be beneficial in advancing their understanding. Copeland explains, “by helping students examine their premonitions and beliefs while at the same time accepting the limitations of human thought, Socrates believed students could improve their reasoning skills and ultimately move toward more rational thinking and ideas more easily supported with logic.”

The term ‘Socratic seminar’ appears to have first been used by the Great Books Program founder Scott Buchanan in his work with the St. John’s College New Program, and the concept has been popularized by organizations such as The Center for Socratic Practice, the Touchstones Project, Junior Great Books, the National Paideia Center, and the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Lynda Tredway explains that although this type of teaching practice has been explored throughout history, this teaching technique was reintroduced in the 1980s, as part of Mortimer Adler’s Paideia Proposal for comprehensive school reform.

The Socratic method in practice

In the Socratic method of education, teachers engage students by asking questions that require generative answers. Ideally, the answers to questions are not a stopping point for thought but are instead a beginning to further analysis and research. Teachers can use the Socratic method in a variety of subject areas and across grade levels in order to challenge students to examine both contemporary and historical issues. In modeling the practice of Socrates, the teacher questions students in a manner that requires them to consider how they rationalize and respond about topics. Copeland explains that it is important for teachers to clarify that these questions are not intended to create an environment of judgment, but rather to help students “examine their attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and logic.” The goal of the Socratic method is to help students process information and

Learn more

- Greece Central School District’s Socratic seminar overview: This Overview from the Greece Central School District’s website provides history and information about the Socratic method and seminars, as well as sample discussion questions and guidelines that can be adapted for different subjects and lessons.
- StudyGuide.org: Socratic seminars: The StudyGuide.org website offers background, sample questions, guidelines, and a participant rubric to support the use of Socratic seminars.

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Socratic circles

Socratic circles can be used to engage in the Socratic method in various subjects. Typically, when participating in Socratic circle activities, students first read a passage critically and then form two concentric circles. First, the inner circle examines and discusses the text and the second circle comments on the quality of the dialogue. Then, the two circles switch places and roles, and the process is repeated with the new ideas from a new circle. The outer circle is required to remain quiet while the inner circle reacts and dialogues, and conversely, the inner circle must listen quietly to the outer circle’s evaluation of their conversation.

Copeland explains that Socratic circles “turn partial classroom control, classroom direction, and classroom governance over to students by creating a truly equitable learning community where the weight and value of student voices and teacher voices are indistinguishable from each other.” Copeland suggests that Socratic circles help to develop “critical and creative thinking skills that will ultimately facilitate their growth and development into productive, responsible citizens.”

According to Copeland, Socratic circles encourage students to “work cooperatively to construct meaning from what they have read and avoid focusing on a ‘correct’ interpretation of the text.”

STEPS FOR CREATING SOCRATIC CIRCLES

Typically, Socratic circles must include a short passage of text in which students have already given a critical read, and two concentric circles of students — one circle focusing on exploring the meaning expressed in the text and a second circle observing the conversation.

Basic structure:

1. Teacher assigns a short passage of text the day prior to the Socratic circle activity.
2. Students read, analyze, and take notes individually.
3. Students are divided into two circles.
4. The inner circle reads the passage aloud and discusses the text for about ten minutes, while the outer circle silently observes.
5. The outer circle evaluates the inner circle’s conversation and provides feedback to the inner circle.
7. The new inner circle discusses the text for approximately ten minutes and then is
Socratic Seminars

Lynda Tredaway describes the Socratic seminar as “a form of structured discourse about ideas and moral dilemmas.” According to Tredway, the Socratic seminar is a 50-80 minute discussion in which 25 or fewer students react to a novel, poem, essay, document, or art reproduction. Students engaging in Socratic seminar generally sit in a circle and do not raise their hands to speak; instead, they make eye contact and observe body language in order to learn the cues for engaging in discussion.

In the Socratic seminar, the teacher usually provides questions that require students “to evaluate options and make decisions.” When Socratic seminars engage students in active learning, they “develop knowledge, understanding, and ethical attitudes and behaviors, they are more apt to retain these attributes than if they had received them passively.” Proponents of this teaching methodology propose that it also has the potential for character and communication development in addition to facilitating the improvement of self-esteem.

THE TEACHER’S ROLE IN SOCRATIC SEMINAR

In the Socratic seminar, the teacher is responsible for guiding students to “a deeper and clarified consideration of the ideas of the text, a respect for varying points of view, and adherence to and respect for the seminar process.” The teacher also counts the number and type of comments made by students and models expected behaviors for listening, thinking and interacting within the dialogue. Teachers often participate in student-led seminars, and in case, the dialogue is charted by students who tally the types of contributions made by classmates.

DEVELOPING QUESTIONS FOR SOCRATIC SEMINARS

There are several methods of developing questions for Socratic seminars; however, creating an opening question can determine the success of the seminar. According to the Greece Central School District of New York, a good opening question must:

- Arise from the curiosity of the leader.
- Have no single “right” answer.
- Be structured to generate dialogue that leads to a clearer understanding of textual concepts.
- Require participants to make textual references.

The questions that follow the introduction to the seminar require students to make personal connections with the text and the world outside of school. For example, the questions might ask students to share similar or different experiences as those in the text. The teacher might also pose questions that ask students to clarify their perspectives and draw on textual evidence to support their claims. The questions in a Socratic seminar might also challenge students to make comparisons, give evidence for cause-and-effect relationships, provide suggestions for why this text might be realistic or unrealistic, and compare it to their personal lives. Sample questions may be found on the Socratic Seminars page at the Greece Central School website.

GUIDELINES FOR PARTICIPANTS IN A SOCRATIC SEMINAR
When implementing Socratic seminars in the classroom, teachers may want to create their own guidelines for participation. Examples of participation guidelines can be found on the following web pages:

- Socratic Seminars on the Studyguide.org website
- Socratic Seminars — Responsibilities: Participants on the Greece Central School District website

Notes