SOCRATIC SEMINAR

Art by A. Olsen

And the Common Core Standards

Charles Ames Fischer

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Socratic Seminar is a structured classroom practice that promotes critical and creative thinking, intellectual curiosity, collaboration, and scholarly habits of mind. The main goal of Socratic Seminar is to build deep conceptual understandings of texts and ideas, where the word "text" is used loosely to refer to a piece of writing, visual art, music, movement, and so on. In seminars, the teacher shifts his or her role to that of facilitator or questioner, so that the students can move from passively receiving knowledge to actively constructing meaning and understanding. They build on others' ideas, cite the text, ask questions and voice their own opinions. With consistent practice, the students become fully self-sufficient and together they can tackle even the most challenging texts.

Participants in Socratic Seminar engage in *dialogue*, which differs from both debate and discussion. Debates are characterized by two oppositional sides, where each team proves their view. Dialogue is characterized by a cooperative atmosphere, where all participants work together to form better shared understandings. Discussions seem similar to dialogue, but they are meant to *broaden* a topic, whereas Socratic Seminars are meant to *deepen*.

With the advent of the new Common Core Standards, teachers may be left wondering how to achieve the integrated literacy components. One very powerful solution is Socratic Seminar.

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It may seem hard to believe, but Socratic Seminars work well with nearly every local, state or federal educational standard, including the Common Core State Standards. This is very simply because communication, which is at the heart of almost every subject, has four components: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A quick and simple look at each of these will show that Socratic Seminars can be used to meet just about any requirement, regardless of the subject or grade level.

READING

Participants of seminars learn how to read more deeply and effectively for many purposes. They are able to read critically by actively engaging with texts and constructing meaning from numerous perspectives. Comprehension and fluency will soar as students become confident in their abilities to engage with difficult material.

WRITING

Students write with more sophistication, depth and thoughtfulness after engaging in Socratic Seminars. Because they are involved in dialogues with their peers, they are able to draw from numerous perspectives and ideas as the seminar group constructs a thorough and deep conceptual understanding.

LISTENING

Students who frequently participate in Socratic Seminars build effective listening skills because dialogue depends on participation from all members. Seminar students actively listen to their peers in order to better understand and appreciate others and to clarify their own thoughts and ideas. By listening effectively, the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

SPEAKING

By some accounts[1], teachers talk up to 97% of the time, leaving just 3% divided amongst the students. In Socratic Seminar, the percentages switch because the teacher transitions to the role of facilitator. Students, therefore, have valuable speaking time to practice diction, eloquence, pronunciation, justifying and clarifying their ideas and more.

1 - Ball & Brewer. (2000). *Socratic Seminar in the Block.*

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The Common Core State Standards

The following seven main points are presented in the English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects Common Core Standards. The commentaries after explain how Socratic Seminar can address each of these "capacities for the literate individual."

They demonstrate independence.

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"Students can, without significant scaffolding, comprehend and evaluate complex texts across a range of types and disciplines, and they can construct effective arguments and convey intricate or multifaceted information. Likewise, students are able independently to discern a speaker's key points, request clarification, and ask relevant questions. They build on others' ideas, articulate their own ideas, and confirm they have been understood. Without prompting, they demonstrate command of standard English and acquire and use a wide-ranging vocabulary. More broadly, they become self-directed learners, effectively seeking out and using resources to assist them, including teachers, peers, and print and digital reference materials."

Connection: Independence is one of the main goals for all dialogue participants. Without changing a single word, this paragraph could be describing the whole purpose of Socratic Seminars. Because teachers shift their role to that of facilitator or questioner, the students must learn to become self-directed to do the thinking work themselves.

They build strong content knowledge.

"Students establish a base of knowledge across a wide range of subject matter by engaging with works of quality and substance. They become proficient in new areas through research and study. They read purposefully and listen attentively to gain both general knowledge and discipline-specific expertise. They refine and share their knowledge through writing and speaking."

Connection: Socratic Seminars are built around "works of quality and substance" that help students build conceptual understandings. Because these works are often extremely challenging, the students must practice working together to "read purposefully" and to "listen attentively."

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They respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline.

"Students adapt their communication in relation to audience, task, purpose, and discipline. They set and adjust purpose for reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language use as warranted by the task. They appreciate nuances, such as how the composition of an audience should affect tone when speaking and how the connotations of words affect meaning. They also know that different disciplines call for different types of evidence (e.g., documentary evidence in history, experimental evidence in science)."

Connection: Conducting Socratic Seminars in all subject areas or using a wide enough variety of texts, would very effectively achieve this goal. Students would understand and "appreciate nuances" inherit in dialoguing about different types of texts. They would have to constantly adjust everything they say in a genuine and organic way based on how the conversation is flowing.

They comprehend as well as critique.

"Students are engaged and open-minded—but discerning—readers and listeners. They work diligently to understand precisely what an author or speaker is saying, but they also question an author's or speaker's assumptions and premises and assess the veracity of claims and the soundness of reasoning."

Connection: Because the students must function as a cohesive group in Socratic Seminars, they all practice becoming "engaged and open-minded—but discerning—readers and listeners." Socratic Seminars focus more on the skill of asking questions, so participants not only question "assumptions and premises" and "the veracity of claims" and "the soundness of reason" in the authors, but they begin to question everything in the world around them as a standard habit of mind.

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They value evidence.

"Students cite specific evidence when offering an oral or written interpretation of a text. They use relevant evidence when supporting their own points in writing and speaking, making their reasoning clear to the reader or listener, and they constructively evaluate others' use of evidence."

Connection: Another goal that perfectly describes an outcome of regularly participating in Socratic Seminars. Participants constantly challenge each other in order to elevate the group's understandings of the text. "What in the text makes you say that?" is a typical question that participants ask of each other as they cite and listen to evidence. As a group process, Socratic Seminars always have students "constructively evaluate others' use of evidence."

They use technology and digital media strategically and capably.

"Students employ technology thoughtfully to enhance their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language use. They tailor their searches online to acquire useful information efficiently, and they integrate what they learn using technology with what they learn offline. They are familiar with the strengths and limitations of various technological tools and mediums and can select and use those best suited to their communication goals."

Connection: Socratic Seminar is a great tool for "strategically and capably" investigating the uses of media and technology, including how both affect the way we think. According to Marshall McLuhan, for example, "the medium is the message" — an idea that places more emphasis on the method of communication than the actual content. Teachers can set up seminar experiences where students compare and contrast dialoguing in various ways: in person, through internet or intranet discussion forums, instant messaging, texting, videoconferencing and more.

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They come to understand other perspectives and cultures.

"Students appreciate that the twenty-first-century classroom and workplace are settings in which people from often widely divergent cultures and who represent diverse experiences and perspectives must learn and work together. Students actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening, and they are able to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. They evaluate other points of view critically and constructively. Through reading great classic and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of periods, cultures, and worldviews, students can vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different than their own."

Connection: Another paragraph that perfectly describes one of the main results of participating in dialogue. Students often reflect after Socratic Seminar that they had never considered many of the ideas or perspectives before. Because seminars are group processes of shared inquiry, the students must "actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures" in order for the group to synthesize a greater understanding of the concepts at play.

Charles has been working with students since he was a senior in high school back in 1988 when he volunteered in a Kindergarten classroom. Since then, he has worked with a variety of students in public and private settings, from rural Maine to inner-city Atlanta. He recently worked for 11 years at Sparhawk School, where he taught math, social studies, language arts, Socratic Seminar, and numerous elective classes to students in grades 4-12. He also mentored teachers and was the Middle School Director for many years. He is currently writing a book on Socratic Seminars and has been facilitating professional workshops and consulting about dialogue in the classroom for several years. Read more on his website.

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