

SOCRATIC DISCUSSION

PROCEDURES:

The Socratic Discussion is patterned after the way Socrates conducted learning activities in Ancient Greece. All of his students were expected to share their thoughts and opinions regarding the written and spoken word. Students were further required to read, analyze and evaluate assigned materials prior to class discussion. Socrates remained silent to allow true discussion to flow from his students.

Today, when a class is conducted using the Socratic Discussion method, students are also required to come prepared to discuss assigned materials and share ideas and opinions, using the text or real life experience to back up their answers. They are not permitted to participate in the class unless they are prepared. This method of instruction can be used effectively for any genre or subject, fiction or nonfiction.

Teacher Preparation

Before the day of the class discussion, the teacher prepares three types of questions:

- 1.) Intersentence, Literal, or Opening (create 3 of these)
 - a general question that directs students into the text
 - an introductory or exploratory question related to a topic that is easy for students to locate in the text

- 2.) Text, Analysis, or Core (create 3 or 4 of these)
 - a question about specific content, theme, or main idea
 - an inquiry that challenges students to examine a central position
 - a request to interpret or explore a passage in the text
 - a "how...?" or "why...?" question
 - a challenge to students to compare and contrast characters, motivations, descriptions, tones, etc.
 - an examination of vocabulary or interesting phrases

- 3.) Beyond Text, Evaluative, or Closing (create 3 or 4 of these)
 - a question that establishes the relevance of the text to students
 - an inquiry that connects the text with the real world
 - an application of the text to self
 - a comparison of the text with real life

Important: You must use these three types of questions in this order. This allows the discussion to begin in a relatively non-threatening manner and allows students' confidence to build as more difficult questions are asked.

Developing good questions is essential to an effective Socratic Discussion.

Student Preparation

Prior to the discussion, students are asked to read the text, magazine article, or newspaper; watch the video; listen to the song; etc., and to record their answers to the questions which the teacher has developed.

Important: Students should be instructed to record their responses in complete sentences and to explain them thoroughly. The "why" is implied!

Class Setup and Procedures for Socratic Discussion

Students are arranged in two concentric circles. The inner circle contains the speakers who will be involved in the discussion; each student must contribute. The outer circle contains the listeners. Students in the outer circle are not to speak, but only to listen to the discussion.

Important: Two empty seats are reserved in the inner circle.

Students in the outer circle have the option of joining the inner circle when:

- 1) the discussion appears to be off topic.
- 2) the discussion becomes nonproductive with arguments and "put downs."
- 3) inner circle members have not discussed an area deemed important.

(Once a student takes an empty seat, he or she must stay for the remainder of the discussion. When both empty seats are taken, the inner circle is complete. Students must weigh whether they really want to enter the inner circle)

Responsibilities of the inner circle members

Students are to clear desks and display only prepared answers to the discussion questions. (No pencil or pen is allowed.) Students, not the teacher, determine the first speaker. A student enters the discussion only when the previous speaker indicates that he or she has finished.

Circle members decide how the discussion proceeds. For example, students may

- choose to speak in sequence around the circle.
- decide to appoint a discussion leader.
- let each speaker choose the next participant.
- other.

Follow-up questions may be asked by inner circle members; for example:

- What do you mean by...?
- Where in the text do you find support for that?
- Would someone take issue with....
- What is your point?
- Are you saying that...?

When a student opts to take an empty seat, he or she becomes the next speaker.

The final responsibility of the inner circle members:

1) Come to a consensus on each question

OR

2) Simply make sure each member has had an opportunity to discuss answers to the assigned questions, and then perhaps agree to disagree.

Responsibilities of the outer circle members

To ensure the practice of good listening skills, students are required to submit to the teacher their written responses to the discussion questions before the inner circle begins the discussion. (Otherwise, students tend to compare their work with the ongoing discussion.)

If the inner circle decides to reach a consensus, students of the outer circle are required to summarize and record the consensus; OR, if the inner circle members decide to simply share ideas and opinions in response to the discussion questions, students in the outer circle are to script as much of the discussion content as possible as the discussion evolves. At the end of the discussion, outer-circle students are to highlight or circle any words or phrases they believe to be important. If outer circle students have a hard time hearing inner circle students, a simple raising of the hand from an outer circle student can direct an inner circle student to speak up. The final activity required of outer circle members is to share their summaries or key words and phrases with the students of the inner circle. (Students of the inner circle cannot comment; they become the listeners!)

Important: Students switch positions during the discussion so that all members of the class have a chance at both positions. For example, Group A might be the inner circle for the first half of the discussion, and might discuss questions 1,3,5,7,and 9; at the conclusion of A's discussion, Group B (the outer circle) would summarize and respond. Then, the students would switch positions, so that Group B is now the inner circle and Group A forms the outer circle. Group B would then discuss questions 2,4,6,8, and 10. Make certain that you divide the three types of questions evenly between Group A and Group B, so that each group begins with Intersentence questions, moves on to Text questions, and finally responds to Beyond-Text questions. You may have both groups discuss the last question, as it is the most intriguing or inviting.

Responsibilities of the teacher

Select appropriate and interesting material for discussion

Prepare the discussion questions for the assigned topic or lead class in inquiry to create their own questions.

During the Socratic Discussion, keep silent unless disorder occurs or students fail to detect an off-topic event. (The role of the teacher is similar to that of a "Sergeant at Arms" in a courtroom--no verbal or nonverbal feedback, no directions once the discussion begins.)

Possible Assessment and Evaluation

1) Students' created questions.

2) Students' labeling of types and selection for discussion.

3) Students' written responses to the three types of questions.

- 4) Inner Circle members' use of effective discussion skills. (Criteria to be determined by teacher and students before the SD.)
- 5) Outer Circle members' use of active listening skills. (Criteria to be determined by teacher and students before the SD.)
- 6) Summaries or scripts of Outer Circle members at the end of the SD.
- 7) Students' abilities to sincerely add to the group's success.(Criteria to be determined by the teacher and students before the SD.)