



A Beginner's Guide to the Socratic Seminar

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Dedication

*To Patrick Lohmeier and Ryan Elliott,
the future of the active learning process*



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The original Socratic seminar: A mosaic of Plato's Academy



Chapter I

General Introduction

The ancient Greeks have been credited with creating the fundamental concept of a dialogue—the idea that more can be learned from thinking together than can be retained by any form of didactic lecturing. Socrates lost his life because, by his own admittance, he encouraged the youth to think rather than simply to memorize. Few societies since the time of Socrates have fully utilized this method of free-flowing interchange as a means of growth and understanding.

The American educational system seems to be entrenched in memorization and regurgitation rather than true learning; its methodologies have become dictated more and more by standardized tests, and its teachers have become driven more and more by job security and pay based on the results of those tests. When teachers do manage to escape the need to instruct—a word whose Latin stems literally mean “pour in”—they might allow for some discussion—a word that in classical Latin means “to shake apart.” In traditional classroom instruction, students are passive receptacles for information. In a discussion, they are active participants who delve into concepts and ideas to understand and perhaps even challenge them.

Brain research indicates that passive learning does not promote long-term memory; it is only the means to short-term retention—information held just long enough to get the grade on Friday’s exam or to pass an Advanced Placement test at the end of the school year, before it is forgotten forever. To be retained for any significant length of time, the material must be learned by active involvement—by student ownership of the learning. Most schools, however, operate on teacher-driven instruction that only works for short-term memory.

One school district I observed illustrated the tragedy of this situation after administrators attempted to assign particular days to particular subjects for testing. History teachers could only test on Mondays and Wednesdays, science teachers on Tuesdays and Thursdays, math teachers on Tuesdays and Fridays, etc. The intent was to prevent the students from having to take six exams on the same day (usually Friday). It would have been an inconvenience for the teachers but a huge help to the students. However, many teachers objected. One lamented: *“If we finish a unit on Thursday and can’t test until Monday, how do you expect the students to remember the answers?”*

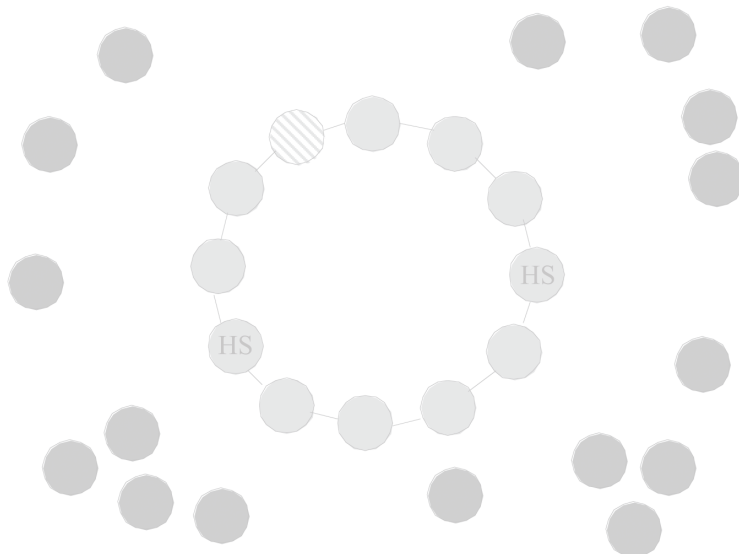
Sad indeed. So let us turn to a positive answer: the Socratic seminar, which employs dialogue as its fundamental methodology. Mortimer Adler, in his *Paideia Proposal* (1998; *Paideia* literally means “nurturing the whole child”), suggests taking one entire day per week

for nothing but Socratic seminars. His followers, the Paideia community, proposed the ideal classical education as follows (Roberts & Billings, 1999):

- **Didactic Instruction: 10-15% of classroom time**
(lecture)
- **Coached Projects: 70% of classroom time**
(essays, experiments, math problems, etc.)
- **Socratic Seminars: 15-20% of classroom time**

However, if the Socratic seminar is to play a role in the classroom, then teachers need to understand the best way to apply it. Years ago, it was commonly believed that 20 minutes was about the maximum amount of time that students could focus on one activity. Many experts now suggest that 30 seconds (the average length of a TV commercial) is the longest any student can stay glued to a lesson before drifting off to distracting thoughts. If that's true, then teachers need a huge bag of tricks, and Socratic seminars can be one part of it. This book does not in any way suggest that teachers throw out their other teaching methods but rather that they add Socratic seminars to their repertoire of activities.

One final note by way of general introduction: Somewhere in our attempt to raise test scores, especially among the lowest-achieving students, we have forgotten that the American public school system was designed to be egalitarian—to provide equal opportunity for all. Ideally, the Socratic seminar does just that; all learners, including the teacher, become equals. Whether the student is an at-risk adolescent, an English Language Learner (ELL), or a gifted prodigy, all have equal voice in the seminar. And perhaps surprisingly, teachers will quickly discover that'll all will have equally valuable things to say. In the Socratic seminar format, it can be difficult to tell the difference between advanced and struggling students. Labels are just that; they have little relevance to the potential for insight!





Chapter 2

Fundamental Differences between Dialogue and Debate

To begin, we must distinguish between *dialogue*, as it is used in the Socratic seminar, and *debate*, as it is most commonly employed in our daily exchanges, classroom discussions, dinner conversations, and social repartee (Winchell, 2006).

Dialogue

Purpose is to understand others' viewpoints

Requires listening for further meaning

Demands an open mind

Looks for strength in all positions

Discourages final closure

Debate

Purpose is to prove others wrong

Requires listening to find flaws

Demands prejudgment

Looks for weaknesses in the opposition's position

Requires a conclusive end

I. Understanding vs. Proving the Other Side Wrong

The first habit of mind that must be altered for a successful Socratic dialogue (used here synonymously with *seminar*) is our basic tendency to stick to our guns and try to prove the other side wrong, rather than to open our minds to the possibility that other viewpoints may be more valid or more incisive than our own. Teenagers, in particular, are generally prone to dismissing other opinions without hesitation or consideration. Often, when they have fixed ideas about an issue, no evidence will change their opinions. They immediately set out in any discussion with the purpose of proving the other side wrong.

The goal of a Socratic dialogue, however, is for students to suspend their belief systems willingly in order to give other opinions a chance. Rather than immediately trying to prove the opposition wrong, they must consider all possibilities. This is not easy. It requires a mental process that goes something like this:

“I think I’m right, but what Ben is suggesting does make sense. And if I add his comment to Kendra’s, then the whole poem takes on a different meaning. Hmm, I almost like it. My original idea still works for me, but I’ll give their ideas a try until I hear what others have to add to theirs and mine.”

2. Listening for Meaning vs. Listening for Flaws

Southern Californians often get into arguments about whether the Los Angeles Dodgers or the Los Angeles Angels has the better team. These debates illustrate what happens when someone listens only for flaws. Suppose I suggest that the Dodgers' first baseman is better than the Angels'. As I run through the statistics, the Angels fan never hears more than my first few words. As soon as he realizes that I'm spouting statistics, he focuses on his statistical counter-argument. While I'm rattling off the batting average, home runs, etc., he's working on a mental compilation of his first baseman's numbers. When he hears me stop, he begins his own litany, never having heard the details of my argument.

In a Socratic seminar, however, the Angels supporter would listen attentively to every statistic I offer, with the possibility in mind that I just might be right—that the Dodgers' first baseman is better than the Angels'. In turn, when he displays his statistics for comparison, I would listen and evaluate his evidence with the possibility that he is, in fact, correct. The essential difference, then, is that neither side attempts to find only flaws; instead, all of the evidence is put on the table for both sides to analyze and evaluate.

3. Beginning with an Open Mind vs. Prejudgment

In order to listen for meaning, one must begin with an open mind rather than entering the conversation with a fixed, inflexible attitude. Our natural state is to allow our egocentric and ethnocentric biases to control our thinking. At the school where I taught, we ran a monthly parent Socratic seminar. At one of the meetings, we were discussing an editorial from the *Los Angeles Times* suggesting that it was time Americans stopped their flag-waving long enough to listen to what the rest of the world has to say about our “jingoistic” position in the world. On one side of the circle sat a high-ranking officer from the U.S. Marine Corps. Directly across from him sat a man who began the conversation by saying, “*So far, all we've accomplished in the Middle East is to reduce big rocks to little rocks.*”

Luckily, both parents brought an open mind to the seminar (despite the tone of that first comment). Both listened to the other's position—and to the other parents who also participated. Neither allowed, at least openly, his own prejudgments to block the possibility that the other had something valuable to say. As a result, both men learned significant lessons that night: the Marine found that civilians' points of view should be taken into account when making decisions that affect the whole nation, and the civilian discovered that the dedicated men and women of the armed services truly do believe in what they're doing and do not act without that motivation.

Because volatile subjects often make for the best seminars, being truly open-minded in a dialogue is not easy. Most of us have preset opinions on such subjects as immigration, abortion, capital punishment, etc. But this is the value of the seminar. As we will discuss in Chapter 11, students are not critically thinking unless they are able to see at least two sides of every issue. Thus, the essence of critical thinking becomes the foundation of the Socratic seminar.

4. Looking for Strength vs. Looking for Weakness

An offshoot of the syndrome of being convinced that we're always right is the built-in need for power or dominance that seems to permeate our subconscious. To that end, most of us seem to have a propensity for asserting our own strength and, at the same time, searching for weaknesses in even our best of friends. I was always fascinated by young couples in my class who went out of their way to prove each other wrong. This habit of mind must be broken in order for people—students and adults alike—to open their minds and attempt to find new meanings.

A good start in this endeavor is to have students, at least at the beginning, purposely look for strengths in someone else's statement and weaknesses in their own. My class once conducted a seminar on a reading about whether or not "Black English" is really a language. In order to drive home the habit of looking for strengths in someone else's point of view, I stopped the seminar without warning and had the students write down the strengths of others' statements with which they did not agree. Then I asked them to write down potential holes in their own comments. When forced to do this, the students were surprised to find that, on paper, some of their peers' opinions were more logical or valid than their own. One student in particular who had voiced the opinion that Black English was not a language not only found himself agreeing with his opposition but was actually able to establish criteria for what constitutes a language based on others' comments. This is a useful exercise in the early stages of seminar training.

Because stopping a seminar in mid-stream tends not to be a good idea because the class seldom can recover its intensity, the teacher may want to employ a different tactic to accomplish the same goal. One such method is to include a question in the general evaluation that takes place after the seminar has concluded (see Chapter 5). The teacher might pose a question such as: "*What statement with which you did not originally agree made the strongest or most conclusive argument?*" This method may not be quite as effective as stopping the seminar, but the flow of the seminar is preserved.

5. Not Requiring Closure vs. Arriving at a Definitive End

Many teachers believe that closure is necessary at the end of every lesson. This is absolutely untrue. Here is a typical scenario: An English teacher conducts a good discussion of a poem. The students have been insightful and engaged for the entire class period. They have owned the lesson. Then the teacher notices that only five minutes remain before the bell rings. He halts the discussion and announces:

"That was truly a great discussion. You had some good observations. Now, because we have only five minutes left, I'm going to tell you what Robert Frost really meant in his poem."

The demand for closure knows no limits by subject matter or grade level. Even math teachers who manage to escape the formulaic, didactic approach to teaching by letting students find their own solutions to problems have been known to state:

“Wow, your suggestions were wonderful. You showed real innovation with your solutions. But now, because we only have a few minutes left, I’m going to show the proper way to work the problem.”

In both of these scenarios, two things immediately happen: (1) the students lose ownership of their learning, and (2) the students dismiss their thought processes as inconsequential because they realize that the teacher will expect his or her answer on the test. Long-term learning is killed.

Socratic seminars, on the other hand, discourage the demand for closure. Rather, they suggest that there are no absolute answers. If a student can provide good evidence that a particular line from a Frost poem can be interpreted a particular way, and it does not contradict the overall direction of the poem, then the interpretation deserves attention. (As the author of two novels, I can attest that students find meanings that I didn’t realize when I originally wrote the work.) If a student can come up with the correct math answer by traveling a road less taken, then that path deserves attention. It should be noted that International Baccalaureate examiners, from what is arguably the most respected international examination system, reward students as much on the method of solving a problem as they do for arriving at the correct answer.

For teachers, a lack of closure may be the single most difficult aspect of teaching the Socratic seminar. We are trained to want closure, to want a definite answer that we can easily score as right or wrong. In addition, most national educational movements are more interested in memorized answers than in long-term memory. The entire American education system is designed so that students spend a particular block of time on each subject, with no real-world interrelatedness. If we accomplish the goals or objectives that are set in our lesson plans, then it has been a good day. In direct contrast, teachers within the Socratic seminar system must learn to let the students leave the room thinking, analyzing, and evaluating as they go.

I used to love ruining students’ lunches. By this I mean that I loved it when the students came back the next day and told me that they had discussed our seminar topic during lunch. It meant that they were engaged in the topic enough to keep thinking about it and talking about it, which meant that it most likely became committed to their long-term memory banks.

Interestingly, the parents who attended our seminars were the worst at letting go of the idea of closure. Because most people are rewarded in their jobs by tasks completed, cars sold, or cases won, closure is second nature. Not once did I conduct a parent seminar in which at least one parent didn’t say, *“Wait! We can’t leave yet. We don’t know the answer.”* I just told them to do what I instructed their children do: *Go home and think about it.*



Chapter 3

Three Simple Rules

Although experts often suggest several rules for running a Socratic seminar, only three are essential for teachers of well-run classrooms. These three can be considered the students' "Commandments."

I. Listen!

You may not start a sentence until the previous speaker has finished.

Listening is a lost art. Blame it on anything you want: TV sitcom characters with their endless blather, talk radio with its multiple hosts trying to out-talk multiple callers, the constant need for noise, whether it be music or television. Who knows for sure? But we have stopped listening.

Evidence of this is clear when we see students in a group who are all talking at the same time or when we notice cell phone users at the register in front of us who never stop talking and therefore can't possibly be listening to the clerk. Society's listening habits remind me of my childhood when my family would go on long road trips. For entertainment we used to sing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," with each member of the family starting one line behind the previous singer. All five of us would be singing at the same time, but always one line off. It was impossible to focus on what the others were singing. Many conversations often seem to go the same way. Yet we simply can't talk and listen at the same time.

Because the concept behind the Socratic seminar is the understanding and evaluation of others' thoughts and opinions, it is essential that we hear what the previous speaker has said. Continuing the flow of the dialogue depends directly on building on, not ignoring, others' comments. If we aren't listening because we're thinking only of what we want to say, the dialogue is stymied, and the seminar becomes, instead, a series of monologues.

One danger about which the beginning seminar practitioner should be forewarned is that some students, when the seminar is first brought to the classroom, decide that they want to make one grand, astute comment to impress others and score points with the teacher. This causes the student to focus more on how to work in the comment than on being a contributing part of the conversation. As a result, the student tunes out what others are saying. Simply discussing this bad habit ahead of time usually works well to curb it. Teachers can suggest that it is more productive to offer insights that build on others' statements than to make a single comment that is "out there," even if by itself that thought is excellent.

No matter the grade level, teachers may wish to employ artificial means of controlling the listening during the first few sessions. *The teacher should not call on students with raised hands* because that puts the teacher in the position of an instructor rather than as an equal participant with the students. The following methods for keeping the dialogue flowing evenly work best:

- a) **The Conch:** Most of us should remember that in the classic book *Lord of the Flies*, the boy who held the conch had the right to speak until he passed the shell to someone else, who then had the power. Any symbolic “conch” will work in a Socratic seminar, but many practitioners actually use a real one. One of my greatest achievements as a teacher came when a deaf student checked into our school and spoke for the first time in his high school career because of the Socratic seminar. We were connected through a wireless “bean” (a microphone attached to my shirt) and his earpiece. I decided to use the bean in place of a conch; the person who held the bean had the right to speak. When the deaf student held the bean, he knew that others would listen closely, despite his severe speech problem. He soon gained confidence, and by the end of the semester, he was contributing two or three good comments in every seminar.
- b) **Cards:** Some teachers give each student three cards, and after speaking, the student must toss a card into the middle of the circle, thus limiting each student to three comments. This keeps students from mindlessly interrupting others and forces them to wait patiently for the proper time to add to the dialogue.
- c) **Students Calling on Students:** A simple method of controlling students’ tendency not to listen to fellow students is to have the speaker call on the next speaker. Students should raise their hands when they have something to contribute. Proper etiquette forces potential speakers to keep their hands down until the speaker finishes. Subtle hand gestures rather than waving and squirming also help. In this way, the seminar promotes civility and discourages rudeness.

Teachers should not worry that these methods will need to be employed for long. Students, whether they be kindergartners or college students, quickly learn to be cordial listeners. If anything, the teacher may get weary of students who accidentally begin simultaneously engaging in a conversation and then proceed with “*Oh, I’m sorry, go ahead.*” “*No, that’s okay, you go.*” “*No, you.*” However, over-politeness can’t be construed as a bad thing!

2. Refer directly to the text.

One of the things that makes the Socratic seminar methodology so valuable is the need for students to delve into the text (the reading, image, problem, etc. that is used as a basis for the dialogue—see Chapter 10) far more deeply than they usually do. Most students are prone to do things as quickly as is humanly possible, regardless of the quality of the work (and this habit

only seems to get worse as the students get older). This means that they can explicate a poem by T.S. Eliot in five minutes and be perfectly happy with their analysis. They can take one look at *Persistence of Memory* by Salvador Dali and think that they've garnered from it all of the hidden meanings that Dali intended.

In sharp contrast, Socratic seminars require that students take a poem apart word by word, line by line. They demand that students consider every nuance of a painting and explore every possible meaning. Students learn to search for subtleties rather than to arrive quickly at generalizations. They are forced to wonder why Stephen Crane used *mumbles* instead of *says* in "The Wayfarer." They must reexamine the apostle sitting next to Christ in da Vinci's *Last Supper* as a basis for evaluating modern theories about his or her identity.

To this end, three things are essential:

- a) All written texts must be numbered down the side, and students must refer directly to the line by number. "*I question what Hitler meant in line 23 when he said....*" Or "*Frost could mean two things in line 15 when he says....*" The same holds true with a reading from a science journal or an article on mathematical statistics.
- b) The teacher must constantly model this habit of referring to line numbers, particularly with the opening question. "*If you notice in line 56, the author refers to the theory of evolution as.... Can you explain...?*"
- c) Students must be trained not to stray far from the text. Some asides might be pertinent, and in fact, they might allow a reluctant speaker into the conversation, but these comments should form a minor portion of the dialogue. The teacher must know the class and each individual in it, potentially allowing in one class what might be considered stray comments in another. For example, in a lower-ability class, slightly off-text comments might be more acceptable because those comments might provide the vehicle for relevance and thus total class involvement.

There are many successful teaching styles, which makes it difficult to recommend precise rules on the relevancy of student input; however, note that the more connected the offerings are to the text, the more valuable the entire seminar is to the understanding of that text.

3. Build on, rather than tear down, others' comments.

During my career, I was often hired by a variety of groups, from school boards to college student body leadership teams, to teach the Socratic seminar as a means of civil conversation between those who previously could not accomplish their goals because the members were in attack mode rather than in a mood to listen, digest, comprehend, and evaluate through meaningful dialogue. Most of us seem to be convinced that we have the right answers to any

problem, and everyone else would do well to listen to us. Few of us ever sit quietly and listen to another's views with the mindset that the other person could have a better answer or solution.

Because we have learned the art of debate, and it has become a habit of mind, we are always on the defensive. When someone else begins to speak, we immediately begin to form a counter-argument. We stop listening, and any attempt at understanding is lost. We hear only flaws in the argument, never the strengths. This dams up any possible flow of ideas. We stop trying to understand.

We must train students to build on one another's comments rather than tear them down. If we want to disagree, we must do it agreeably. The simplest way is to ask a question rather than to make a statement:

Not: *"That can't be right. Everyone knows that science and religion...."*

But: *"Isn't it possible that science and religion can...?"*

Or: *"Can you explain to us why science and religion can't...?"*

Many questions are not only less abrasive than putting another student down but also are more likely to lead to further understanding:

Not: *"You don't know what you're talking about when you say...."*

But: *"Are you assuming...when you say...?"*

Or: *"Isn't there some bias involved when you suggest that...?"*

Not: *"I know you're wrong. I just read that...."*

But: *"Is that your opinion, or do you have evidence that...?"*

Or: *"Can you give us the source for those statistics...?"*

Not all disagreements, however, lend themselves so readily to questions. Sometimes one student simply disagrees with another and wants to contradict the previous statement. Even then, it's important that this be done in a civil manner that shows respect for the other student and his or her opinion. For this reason, many teachers post "helping" phrases on the wall for easy reference by the students:

- *"That's interesting because I was thinking...."*
- *"I hear what you're saying, but doesn't line 5...."*
- *"I'm a bit confused. I thought maybe...."*
- *"I could accept that if only line 7 didn't say...."*
- *"Can you clarify what you meant by...because...?"*
- *"I might be mistaken, but line 9 seems to suggest something else."*
- *"I don't think you and I are quite on the same page on this because...."*
- *"Perhaps we should consider an alternative viewpoint."*

Every teacher needs to compile his or her own list, depending on the age and sophistication of the students, but the bottom line is that we want students to build on one another's comments. Teachers will soon find students even using the word *build* in their comments: "*Just to build on what Kylie said....*" Believe it or not, I've actually had students tell me that the class is getting "*too nice*"—that it was more fun when they "*tore each other apart*"! Fine, let them do that elsewhere; the goal in a dialogue is to have them listen, understand, and grow.

