

Socratic Seminars

What does *Socratic* mean?

Socratic comes from the name Socrates. Socrates (ca. 470-399 B.C.) was a Classical Greek philosopher who developed a Theory of Knowledge.

What was Socrates' Theory of Knowledge?

Socrates was convinced that the surest way to attain reliable knowledge was through the practice of disciplined conversation.

What is a Socratic Seminar?

A Socratic Seminar is method to try to understand information by creating a dialectic in class in regards to a specific text. In a Socratic Seminar, participants seek deeper understanding of complex ideas in the text through rigorously thoughtful dialogue, rather than by memorizing bits of information.

The Text: Socratic Seminar texts are chosen for their richness in ideas, issues, and values and their ability to stimulate extended, thoughtful dialogue. A seminar text can be drawn from readings in literature, history, science, math, health, and philosophy or from works of art or music. A good text raises important questions in the participants' minds, questions for which there are no right or wrong answers. At the end of a successful Socratic Seminar participants often leave with more questions than they brought with them.

The Question: A Socratic Seminar opens with a question either posed by the leader or solicited from participants as they acquire more experience in seminars. An opening question has no right answer; instead it reflects a genuine curiosity on the part of the questioner. A good opening question leads participants back to the

text as they speculate, evaluate, define, and clarify the issues involved.

Responses to the opening question generate new questions from the leader

and participants, leading to new responses. In this way, the line of inquiry in a Socratic Seminar evolves on the spot rather than being pre-determined by the leader.

The Leader: In a Socratic Seminar, the leader plays a dual role as leader and participant. The seminar leader consciously demonstrates habits of mind that lead to a thoughtful exploration of the ideas in the text by keeping the discussion focused on the text, asking follow-up questions, helping participants clarify their positions when arguments become confused, and involving reluctant participants while restraining their more vocal peers.

As a seminar participant, the leader actively engages in the group's exploration of the text. To do this effectively, the leader must know the text well enough to anticipate varied interpretations and recognise important possibilities in each. The leader must also be patient enough to allow participants' understandings to evolve and be willing to help participants explore non-traditional insights and unexpected interpretations.

Assuming this dual role of leader and participant is easier if the opening question is one which truly interests the leader as well as the participants.

The Participants: In a Socratic Seminar, participants carry the burden of responsibility for the quality of the seminar. Good seminars occur when participants study the text closely in advance, listen actively, share their ideas and questions in response to the ideas and questions of others, and search for evidence in the text to support their ideas. Eventually, when participants realise that the leader is not looking for right answers but is encouraging them to think out loud and to exchange ideas openly, they discover the excitement of exploring important issues through shared inquiry. This excitement creates willing participants, eager to examine ideas in a rigorous, thoughtful manner.

Guidelines for Participants in a Socratic Seminar

1. Refer to the text when needed during the discussion. A seminar is not a test of memory. You are not "learning a subject"; your goal is to understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in the text.
2. It's OK to "pass" when asked to contribute.
3. Do not participate if you are not prepared.
4. Do not stay confused; ask for clarification.
5. Stick to the point currently under discussion; make notes about ideas you want to come back to.
6. Don't raise hands; take turns speaking.
7. Listen carefully.
8. Speak up so that all can hear you.
9. Talk to each other, not just to the leader or teacher.
10. You are responsible for the seminar, even if you don't know it or admit it.

Expectations of Participants in a Socratic Seminar

Did the Participants...

Speak loudly and clearly?

Cite reasons and evidence for their statements?

Use the text to find support?

Listen to others respectfully?

Stick with the subject?

Talk to each other, not just to the leader?

Paraphrase accurately?

Avoid inappropriate language (slang, technical terms, sloppy diction, etc.)?

Ask for help to clear up confusion?

Support each other?

Avoid hostile exchanges?

Question others in a civil manner?

Seem prepared?