Part 2: Text Selection...Why and How!

Part 1: Overview of the Elements of Socratic Seminars (see Tchers’ Voice blog)
Part 2: Why and How of Text Selection
Part 3: Questions: Opening, During, and After
Part 4: The Leader: In the Circle
Part 5: Great Seminars are Dialogues, Not Debates

WHAT IS TEXT, AND WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

Whether Socratic Seminar participants are adults or students, participants are encouraged to share opinions and experiences related to the topic being explored. Hearing the opinions and experiences of others and sharing your own helps bring a dialogue to life and make for authentic conversation. The most powerful Socratic Seminars, however, go beyond opinions and experiences to collective inquiry and an enlarging of the Big Ideas in a text.
Socratic Seminar moves past opinions and experiences by including a common “text” to which everyone in the circle has equal access. A “text” can be in a variety of formats: fiction or nonfiction, a short poem, a story, a written passage, excerpt from a longer poem, or an article. For example, the following excerpt from Ralph Waldo Emerson in secondary classroom ensures that the conversation will go past opinions and experiences.

“Traveling is a fool's paradise. Our first journeys discover to us the indifference of places. At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty, and lose my sadness. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea, and at last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from. I seek the Vatican, and the palaces. I affect to be intoxicated with sights and suggestions, but I am not intoxicated. My giant goes with me wherever I go.”

While some students have many personal experiences in traveling in and out of their state, some students have not been out of their back yard. In the absence of a text, the
contributions are only opinions and experiences, resulting in a conversation that lacks equity and depth. A well-chosen text provides all students with the chance to enlarge their understanding of big ideas in and around the text.

Want more? Take a look at this YouTube video, which discusses more about the Why and How of Text Selection.

Part 3: Questions: Opening and During and After a Socratic Seminar

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“We are often searching for better answers, when we should be searching for better questions.”

An effective Socratic Seminar always begins with an Opening Question that is designed to spark the conversation, not limit, guide, or direct the conversation. Creating this open-ended question happens when a leader prepares in advance an Opening Question that includes four essentials.

➢ Students are engaged in Socratic Seminars when they know that the leader is “genuinely curious” about the question; there is authentic interest shown by the teacher/leader in the text and the ideas running through the text. Obviously, it is not just about the teacher’s curiosity; the question must pique the curiosity of the students to explore the text.

➢ Engaging Opening Questions are always “open-ended” questions; i.e. there is no one single right answer. There are multiple supportable, plausible responses and interpretations to the question.

➢ While Socratic Seminars encourage students to share their opinions and experiences, the richest and deepest dialogues occur when big ideas in and around the text are explored and enlarged. An Opening Question that includes big ideas ensures that students go beyond their opinions and experiences.

➢ The importance of including a text rich in ideas, issues, or values in each Socratic
Seminar means that the Opening Question must encourage and direct the students to the text. An Opening Question that only asks for the opinions of students does not foster deep exploration of big ideas.

Once a well-crafted Opening Question is presented to the group, an experienced leader employs one or more of the Socratic Questioning Strategies to help students go deeper into the text and to its ideas, issues or values.

**Socratic Questioning Strategies**

- **Pausing-Wait Time-Silence.** Pausing and waiting *slows the conversation down.* Waiting 3-5 seconds after asking an open-ended question, and waiting 3-5 seconds after student responses, gives everyone time to think while also providing space for hesitant speakers to respond or join the conversation.

- **Paraphrasing.** Saying back to students what they have said, using different words and phrases, requires students to think deeply about their ideas, what they have said, and what they mean. Paraphrasing enlarges ideas for the speaker and for other students.

- **Serializing.** Asking a series of questions based on the previous response of a student shows that they are being heard, understood, and valued. Serialized questions engage students into meaningful conversations that enlarge their understanding of the big ideas of a text and a discipline.

- **Clarifying.** While clarifying questions are simple questions of fact, clarifying questions ask students to focus on clarity of expression and thought. Simple questions like, “Do you mean thousands of people or do you mean hundreds of people?” or “Are you suggesting that we start with step 3 to solve the problem?” can move understanding and learning forward for everyone.

- **Expanding.** Questions of elaboration like, “Why do you say that? Tell us more about that… What are some examples of what you mean? How is what you are suggesting different from or similar to what you just heard from Sue?” ask students to go deeper in expressing their thoughts and ideas as they provide clarity and new understanding. Asking questions that expand and enlarge the ideas being offered by students shows students higher levels of understanding.

- **Probing.** Since probing questions encourage multiple responses, avoid yes/no responses, elicit slow and thoughtful responses, and move thinking from reaction to reflection, asking probing questions requires that students stop, pause, and think closely about the sources of their assumptions, inferences, and conclusions, resulting in deep learning and new understanding.
It is the “art and practice of Socratic Seminar leadership.” The most important skill that a great leader of Socratic Seminars learns is the ability to listen closely to students and to ask questions based on their contributions. It takes 6-8 Socratic Seminars before you and your students start to get it...the “it” being civility, thoughtfulness, trust.” Creating outstanding Opening Questions and asking thoughtful follow-up questions takes practice and regular reflection.

For more information, please view our YouTube video (The Questions, Part 2) which goes deeper into the designing of Opening Questions and the use of Socratic Questioning Strategies.

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**Part 4: The Leader: In the Circle**

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“The leader plays a dual role as leader and participant.”

The place for the leader of a Socratic Seminar is in the circle with the students, not outside the circle as an observer and note-taker.

Socratic Seminars are powerfully engaging for students when they know they are heard, understood, and valued. This can only happen when their respected teacher/leader is in the circle as a mutual explorer of the text, and he or she is modeling wonder, curiosity, and thoughtfulness about the contributions of each participant.

In the following YouTube video (The Leader, Part 3), I make clear how important it is to be in the circle with your students.

Those teachers who adapt a Socratic Seminar by not being in the circle do so by running a “student led discussion.” not a Socratic Seminar.

This next YouTube video (Student Led Discussion vs. Socratic Seminar) discusses the important distinction between a student led discussion and an actual Socratic Seminar.

“Teachers who find their kids ideas interesting and wondrous are just better teachers than teachers who find the subject matter fascinating.”

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*William Isaacs* Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together
The only way your students know this is when you are in the circle with them.

Part 5: The Participants

“With practice, the students take ownership of the quality of the seminar.”

While the place of the leader is in the seminar with the students to be a co-participant in the mutual exploration of the text and its ideas, after 6-8 seminars with reflection on the process, students start to take ownership of the quality of the seminar. They realize that their collective viewpoints of the big ideas in a text can be just as valid as anyone else’s ideas. This growth in the confidence and skills of students in a Socratic Seminars happens when the follow strategies are employed by the teacher/lead:

- Seminars are run using the inner/outer circle arrangement so that no more than 15-16 students are verbal participants in the seminar.
- Students are given clear expectations for their behavior while in the inner circle and while they are in the outer circle.
- Clear Ground Rules are presented and modeled by the teacher/leader
- Students understand the differences between their personal opinions and experiences and their interpretations of the text and its ideas
- Every seminar includes written reflections on how well the participants adhered to the Ground Rules

In the following YouTube video (The Participants, Part 4), I elaborate on each of the five strategies above and more! Hope this provides you with the information, tools, and ideas to get the conversation started.

Oscar Graybill, M.Ed., Director and National Presenter - A former San Diego City Schools’ EXCEL Outstanding Teacher and former California Mentor Teacher, Oscar Graybill used Cooperative Learning and Socratic Seminar in his classroom teaching career. Oscar worked for thirteen years as an English teacher at Walla Walla High School in Walla Walla, Washington, after spending his first seventeen years at Herbert Hoover High School in San Diego, California.

As Director of Socratic Seminars International, Oscar works with scores of teachers and administrators throughout the United States in the art and practice of Socratic Seminar leadership. Visit Socratic Seminars International to learn more!