



SOCRATIC SEMINAR



Socratic seminars are named for their embodiment of Socrates' belief in the power of asking questions, prize inquiry over information and discussion over debate. Socratic seminars acknowledge the highly social nature of learning and align with the work of John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and Paulo Friere. Elfie Israel succinctly defines Socratic seminars and implies their rich benefits for students:

The Socratic seminar is a formal discussion, based on a text, in which the leader asks open-ended questions. Within the context of the discussion, students listen closely to the comments of others, thinking critically for themselves, and articulate their own thoughts and their responses to the thoughts of others. They learn to work cooperatively and to question intelligently and civilly. (89)

Israel, Elfie. "Examining Multiple Perspectives in Literature." In *Inquiry and the Literary Text: Constructing Discussions in the English Classroom*. James Holden and John S. Schmit, eds. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002.

Strategy in Practice

- **Choosing a text:** Socratic seminars work best with authentic texts that invite authentic inquiry—an ambiguous and appealing short story, a pair of contrasting primary documents in social studies, or an article on a controversial approach to an ongoing scientific problem.
- **Preparing the students:** While students should read carefully and prepare well for every class session, it is usually best to tell students ahead of time when they will be expected to participate in a Socratic seminar. Because seminars ask students to keep focusing back on the text, you may distribute sticky notes for students to use to annotate the text as they read.
- **Preparing the questions:** Though students may eventually be given responsibility for running the entire session, the teacher usually fills the role of discussion leader as students learn about seminars and questioning. Generate as many open-ended questions as possible, aiming for questions whose value lies in their exploration, not their answer. Elfie Israel recommends starting and ending with questions that relate more directly to students' lives so the entire conversation is rooted in the context of their real experiences.
- **Establishing student expectations:** Because student inquiry and thinking are central to the philosophy of Socratic seminars, it is an authentic move to include students integrally in the establishment of norms for the seminar. Begin by asking students to differentiate between behaviors that characterize debate (persuasion, prepared rebuttals, clear sides) and those that characterize discussion (inquiry, responses that grow from the thoughts of others, communal spirit). Ask students to hold themselves accountable for the norms they agree upon.
- **Establishing your role:** Though you may assume leadership through determining which open-ended questions students will explore (at first), the teacher should not see him or herself as a significant participant in the pursuit of those questions. You may find it useful to limit your intrusions to helpful reminders about procedures (*e.g.* "Maybe this is a good time to turn our attention back the text?" "Do we feel ready to explore a different aspect of the text?"). Resist the urge to correct or redirect, relying instead on other students to respectfully challenge their peers' interpretations or offer alternative views.
- **Assessing effectiveness:** Socratic seminars require assessment that respects the central nature of student-centered inquiry to their success. The most global measure of success is reflection, both on the part of the teacher and students, on the degree to which text-centered student talk dominated the time and work of the session. Reflective writing asking students to describe their participation and set their own goals for future seminars can be effective as well. Understand that, like the seminars themselves, the process of gaining capacity for inquiring into text is more important than "getting it right" at any particular point.

I'm waking up to ash and dust
I wipe my brow and I sweat my rust
I'm breathing in the chemicals

I'm breaking in, shaping up, then checking out on the prison bus
This is it, the apocalypse
Whoa

I'm waking up, I feel it in my bones
Enough to make my systems blow
Welcome to the new age, to the new age
Welcome to the new age, to the new age
Whoa, oh, oh, oh, oh, whoa, oh, oh, oh, I'm radioactive, radioactive
Whoa, oh, oh, oh, oh, whoa, oh, oh, oh, I'm radioactive, radioactive

I raise my flags, don my clothes
It's a revolution, I suppose
We'll paint it red to fit right in
Whoa

I'm breaking in, shaping up, then checking out on the prison bus
This is it, the apocalypse
Whoa

I'm waking up, I feel it in my bones
Enough to make my systems blow
Welcome to the new age, to the new age
Welcome to the new age, to the new age
Whoa, oh, oh, oh, oh, whoa, oh, oh, oh, I'm radioactive, radioactive
Whoa, oh, oh, oh, oh, whoa, oh, oh, oh, I'm radioactive, radioactive

All systems go, the sun hasn't died
Deep in my bones, straight from inside

I'm waking up, I feel it in my bones
Enough to make my systems blow
Welcome to the new age, to the new age
Welcome to the new age, to the new age
Whoa, oh, oh, oh, oh, whoa, oh, oh, oh, I'm radioactive, radioactive
Whoa, oh, oh, oh, oh, whoa, oh, oh, oh, I'm radioactive, radioactive

