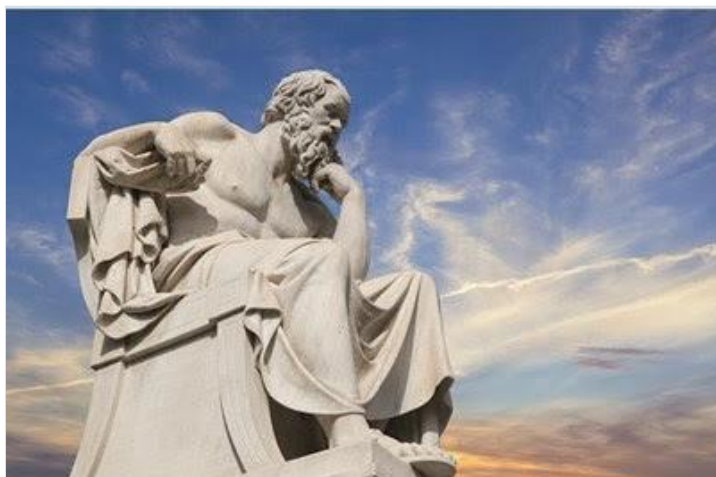


# Teaching practice: Socratic seminars

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Thinker: The statue of philosopher Socrates at the

Academy of Athens in Greece (Image: Adobe Stock)

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**Our teaching practice series continues, as does our focus on dialogic questioning. Expert Matt Bromley discusses the teacher's role in using the six Socratic questions and looks at Socratic seminars in lessons**

*Editor's Note: This article is part of a series of 10 best practice pieces to have published in 2017. Access them [here](#):*

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## ***“To find yourself, think for yourself.” Socrates***

In last week's article, I explained that dialogic questions are those which encourage discussion, and which are open, philosophical, and challenging ([Teaching practice: Dialogic questioning, SecEd, February 2017](#)).

One widely used dialogic technique is Socratic questioning, which can be used to: control a discussion, explore more complex ideas, uncover assumptions, analyse concepts and ideas, and distinguish between what students know and do not know.

Socratic questioning performs two functions in the classroom: first, it probes students' thinking and helps them begin to distinguish what they know or understand from what they do not know or understand, and second, it fosters students' abilities to ask Socratic questions and helps them to use these tools in everyday life (in questioning themselves and others).

Last week, I shared the six Socratic questions and explained how they could be used in practice. This week we will explore the role of the teacher during Socratic questioning and also look at how Socratic seminars can help a class to analyse a text.

## The role of the teacher

The six types of Socratic question are:

1. Questions for clarification – why do you say that?
2. Questions that probe assumptions – what could we assume instead?
3. Questions that probe reasons and evidence – what would be an example?
4. Questions about viewpoints and perspectives – what would be an alternative?
5. Questions that probe implications and consequences – what generalisations can you make?
6. Questions about the question – what was the point of this question?

And when using these six questions, the teacher should:

- Respond to all of a student's answers with further questions which are designed to develop the student's thinking still further.
- Understand a student's reasoning for answering in the way he/she did and the implications of this.
- Use all student answers as a means of connecting to and developing further thoughts and ideas.
- Stimulate students' thinking through their questions and by "thinking aloud".
- Recognise that all questions reflect an agenda and presupposed pattern of thought.

The best place to start planning a series of Socratic questions is with the big question that is to be discussed. Once the big question has been formed, the teacher can develop a series of follow-up questions. However, Socratic questioning can be used in reverse, too. In other words, once the big question has been formed the teacher can then develop a series of prior questions that lead up to it.

For example, if the big question is "What is social democracy?" then the first question might be "What is democracy?" and to settle this question the teacher might ask "What are the fundamental principles of a democratic society?" and "What rights and responsibilities are afforded to citizens living in a democratic society?"

## Socratic seminars

Socratic questions can also be used to help students respond to a text. This technique is often referred to as a Socratic seminar.

The purpose of a Socratic seminar is to achieve a deeper understanding about the ideas and values contained in a text.

In the seminar, students systematically question and examine the issues and principles related to a particular text, and then articulate different points of view. The class discussion helps students to construct meaning through a process of disciplined analysis, interpretation, listening, and active participation.

In a Socratic seminar, students carry the burden of responsibility for the quality of the discussion.

Good discussions occur when students have studied the text closely in advance, and then – during the seminar – 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.

A seminar discussion is not about right answers; it is not a debate. Instead, students should be encouraged to think aloud and to exchange ideas openly while examining each other's ideas in a rigorous, thoughtful, manner.

There are three basic elements to a Socratic seminar: Text, Classroom Environment, and Questions. Let's explore each in turn...

## Text

The text (which may be a book, an article, a short video or audio clip, or an object or artefact) should contain important and powerful ideas and values relevant to the topic being taught. The text should be pitched at the appropriate level for students in the class in terms of its language and the complexity of its argument, and it should relate directly to the core concepts of the content being studied.

It is beneficial if there is a certain degree of ambiguity in the text and, therefore, the potential for different interpretations because this makes for richer discussions. It helps if all students have read the text in advance.

## Classroom Environment

Ideally, the classroom should be arranged so that students can look at each other directly, as this promotes discussion and enables students to display and respond to active listening cues such as body language.

An agreed set of discussion "norms" or classroom rules should be displayed. More on this in a moment.

## Questions

It is best for the teacher to prepare several questions in advance, in addition to the questions which students may bring to class having read the text.

The questions should be open-ended and reflect a genuine curiosity. There should be no right answer.

At the end, it is useful to debrief students and encourage them to reflect on how successful they feel the seminar has been.

Here are some sample questions which could serve as the key question or which could help students to interpret the text:

- What is the main idea/underlying value in the text?
- What is the author's purpose or perspective?
- What does (a particular phrase) mean?
- What might be a good title for the text?
- What is the most important word/sentence/paragraph?

Here are some sample questions which could help move the discussion along:

- Who has a different perspective?
- Who has not yet had a chance to speak?
- Where do you find evidence for that in the text?
- Can you clarify what you mean by that?
- How does that relate to what (someone else) said?
- Is there something in the text that is unclear to you?
- Has anyone changed their mind?

Here are some sample questions which could help bring the discussion to a logical conclusion:

- How do the ideas in the text relate to our lives?
- What do they mean for us personally?
- Why is this material important?
- Is it right that...?
- Do you agree with the author?

And here are some sample questions for the final debriefing:

- Do you feel like you understand the text at a deeper level?
- How was the process for us?
- Did we adhere to our norms?
- Did you achieve your goals to participate?
- What was one thing you noticed about the seminar?

## A thinking classroom...

Finally, in order to develop dialogic questioning, teachers need to establish clear rules and boundaries, and model good thinking, learning, and speaking and listening strategies.

It is also important to establish a positive learning environment which fosters students' confidence and encourages all students to participate fully, promoting both tolerance and respect for each other's views.

A set of classroom rules might look something like this:

1. Respect each other's ideas, views and opinions: One voice at a time; say what you think; say why you think it.
2. Listen and reflect on what others say.
3. Build on what others say.
4. Support and include each other.
5. Confidentially share partial ideas.
6. Ask when you don't understand.
7. Try to reach an agreement.
8. Seek clarity from each other.
9. Speak calmly – be noise aware.

And a "thinking classroom" might be built on the following foundations:

1. Follow the classroom rules.
2. Listen to others, add or build on their ideas.
3. Never put others down or intimidate them.
4. During thinking time, actively consider all ideas and ask new questions.
5. Test ideas and subject them to scrutiny or challenge.
6. Respect the views and ideas of others.
7. Weigh the value of different viewpoints and evidence.

In the Uncommon Schools network in the US, teachers use a mnemonic to quickly remind students what's expected of them and how to behave during classroom discussions and debate. For example, STAR stands for: Sit up. Tracker the speaker. Ask and answer questions. Respect those around you. Whereas SLANT stands for: Sit up. Listen. Ask and answer questions. Nod your head. Track the speaker.

It might also be helpful to provide students with some of the language they require in order engage in polite and professional discourse. Diplomacy, after all, is a taught skill.

Here, by way of conclusion, are some examples of thought or sentence stems which could be shared and explained, discussed and agreed, then perhaps displayed on the wall as a constant reminder of how to debate:

Example statements to develop independence:

- I acknowledge your views but have a slightly different point, which is...
- I am starting to think that...
- My studies suggests that...
- That's a good idea but I think we could...

Example statements to show respect for others:

- Similar to others, I think that...
- That's a good point, I agree with it and I think that...
- I want to build on that point by...

Example statements to develop a high confidence environment:

- My initial thoughts are...
- I am starting to think that...
- I'm not sure if others would agree but...
- Just a thought, but it could be that...

Example statements to encourage collaboration:

- In our discussions we were thinking that...
- Between us we thought that...
- Overall we came to the conclusion that...
- Building on what was said earlier, we...
- ***Matt Bromley is an experienced education leader, writer, consultant, speaker and trainer. He is the author of several books for teachers including Leadership for Learning, and Teach. His latest book, Making Key Stage 3 Count, is now available. Visit [www.bromleyeducation.co.uk](http://www.bromleyeducation.co.uk) or follow him @mj\_bromley***

## Teaching Practice Series

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