

SOCRATIC SEMINARS: GUIDELINES

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The following ideas, roles, criteria, and scoring strategies can be used to assess and improve the quality of any student group discussion. They are designed to help teachers enable students to become increasingly self-regulating and self-disciplined about their seminar work.

A seminar is devoid of any intention to add to collectible stores of information; it has no relation to newness or oldness of knowledge. One becomes intent on thinking things anew rather than thinking new things.¹

What is a seminar?

A seminar is a genuine discussion. As the opening quote suggests, a seminar is meant to be a different kind of class (or instructional strategy). The seminar is designed to enable students to explore a text, a problem, an experience; it is not a more conversational form of teacher-led instruction. Rather, it is the students' opportunity to ask and consider questions and explore each others' answers. In short, it becomes the student's opportunity and responsibility to develop habits and skills that are traditionally reserved for the teacher.

The seminar experience rolls 'content' and 'process' into one. The student not only learns more about an idea or text, the student learns how to discuss it: the student gains practice in leading discussions, listening for insights in the comments of others, proposing alternative paths of conversation, insuring that quiet or "weird" voices are heard, and how to help talk move beyond superficial but unconnected sharing to sustained and thought-provoking dialogue.

What a seminar isn't. A seminar can perhaps be better understood by considering what it is not: it is not training; it is not interactive lecturing; it is not canned student speaking (like the 19th century 'recitation.')

A seminar is neither a debate nor a teacher led "class discussion" (where "discussion" means students taking turns sharing thoughts, feelings, and reactions). Rather, the seminar is a collective inquiry into questions and issues, typically prompted by a reading or shared experience. A key aim is to develop everyone's understanding of the issues – not to be confused with "answering" the teacher's questions. But it also aims at everyone's self-understanding – through speaking, idea testing, listening, and reflection. The purpose is to 'uncover' not 'cover' a subject.

The teacher may well have to learn and practice new habits, therefore. In a seminar, the teacher becomes a mature co-colleague in the conversation (after some initial training and modeling). The great challenge for the teacher is to break habits – to very self-consciously try to stop managing all the talk and leading students to an answer. The seminar leader's job is more like that of a counselor, therapist, or spiritual leader: to keep the important issues alive and to keep important voices, perspectives or past strands of talk from getting lost. Initially one must direct and train. But once students have grasped the *new* purpose, routines, and norms at work, the teacher can become less of a "teacher" and more like a coach as students manage their "team" performance. In advanced seminars, the teacher becomes even less obtrusive – more like the referee.

The aim of a seminar is not to replace or jazz up instruction, then, but to supplement it. The seminar works best as a precursor to or synthesizing experience of traditional didactic teaching and skill coaching. The seminar presents students with chances to explore the meaning of the work (assignments, lessons, discrete learnings) that make up their formal instruction.² A seminar works best when the issues arise "naturally" out of prior work and experience.

"What is my job?" Students must come to know that their job is different. It is not to sit passively and await instruction or answers, or only to say whatever pops into their mind. Their job is to come to a common and an individual understanding of what something means. In the broadest sense, the goal is to make sense of a 'text' -- be the text a book, a story heard, a video, or a shared experience; and to bring the whole

group along on the quest for meaning as much as possible – what we like to call *Intellectual Outward Bound*. This student freedom and responsibility takes some getting used to. Habits and expectations run deep: students will typically glance toward the teacher during each lull, to find out the next “move” in the conversation (even if the teacher has worked hard to shed the mantle of “traffic cop” and authority). A key understanding occurs when a student realizes that the seminar is only as engaging and effective as what each person puts into it.

Many teachers report happily that good seminars often improve student preparation for class and decrease student absence. A good seminar often becomes as engaging and compelling as team sports or putting on a play: the talk becomes so important that to get a later summary just won't do. Leadership and maturity often arise from surprising sources, too. Learners who may not have been effective or outgoing in a teacher-led class may well shine as seminar leaders. Alas, the opposite happens, too: seemingly bright and able students may become sadly timid and anxious when the Teacher is no longer the All-Knowing Arbiter of Truth. Be prepared, too, for losing *your* bearings as a teacher, especially at first. You may misjudge success or failure by basing your evaluation too much on your own feelings of being in or out of control of the process. Often the best seminars feel out of control as teachers shed the role of tour director; discussions that seemed to go well may only have felt that way because it was a smooth flow toward good answers. So, seek feedback from students, videotape, and student work to test your perceptions against the evidence.

Certain texts, questions, or problems lend themselves more than others to seminar work. So-called ‘great books’ are ideal for seminars, as many learn in college: they are ‘great’ precisely because they raise as many questions as they answer; we project different meanings into the text, leading to lively argument; and they focus on ‘big idea’ questions. Organizing a seminar around provocative “essential” questions and texts that offer different compelling perspectives on those questions is thus an effective entry point: students come to see quickly that the text is a means to an end, that the ideas come to life in a free-wheeling dialogue, and that a good text profits from re-reading and re-thinking.

The seminar can be as loose or structured as a facilitator desires. But with pre-college students, being clear about the forms and rituals of seminar is useful, especially at first, since a new form and function is being tried out. Deliberate training in the new roles is therefore vital. Below, the reader will find examples of how more explicit structures -- i.e. roles, rules, and relationships -- can be designed to make the conversation more deliberately productive and focused. (A full set of seminar rubrics is available in a separate handout). But no set of rules can substitute for your sound judgment, good ears and eyes, and tact. For, at bottom, the seminar is co-operative learning at its best: finding whatever ways we can to insure that everyone feels included and competent as a seminar member.

SEMINAR DESIGN & TACTICS

1. FACILITATING QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED AT OPPORTUNE TIMES – AND LEARNED BY STUDENTS

The questions below are not just your facilitative “moves”. Students should be trained to use these strategies, to see them as their moves, on the field of play, as it were. These vital roles involve some unnatural habits. Make them explicit; get everyone to be meta-cognitive about them, even if it seems awkward at first. Try assigning the roles for a period of time to different students. Of course, there needs to be a *modeling* of them, *feedback* about their use, and *incentives* for using them if they are to “stick.”

- a. What question are we trying to answer? Why?
- b. Could you give me an example or a metaphor to explain that?
- c. Can you find that in the text? Where does the reading support you?
- d. What are you assuming in that argument?
- e. But what about...? (That seems at odds with what we said before, what the author said here, etc.)
- f. How does this relate to... (what was said before, read last week, etc.)
- g. Do we need to modify or rephrase the question (or answer) we are working on?
- h. What do you mean by _____ (key words)?
- i. I think we are lost. Could someone tell me where we are, where we are going, help me find some "landmarks"?
- j. (To a quiet but clearly engaged member:) Bob, what do you think? (Or) Is there someone who hasn't yet spoken who might have something to say at this point?

2. ROLES TO BE PRACTICED & USED

These roles, once understood and practiced, become very useful not only in managing the seminar but in prescribing guidance for specific areas of student weakness in seminar. Thus, overly-dominant students can be assigned listening roles for 10 minutes, for example. Or, with large classes and a fair number of quiet speakers, the class can be divided in half (with the talkative ones in one group). While one half conducts the discussion, the other half can take on listening roles, etc.

As Speaker

Explorer Let's try a new path or perspective...

Gadfly Everyone seems to be too easily content with saying...

Sherlock Holmes I think we have overlooked an important clue (comment/bit of text)..

Librarian Here's a passage in the text that supports your point...

Matchmaker What you are saying is a lot like what Sue said earlier...

Judge Judy Let's see what the argument is between you two and try to settle it...

Will Rogers Let's find a way to make her/his seemingly odd/unpleasant/ incorrect comment more plausible or helpful...

As Listener

Journalist Summarize the important points briefly

Map-maker Make a visual chart of paths and terrain covered in the conversation, noting major "landmarks" and "twists and turns"

Shadow Listen to and observe one person for a fixed period of time, noting their comments and behavior (effective in large classes and for listening skill practice)

Referee Judge which "moves" in the discussion seem warranted or unwarranted (in terms of content) and exemplary of or outside the "rules" of good seminar behavior (in terms of process)

Coach Diagnose the overall "play" and propose some new ones, improvements in performance, strategies, etc.

How did you feel about today's discussion?

Class' treatment of issues						
superficial	1	2	3	4	5	thorough & deep
Quantity of your own participation, as compared with your usual performance						
low	1	2	3	4	5	high
Quality of your own participation						
poor	1	2	3	4	5	excellent
Your own interest in the conversation						
low	1	2	3	4	5	high
The class' interest, reflected in intensity of conversation and % of participation						
low	1	2	3	4	5	high
Complexity of discussion						
low	1	2	3	4	5	high
Degree of your own understanding of material						
lost & confused understanding	1	2	3	4	5	full
Facilitator's Success						
too much input (forgot role?)	1	2	3	4	5	too little input
too much control	1	2	3	4	5	too little control
showed great	1	2	3	4	5	showed too little respect respect for others

Comments (including your view as to the high and low points):

¹ A modification of a claim by Eva Brann in *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*.

² See the writings of Mortimer Adler on this subject. See, for example, *The Paideia Proposal* and *How To Talk, How to Listen*.