

# SOCRATIC SEMINARS: GUIDELINES FOR FACILITATION & ASSESSMENT

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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.<sup>1</sup>

Good seminar participants realize that a seminar rarely ends in definite answers and official positions.... With only a little encouragement and training, students will adopt the attitude that a good seminar initiates a rich relationship with a text, it doesn't close it.<sup>2</sup>

## *What is a seminar?*

A Seminar is a question-focused, student-led, and teacher facilitated discussion, based on appropriate texts. Sometimes we call this activity a “Socratic Seminar” - after Socrates, well-known for his open-ended dialogues. Sometimes we call it a “class discussion” to signal that the *class* will discuss, with the teacher playing a moderator role. Whatever we call it, a seminar is different from a talk/recitation/ lecture-with-discussion. As the opening quotations suggest, a seminar has a different *purpose* than direct instruction: the goal is not acquisition of knowledge via the expert; the aim is student understanding via active thinking out loud and probing of ideas by all students.

Thus, teacher and students play different roles than normal. A different set of norms and expectations for all parties must therefore be made explicit, taught, learned, practiced, and acted upon.

*What a seminar isn't.* A seminar is not a debate: “competitive dialogue” is a contradiction in terms. Nor is it “canned” or rehearsed student speaking (like the 19th century ‘recitation’.) A seminar is not a mere one-shot off-the-top-of-one’s-head sharing of a belief or opinion (as if, having said their piece, students signal that their thinking is over.) A

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<sup>1</sup> Eva Brann in *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*.

<sup>2</sup> Roberts & Billings, p. 53 *The Paideia Classroom: Teaching for Understanding*.

seminar is most definitely not a roundabout way of arriving at the teacher's prized understandings of what a text, event, or data "really" means.

Rather, the seminar aims at *sustained* inquiry and meaning making by students. They must theorize and test ideas; they must try to figure out what a confusing text means. The aim is not acquisition of the expert's understanding. Rather, the aim is for students to "play the game" the expert plays, i.e. working to improve at making defensible and systematic interpretations, supported by the text, by logic, and by experience. These student understandings (subject to change!) are arrived at through an open-minded sharing and testing.

As the opening quotes and reference to "playing the game" also suggest, a seminar is more like what student athletes and artists do rather than what happens in a typical class where typical instruction occurs. The aim is for students to be pro-active and strategic users of knowledge and skill; it is contrary to seminar if students passively wait for the teacher to make every next "move" in the seminar. Rather, the students must learn to take on teacher "moves": asking questions of one another, pointing out inconsistencies in what has been said at times, etc. The teacher is a facilitator of student playing; a coach who, after brief instruction, retreats to the sideline to observe and listen as students learn from playing the game of collaborative and personal inquiry. Before and after the "playing" – like any coach – the teacher often provides training in the skills and strategies of Seminar, and provides specific feedback and remediation to the class and to individuals, based on their performance.

In short, Seminar is not a more conversational and lively form of direct instruction. Rather, it is the students' opportunity to learn to apply their learning and think things through, together, in public; to figure out as much as possible on their own what the *issues* and underlying questions are, what a text means, and to what extent a text has something important to say. It is the students' opportunity to get better at self-regulated inquiry, with increasing freedom from teacher cues, prompts, and scaffold.

The student not only learns more about an idea or text, the student learns how to ask about, think about, and discuss it. The student gains practice in thinking out loud, asking questions, pursuing a line of inquiry, listening for insights in the comments of others, proposing alternative paths of conversation, and insuring that all voices are heard. In short,

it becomes the students' *opportunity* to engage in meaningful talk, and their *responsibility* to develop habits and skills that are typically reserved for the teacher only.

*The goal and roles of the teacher-as-facilitator*

As for the teacher, the challenge is to coach students in learning the “moves” of good discussion: how to move the talk beyond superficial, unconnected, and individual talk; toward sustained, thought-provoking, collaborative, and ultimately illuminating dialogue.

The teacher may well have to learn and practice new habits, therefore. The teacher's three major facilitative roles initially are to

- 1) pose a question for discussion, and ensure that students are prepared to discuss it
- 2) ensure that everyone who is ready to speak speaks and is heard, and
- 3) listen for and call attention to overlooked insights, inconsistencies, or gaps in the discussion: “But, you said earlier that ‘love conquered all’. So, why does it now seem to you that things were fated to end badly in *Romeo and Juliet*?”

This third role – a role much like that of a therapist or parent – is crucial. It is vital that you make clear that the class must seek a coherent and systematic understanding of the issues and elements of text on the table. You (or any facilitator, including, later, all the students) are thus always on the lookout for inconsistencies, illogical claims, unexamined assumptions, contradictions between present and past comments, and problems that arise from comparing current understandings with previous experiences and understandings.

In the best seminars, the teacher becomes increasingly obsolete in this role – or, rather, the teacher is just one member of the seminar, not the aggressive traffic cop and tour guide. Long-term progress in Seminar is thus like the “gradual release of responsibility” familiar to reading teachers, whereby over time students learn to master reading on their own:

- I do, you watch
- I do, you help
- You do, I help
- You do, I watch

The great challenge for the teacher, therefore, is to break long-established habits of exerting significant control over classroom talk – and to avoid speaking too much. This

requires a disciplined self-conscious effort to take on a new “coaching” approach; most of all it requires the ability to *bite your tongue*. You are a facilitator of their talk, not a chatty expert on the subject constantly sharing your wisdom. Even if you think the current strand of talk is a dead end resist the urge to say so; make note of it for later feedback. You may find to your surprise and delight that students see the problem and move on – this often happens, even with novices, when they grasp that the conversation is theirs to manage.

The seminar leader’s role is thus more like that of a friend, counselor, therapist, or parent listening: to keep the talk going, to press beyond the superficial or glib opinion, to keep the important issues alive. Most importantly, as a group leader, the teacher’s job is ensure that all voices are heard from, and that important perspectives and past strands of talk don’t get lost or ignored in the end.

Direct instruction is needed, however, in terms of modeling and explaining seminar norms and effective performance. Initially the teacher must teach students how seminar works, just as if it were a new game on the fields outside to be learned. However, once students have initially grasped the *new* purpose, routines, and norms at work, the teacher must quickly become less of a “teacher” and more like a sideline coach as students learn from “playing” how to better manage their “team” performance. In advanced seminars, the teacher becomes more like the referee.

Since the aim of a seminar is not to replace or jazz up direct instruction, it works best if discussion is either used as an “advance organizer” to focus upcoming direct instruction on a new topic; or, as meaning-making activity after direct instruction and some experience with that content to consider: so, what did we learn? Why does this matter? The seminar presents students with chances to explore the meaning of the work (assignments, lessons, discrete learnings). A seminar works best when the Seminar questions arise “naturally” out of current work and experience.

#### *The students’ job and their reactions to it*

Students must of course come to know and really understand that their job is different than in most typical classroom situations. Initially, the teacher will have to make this painfully clear: “We are now in Seminar. You are the focus, not me; the point is not for me to ‘teach’ you something, but for you to get better and better at ‘discussing’ what we have been

reading and thinking about. Please put on your ‘discussion’ hats, not your ‘listen-to-the-teacher’ hats.”

Initially, many students won’t get the hang of their new roles - and may even resist them: “Mr. Wiggins, just tell us the right answer! We are not getting it.” Or, the room will be painfully quiet after you ask a question. Let them persist in the silence for awhile; look away or down at your observational notes. Let it be quiet. Wait. Keep waiting. Look away. Don’t move it along. If you must speak, remind them: “Uh, guys – it’s *your* seminar. If my question isn’t helping you get into the issues, what questions do *you* have about our topic?” Sooner or later by doing so you will help them come to understand that their job is not to wait until the teacher or someone else makes the key next move. It is up to them, just like on the soccer or softball field.

Students who are eager to use their newfound freedom to discuss may err on the other side, of course. They may say anything and everything that pops into their head, and leave it at that. When asked to explain themselves, they cannot. In your pre- and post-seminar coaching you must make clear that just as waiting for someone else to move things along is not appropriate neither is just thoughtlessly blurting out any old comment and thinking that that is all that is needed. There is a *goal* here, and the goal requires learning to control some impulses: the aim is understanding, not just saying what you have to say. Their job is first and foremost a collective responsibility: to help come to a common and an individual understanding of what something complex/puzzling/interesting might mean. Just as in sports, we don’t aimlessly kick or throw the ball; so, too in seminar, talk must be purposeful.

This student freedom and responsibility takes some getting used to. Research supports what common sense suggests: students actually resist higher-order thinking and self-responsibility. Their habits and expectations run deep: even after the norms of Seminar have been understood, most students– without realizing it – will glance toward the teacher during each lull, to wait passively for the next “move” in the conversation to be made by you (even if you have 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 pro-actively puts into it. I like to call the process and purpose intellectual Outward Bound. (*Outward Bound* is the experiential course of learning how to survive in the wilderness.)

Many teachers report happily that good seminars often improve student preparation for class and decrease student absence. A good seminar thus becomes as engaging and not-to-be-missed as a team sport or putting on a play: the discussion becomes so important that to get a later dry summary just won't do (nor is it adequate as review or preparation for assessments, in most cases). 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.

The seminar can be as formal or informal as a facilitator desires and as the setting suggests. But with pre-college students, it is vital to nail down in writing and in practice the rituals and rules of good seminar behavior. (I have provided various tools, including design tips and rubrics, below.) But no set of rules can substitute for sound judgment, good ears and eyes, and - especially - **tact**. For, at bottom, the seminar is co-operative learning at its best: finding whatever ways we can to insure that everyone feels included, increasingly competent, and increasingly important as a seminar member.

*When you feel lost or out of control*

Be prepared: you will initially feel at sea. You will feel like you are in danger of losing control not only of the content and learning but the class dynamic and behavior. You may thus 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 don't at first feel good to us. It is only when we realize how unusually engaged students were and that quiet people volunteered more than usual that we begin to realize that our own feelings need to be set aside as we observe the good things taking place. On the other hand, discussions that *seemed* to go well may only have felt that way because it was a smooth flow, due to our constant guidance, toward the answers we wanted them to reach. So, seek feedback from students, videotape, and student work to test your thoughts and feelings against the evidence.

Walter Bateman, who writes on teaching at the college level, captures the spirit and feelings of this as well as anyone:

So you are actually brave enough to try one class of teaching by inquiry. You prepare for the big day. You have a problem ready to start the class. You pose that problem. You wait for an answer. Three seconds later, you begin to panic. Your hands sweat. The class just stares at you dumbly.

Calm down. Students need time to think. They need time to digest the very notion that you actually want them to think. They need time to figure out what the question meant and also whether they dare stick their necks out.

Wait.

Smile. Don't even glance at your wristwatch. Stare expectantly at one or two students that you normally count on to be ready. Nudge them a little with your smile.

Wait. Don't say a word. Smile expectantly.

Wait.

In two or three hours, someone will offer a tentative response. Should you be able to sneak a glance at the time, you will find that those two hours were really forty seconds.

Glory be, the student who speaks up gives the "correct" response right out of the text. In sheer gratitude you want to shout: "Good for you. That's right. I knew I could count on you."

Don't you dare. Don't you dare tell that student that the answer is right. Don't you dare deny the class the fun of thinking and deciding and judging.

Instead, you turn and lay that delight on some other student.

"Do you agree with that?"

Shock. Many students have never been asked that. Another commentary on our system.

The students will survive. You will live through it. With a bit of patience and practice, both you and the students will learn to discuss an issue, to question an assumption, to define a word, to explore alternatives, to gain the skills needed for thinking. Since you already know how to do this, your job is to learn to be quiet.<sup>3</sup>

### *What should be the 'text' of seminar?*

Certain texts, questions, or problems lend themselves more than others to Seminar work. So-called 'great books' are ideal for seminars, as many of us have learned 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 a very smart entry point: students come to see quickly that the text is in part a means to an end – keep coming back to that Essential Question.

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<sup>3</sup> Bateman (1990), *Open to Question: The Art of Teaching and Learning by Inquiry* P. 183.

But the 'text' could be a poem, fairy tale, magazine article, movie clip, or song lyric. The only requirement is that the text be sufficiently complex and ambiguous to generate alternative points of view as to its meaning and value. In addition, of course, the text should relate to the topic/lessons/Standards at the heart of the unit of study in which it occurs.

The following resources can take you much more deeply into the purposes, logistics, techniques, and tools of Seminar.

### **Books on Socratic Seminar**

*Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in Middle and High School.* Matt Copeland. Stenhouse. 2005.

*The Paideia Classroom: Teaching for Understanding.* Terry Roberts and Linda Billings. Eye on Education. 1999.

### **Socratic Seminar Internet resources**

<http://www.greece.k12.ny.us/instruction/ela/SocraticSeminars/overview.htm>  
<http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/practice/instruction/theories/miscideas/socratic/>  
<http://www.socraticseminars.com/education/whatare.html>  
<http://www.socraticseminars.com/education/bibliography.html>  
<http://www.touchstones.org/>  
[http://gallery.carnegiefoundation.org/collections/castl\\_k12/yhutchinson/socraticseminar.html](http://gallery.carnegiefoundation.org/collections/castl_k12/yhutchinson/socraticseminar.html)  
<http://www.huffenglish.com/?p=342>  
[http://www.liketoread.com/struct\\_talk\\_seminars.php](http://www.liketoread.com/struct_talk_seminars.php)  
[http://www.studyguide.org/socratic\\_seminar.htm](http://www.studyguide.org/socratic_seminar.htm)  
<http://www.ncsu.edu/literacyjunction/html/tutorialsocratic.html>  
  
<http://www.webenglishteacher.com/socratic.html>  
  
[http://www.saskschools.ca/curr\\_content/bestpractice/socratic/process.html](http://www.saskschools.ca/curr_content/bestpractice/socratic/process.html)  
  
<https://secure.layingthefoundation.org/english/links/englishwebsites.asp>  
  
<http://www.bright.net/~dlackey/2004/10/socratic-seminar.html>

## ***SEMINAR DESIGN & “MOVES”***

### **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 coached in what these ‘moves’ are, why they are useful, and how to get better at them (via exercises and feedback). Try assigning the roles at different times to different students – especially if a student is either too dominating or too timid. Of course, there needs to be a *modeling* of them, *coaching* in how to use them, *feedback* about their use, and *opportunities* 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 about [ ] when you say that?
- 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 we said before, read last week, etc.)
- g. Might we need to rephrase the question (or answer)?
- 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. FACILITATOR ROLES

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...

*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 that seemingly odd comment more plausible...

### **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.

