

Socratic Seminar (Questioning) Activity

Grade Level: All

Time: 30 min.

Purpose: This activity provides students with an opportunity to discuss issues at a higher-order thinking level. It enlarges their understanding of ideas, values, and issues. It works well to discuss timeless issues, hypothetical situations or school or community concerns.

Procedure:

- 1) Select a topic that you want students to understand more thoroughly. It works well to select a reading the students can prepare prior to the seminar.
- 2) Have the team (or a group of 12-15 students if the entire class is one team) sit in a circle. If small groups are not possible, students could take turns sitting in the “inner circle” that is observed by the “outer circle” of students.
- 3) Explain the rules for the discussion:
 - a. Students speak directly to each other (one at a time)—there is no discussion leader.
 - b. They do not have to raise their hands if they can take turns without it.
 - c. You can try using a “talking piece”—something a speaker must be holding to have the floor.
 - d. Students will be asked interpretive questions that do not have a right or wrong response, but will instead invite thought and expression.
 - e. Students should provide evidence for each statement they make—and identify its source (personal experience, reading, etc.).
 - f. Students can disagree with others in a respectful manner.
 - g. If students do not appear to be listening appropriately, you can have them repeat the previous contributor’s comments before making their own.
 - h. Students should ask each other follow up questions or new questions that arise in the discussion.
 - i. Each student should participate. You may want to start the discussion with a Round Robin so that each student has an initial opportunity to participate.
- 4) After the ground rules are laid, pose an open-ended question to the group that you want them to think about thoroughly. Some example questions include:
 - a. How is _____ similar to [another subject we’ve discussed]?
 - b. What do you think another point of view would be on this issue?
 - c. Why do you think _____ occurred? What could have prevented it?
 - d. What did your reading say about _____ (Core Concept)?
 - e. What is the logic behind _____’s point of view?

- 5) Allow plenty of wait time for the students to begin responding. If no one starts the discussion, you can allow them to talk to another person to come up with some ideas.
- 6) Allow time for reflection at the conclusion of the seminar. Discuss ways to make it better the next time.

Adapted from Susan Winebrenner, Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom (2001) at 139 and Patricia Weiss & Rita Kaplan, The Paideia Handbook, Augsburg College, Mpls. (2001).