Something to Give …

Socratic Seminar in the English Classroom

Ruth Aman explains and explores the use of Socratic seminar to promote genuine dialogue about texts in the English classroom, and argues that it can be particularly effective with students who have not always been successful in engaging with English.

"I believed that introducing Socratic seminar to my students could provide a deeper engagement with literature."

Although many educators aspire to dialogic classrooms – that is to say spaces where students are engaged in sustained talk leading to co-construction of knowledge (Alexander, 2006) – in fact, for many students, for much of the time, student-sanctioned classroom talk often appears to be utilised to expose students' lack of knowledge – and scripted questions, controlling discussions, ignoring off-topic comments, and evaluating students are more frequently used (Cazden 2001; Mehan 1979; Nystrand 1997).

With this context in mind, I wish in this article to explore ways in which Socratic seminar – a specific way of promoting student dialogue – might be an antidote to these monolingual spaces.

How did I get here?

While living in the USA I taught English at a community college. Community colleges, similar to FE colleges in the UK, have been well-documented as places where *'racial/ethnic minorities, low-income students, first-generation college students, adult learners, and recent immigrants'* (Malcolm, 2010, p. 19) study. They serve population groups that, historically, have been underserved by post-compulsory education.

A broad variety of skill levels characterise community college students. I taught a class that were categorized as a 'Basic English' class. Basic college classes are usually defined as *'postsecondary level [courses] ...whose content is generally considered 'pre-college''* (Shaw, 2000, p. 194). The intention of such courses is to bring students *'who arrive unprepared for college' ... up to an adequate level'* (Bailey et al, 2010, p. 1).

Many of my students seemed to be overwhelmed by the challenges that community college reading entailed. Similar to Levy (2011), I also noticed that after reading students often appeared to be *'confused,'* and waited for me to tell them what the text was about (p.58). This post-reading reluctance was in contrast with the students' willingness to engage in *'non-academic'* class discussion. I wanted to find a space where these students could utilise their own knowledge and experiences to construct meaning and reflect upon their own thinking.

Introducing Socratic seminar

Although it is debatable whether Socrates is the source of contemporary Socratic practice (Schneider 2013), there is agreement that Socratic practice is concerned with reflective and critical thinking (Mintz 2009).

Socratic seminar, sometimes called 'shared inquiry', 'Socratic dialogue', or 'Harkness discussion', is concerned with students constructing meaning through dialogue. I am defining 'dialogue' as discussion used with the intention of developing real and collaborative understanding (Bruer 1994; Moffett 1968; Tannen 2007; Wells 2000) through the co construction of knowledge (John-Steiner & Teresa 2000), not seeking consensus (Matusov & Duyke 2009; Nikulin 2006), and not necessarily having a *'final end-point'* (Matusov & Duyke, 85).

Why I believe in Socratic seminar

I embrace the research that posits that literacy is socially situated (Gee, 1999). I also noticed that, while older youth and adolescent readers rarely have problems with reading words, they *'are more likely to struggle with understanding needed vocabulary, background, or organization of arguments in the texts they encounter'* (Greenleaf, C. L., & Hinchman, K. (2009), p.5). I was also concerned that the labelling of readers can impact students' attitudes towards reading (Alvemann, 2001; Gee, 1996).

These ideas resulted in me being drawn to theories around student empowerment. Such theories are concerned with student participation and collaboration *'on an identified outcome or common goal'* (Henry, Castek, O'Byrne, & Zawilinski, L, 2012, p. 280). These types of activities have been found to result in intrinsic motivation (Rosow, 1989; Seifert, 2004; Henry et al 2012). Furthermore, such empowerment helps students *'to transform identities they may have constructed as non-readers into new identities as more capable readers and learners'* (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009, p.6). For these reasons, I believed that introducing Socratic seminar to my students could potentially provide opportunities for them to have a deeper engagement with the literature.

Studies have also shown that talk seems to both aid thinking and promote understanding (Harman, 1991; Vygotsky, 1962). From a sociocultural perspective, talking is valuable because different interpretations are an inevitable product of any social encounter (Billett, 1998). Vygotsky's (1980) theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is *'the distance between actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'* (p. 86) further highlights the value of discussing texts.

Finally, there are strategies that De Valenzuela (2006) refers to as *'instructional conversation'* (p. 305) that effective teachers employ. These include asking questions, comments that encourage reflection, and engagement in dialogue. Such strategies can be employed by the students themselves within the Socratic seminar. These 'instructional conversations' promote students to examine, more closely, the literary texts they are discussing and to encourage one another to clarify their thinking (Beaufort, 2000; Ding, 6 2008).

The structure of Socratic seminar, and its principles, promote student collaboration. Various studies have praised collaborative learning; the theory is that, when in a group with similarly skilled individuals, students *'are less afraid of risking errors'* (Bruffe, 1989, p. 219). Unlike traditional class discussions whereby the individual student stands alone, in Socratic seminar the students are part of a group who are trying to understand together. Peer-feedback, in Socratic seminar that commends collaborative behaviour over competitive discussion, further encourages collaboration.

So, what actually happens?

Since Socratic seminar varies widely, I will provide an overview of how I implement Socratic seminar with my students.

Introductory workshop

I present the principles of Socratic seminar to students via a workshop that I have adapted from Jane Dicker's work. Dicker drew her inspiration for these principles from studies concerned with promoting empathy and compassion in the classroom (Aronson, 2002; Seppala, Rossomando and Doty, 2013; Leiberg, Klimecki, and Singer, 2011).

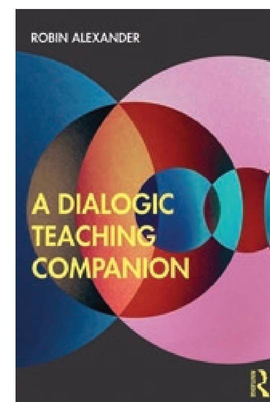
In the workshop, students are asked to discuss the success of a famous athlete and the various factors that have enable that success, drawing out the importance of support networks and collaboration. This work introduces the idea that even individual success is a collaborative effort.

Next, students are encouraged to recognise the difference between debate and dialogue by comparing words that describe debate with words that describe collaborative talk. Then, students are introduced to the principles of Socratic seminar (see panel on the next page) which they are asked to read aloud.

Following this reading, students are asked to write down the principles that particularly resonated with them. The students share their chosen principles and, where appropriate, I explain them. For example, I would explain principle nine – 'Genuine open-ended questions benefit all' – by explaining that a genuine question is a question where the questioner does not already know the answer, but rather is trying to understand something better.

Finally, students are asked to come up with a word or phrase that they believe best summarises the principles of Socratic seminar. We discuss these different interpretations and any overlapping themes.

The focus of the workshop is twofold. Firstly it promotes an understanding that even individual success is a collaborative effort, and secondly it encourages recognition that debate and dialogue are different types of talk. Focusing upon Socratic seminar principles, before even explaining the practicalities of the seminar, helps the students to be particularly mindful of their interactions during Socratic seminar.



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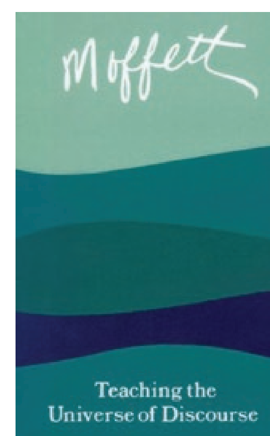


The Principles of Socratic Seminar

1. Changing your mind can be a sign of mental flexibility- the beginning of wisdom
2. Everyone has value
3. Everyone has a unique perspective- this is welcome
4. Everyone has a right to speak
5. Everyone has a right to learn through listening
6. Active listening is a gift that benefits the speaker and the listener
7. Doubt leading to genuine questioning is key to learning
8. Teamwork is the beginning of development
9. Genuine open-ended questions may benefit all
10. In Socratic seminar disagreement is welcome
11. Successful disagreement in Socratic seminar relies on respectful disagreement
12. In order to truly disagree with another, you must first fully understand their viewpoint
13. To understand another person's perspective ask them questions
14. In Socratic seminar agreement is welcome
15. Ideas come through teamwork
16. Ideas belong to everyone in the group
17. Doubt may be the beginning of wisdom
18. That which is spoke during Socratic seminar is confidential
19. Honesty is the foundation of learning
20. Socratic seminar must be conducted in a spirit of love. If conducted in a spirit of malice it is doomed to fail.

Inner and outer circle

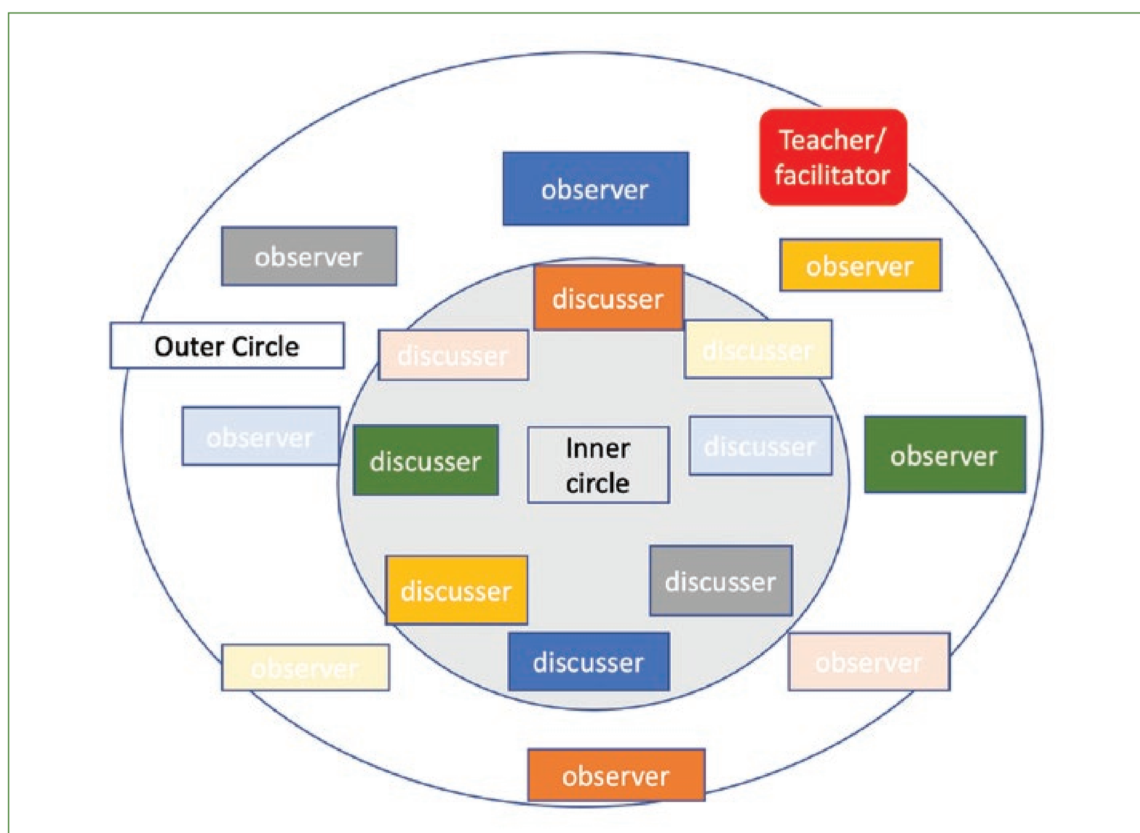
Using Copeland's model of Socratic seminar, I divide the students into two groups of equal size (Copeland, 2005). One group (the inner circle) will engage in discussion first while the other group (the outer circle) will observe before being given the opportunity to become the discussing group. Sometimes, I deliberately put the more publicly verbal students in one group and those students who have shown less inclination to speak up in class in another group. Putting these quieter students, who Tannen refers to as exhibiting a '*high-considerateness style*' (Tannen, 2007, p183), into one group sometimes results in them taking a more active verbal role as they may find it easier to enter into the discussion with students who exhibit a similar speaking style.

The outer circle students are each assigned someone in the discussion group to observe and make notes on. After the discussion is over the observers provide feedback to their observee. Feedback is required to be specific; therefore, '*that was awesome*' is discouraged in favour of something like '*when you asked X to clarify what they meant by the phrase ...this was effective in promoting understanding – this was apparent because...*'

Feedback on discussion

The feedback given must refer to the principles of Socratic seminar, specifically with regards to the following behaviours: evidence of a participant's active listening, participant's verbal contributions, and participant's use of questions.

I require the outer circle to observe for these particular sets of behaviours until the majority of the students are doing them effortlessly. Once these behaviours (participant's active listening, own verbal



Socratic seminar inner and outer circles

contributions, and their use of questions) appear to have been acquired, then the class are informed of new behaviours to incorporate into the seminar. Each observer is required to provide positive feedback, an area for improvement, and another positive note (in that order). This approach ensures that there is a balance of praise and suggestions for improvement.

The feedback is to be spoken directly to the student. I also instruct the students to receive the feedback in silence, but I explain that since all feedback is subjective they are welcome to silently choose whether or not to accept the feedback that they are given. Typically, I have the students give the feedback publicly the first few times, but when I am confident that the feedback is meaningful, I sometimes have the students individually give feedback to the person that they have observed. The groups then change roles – the outer circle becomes the inner circle and *vice versa*.

During the discussion I also write detailed notes about the discussion, so that I can add to students' feedback. This is particularly helpful if one of the observer's observations is lacking details or content.

Ways of participating

While Socratic seminar provides a specific format for collaborative dialogue, there are a variety of acceptable ways in which students may participate such as: listening, asking comprehension questions, asking clarifying questions, asking hypothetical questions, quoting from the text, offering critical analysis from the text, offering their own experience, observing other students, making notes on the seminar, posing solutions, and posing suggestions.

Reflections on dialogue

As an educator, I have sometimes felt an overwhelming responsibility to make sure that things are going according to my plan. With Socratic seminar I have learned to relinquish some of that control.

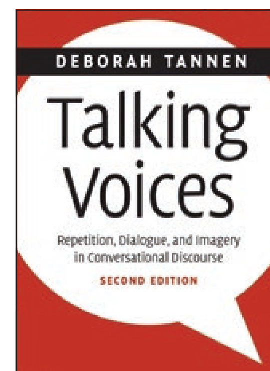
For example, sometimes there can be periods of silence; I have to refrain from filling up this silence, as this silence can be a time of productive thinking for the students. Indeed, the importance of listening, specifically what Ratcliffe (2006) terms '*rhetorical listening*', which is listening with an openness to understanding different perspectives, cannot be overstated.

At other times I find that I have to control my urge to speed the discussion along when I am hearing repetitions; while these recapping of ideas may appear, to me, to be redundant, they may be helpful reinforcements for the group.

Occasionally a student does not speak when they are a member of the inner circle. Sometimes, I privately encourage these students to try to find a way to verbally participate in the next seminar. I also put the onus of a successful dialogue upon the group, rather than on the individual; therefore, I offer praise to a group if I notice that they have been very inclusive to all members and I offer suggestions to a group if there are only a few people who dominate the discussion. If I notice that someone seems to be trying to speak in the seminar I invite them to contribute.

During the seminar, I redirect students to adhere to the principles of Socratic seminar if they seem to be deviating from them. So, for example, if a student seems to be monopolising the discussion, I remind the group of the principle that '*everyone has a right to speak*.' If this does not help to democratise the discussion, I ask students to use the '*three then me*' strategy, which is when students wait for three other people to speak before they speak again. This technique is helpful in situations where students have not found a natural way to share the discussion space.

Reminding students that they are to engage in rhetorical listening and the use of genuine open-ended questions helps to ensure dialogic discussions. The focus on 'genuine open-ended' questions, as opposed to other types of questions such as rhetorical questions and closed questions, seems to be key to deeper thinking and dialogue. When students begin to use 'genuine open-ended' questions the seminar switches from simply summarising the text or subject to a deeper exploration of the text. With that said often the non-dialogic discussion is a starting place to lead to dialogue.



Student experiences and teacher observations

There are three significant ways in which I have found that the use of Socratic seminar impacted my classroom – through the culture of the classroom, the ways in which students engage with texts, and the types of writing that occur in response to a seminar.

During one semester, after a course was over, I interviewed students about their experiences in Socratic seminar. One of my students described her experiences of Socratic seminar this way:

> *Doing Socratic seminar was actually good in a way because it teaches us how to have a conversation, without having an argument at the end of it. It just builds on, it lets people find out more about the passage together than just by yourself.*

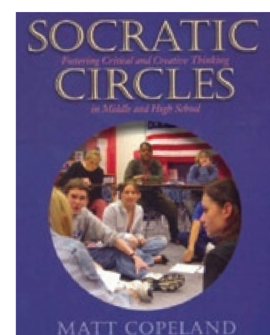
> "Socratic seminar impacted my classroom in three significant ways – the culture of the classroom, the ways in which students engage with texts, and the types of writing that occur in response to a seminar."

Another student who was usually verbally reticent in other non-Socratic seminar class discussions, said: '*In Socratic seminar I think it is more easy to talk out, because we are all on one topic of the same idea.*' This suggests, just as Navratilova's 2020 study found, that given '*favourable circumstances*' even students who have '*low achievement and a weak academic identity are able to speak extensively*' (Sedova and Navratilova, p. 710). A different student contrasted Socratic seminar with lecture, explaining:

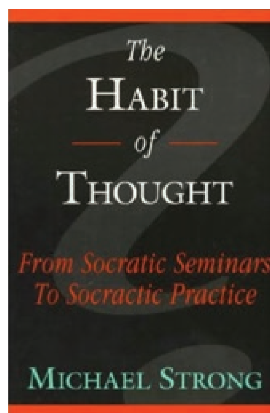
> *Because if the teacher is just putting something on the board and just talking, like and not engaging with their students, it is like nothing done ... We'll talk about it in the Socratic seminar, so I got more out of it, and my understanding of the story or the passage got better.*

Additionally, several students explained that involvement in Socratic seminar helped them connect with their classmates differently. One student suggested that Socratic seminar was a safe space for discussion. She explained:

> *'Me and some students don't really get along in class, but when we were in the circle, we all somehow talked to each other and give our opinions.'*



"As I observe students in Socratic seminar, I witness students collaborate, co-construct knowledge, appreciate different perspectives, and accept non consensus. Much of this is achieved by students asking genuine questions, deliberately and actively listening to one another, and maintaining an atmosphere of mutual respect of one another."



Others saw it as a space where they could develop friendships and get to know one another.

Several students commented on the ways in which the instructor's role as facilitator, rather than as the discussion controller, meant that they felt the onus was upon them. One student said that on the days he had Socratic seminar he would think:

> *'OK I know we gonna do the Socratic seminar today, so let me start putting some ideas down so when we sit down in the middle, I have something to give.'*

Another student explored the contrast between *'pseudo-open questions'* (Gibbons, 2015, 162) and what happened in Socratic seminar:

> *So, in Socratic seminar everybody in the group doesn't know what the answer is, it is not like the teacher knows, so she is just waiting for her students to get to the right answer so she can explain it. In Socratic seminar nobody knows, everybody is kinda on the same page when it comes to reading the passage or reading the story, so you have to figure it out yourself, so you have to look back to the passage, you don't have the teacher to tell you, that's wrong that's wrong, that's wrong, this is right.*

All the students that I interviewed mentioned that they had found Socratic seminar helpful in promoting their understanding of the texts we had read. Several students specifically talked about their involvement in Socratic seminar leading to closer and more frequent re-readings of the text; *'we would go back to the story and re-read it, explain it to them.'*

Some students mentioned that listening to that variety of perspectives was helpful:

> *'It helped me to understand it a little better, 'cos I heard other people opinions about how they see the story, so I see different stories from a different point of view.' ... 'Everybody else looked at the passages differently—so getting a different response from everyone helped me to understand it more.'*

And finally ...

As I observe students in Socratic seminar, I witness students: collaborate, co construct knowledge, appreciate different perspectives, and accept non-consensus. Much of this is achieved by students asking genuine questions, deliberately and actively listening to one another, and maintaining an atmosphere of mutual respect of one another.

Echoing Strong's sentiment that Socratic seminars *'are often most liberating for students for students who have not been successful in traditional school situations'* (39), I would add that groups, such as basic level community college students, that have long been served with a remedial education with an emphasis on *'drills and practice'* (Grubb 52), thrive when presented with opportunities that have long been granted to so called 'advanced'-level students.

These practices that we, as educators, believe promote higher order critical thinking skills can indeed promote such thinking skills in all students; regardless of how they may have been categorised by the institution that they attend.

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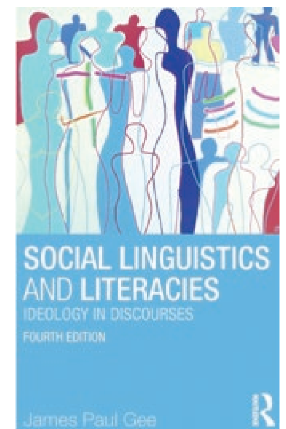

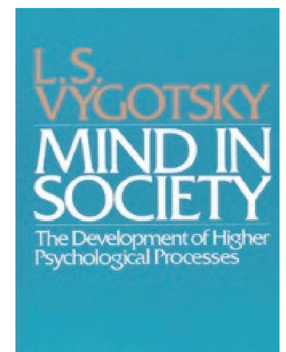

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