

## Facilitating Socratic Seminars

*“A Paideia Seminar is a collaborative, intellectual dialogue facilitated by open-ended questions about a text.”*

1. The basic “life-cycle” of a Socratic seminar is to:
  1. select relevant text,
  2. distribute it to the class,
  3. assign a careful reading and a pre-seminar assignment or activity,
  4. check for completion of the assignment to determine who is “in” or “out” of the circle,
  5. assign any observer tasks (for those outside the circle),
  6. conduct the seminar,
  7. conduct a reflection of the seminar, and
  8. assign a follow-up task of some sort ( post-seminar activity, usually a writing).
  
2. Seminars should only be conducted in a circle or at a semi-circle to view an image as text, with each participant sitting at a desk or table with the text in hand. Name cards or tents should be used to allow students to call each other by name and a dictionary should be readily available. If your room does not accommodate a circle, trade with a colleague, use a conference room, arrange tables in a part of the library, or find some other space that allows all students to see each other. **THIS IS CRUCIAL.**
  
3. All students should be expected to participate in Socratic seminars. Seminars are one of the most democratic of classroom processes. All abilities and all histories of engagement in classroom activities have a common place in the seminar circle. Sitting in a circle, using name cards, insisting that ideas be linked back to the text, and encouraging the construction of meaning are all elements that contribute to the egalitarian nature of Socratic seminars.
  
4. Socratic seminars differ from regular classroom discussions. A seminar does not have a pre-determined destination and is not intended to “teach” some identifiable piece of content though a seminar will support depth in your standards. Rather a seminar goes where the group takes it and uses as a measure of success the **rigor** with which the ideas are pursued and developed. Seminars are a time for careful thinking about content. Teachers should NOT direct thought nor interject his own ideas. Be content with the quiet and acknowledge the luxury of being allowed to think! Do not tell students what they to think nor what they should believe. Correct misinformation, such as an incorrect statement construed as a fact, **ONLY** if another student does not rise to the occasion.

5. The actual Socratic seminar itself will be a “grade free zone”. Grade pre and post seminar activities diligently. I do believe every student should grow to regular participation. The culture in our classrooms should be one of trust whereby students know they will be “safe” to share ideas without fear of ridicule or personal attack.
6. A text should be rich in issues, ideas, and values. It should have an identifiable “voice” or “voices”. Avoid texts that you want to use to get some point across...use other discussion strategies because you will want to lead the class in a specific direction instead of where the group wants to go. Spare yourself and the class the frustration! Length is not definite: rich conversations are possible with *one sentence*, but an entire book is far too much. Try one chapter, instead.
7. A good opening question is open-ended (or allows for open-ended responses), takes the participants into the text and is something the leader has genuine curiosity. It should provoke thinking without being overly thoughtful.
8. Write on the top of each text these three questions: **where did you find that in the text, how do you know that and how does what “X” said relate to what “Y” said?**
9. Take advantage of observing other facilitators as the opportunities are built in at MHMS for refining facilitating a Socratic seminar. It is always good to sharpen one’s skills as a facilitator.
10. Conduct seminars in all classes! We should be having a seminar every 3-4 weeks. Based on the TEAM instructional model, our Paideia coached projects are perfect to meet the rubric for exceptional teaching. Standards driven, differentiated instruction, group work, built in reflections, cross-curricular, thinking and problem solving, formative assessments, multiple rubrics. Some coached projects will be large and encompass many standards, while others will be smaller, shorter. ALL coached projects will have at least one Socratic seminar.