

Description of the Socratic Seminar Format (used in EDUC3200 and EDUC3002)

The courses I teach are largely about getting students thinking about and connecting to ideas. I've found that lecture and similar "one way communication" approaches don't work terribly well toward these goals. For success, students need to take responsibility in trying to make their own sense of these ideas and make their own connections regarding what is important about the ideas.

Toward that end, I utilize a lot of Socratic seminar, a practice I started studying and using in 2015, after being dissatisfied with the level of student engagement with the ideas presented in class. More specifically, I use a method called Socratic Circles. Each class usually starts with a mini-lecture where I give some further insight and context to the reading being discussed that day - or expose students to a related topic - and most of the subsequent class time is spent "in seminar."

Here's how it works. Students come into class and pick up a playing card. Students also sign a "present and prepared" sheet that attests that they are both present and prepared for discussion; they have three passes per semester where they do not have to sign the sheet. I then use the playing cards to randomly assign students to one of two 15-or-so-person groups, the Inner Circle and the Outer Circle.

Once students gather in their group - the outer circle forming outside of the inner circle - I choose a student who has signed the Present and Prepared sheet to start us off with a question about the day's reading for discussion. The Inner Circle then has 15 or so minutes to discuss that question (and move if they'd like to a different question that anyone in the group can bring in.)

The Outer Circle's job is to pay attention to the discussion and evaluate it. Once the Inner Circle is done their time, the Outer Circle spends several minutes debriefing to the class on how they thought the Inner Circle did: were there any slow spots? did we hear from a lot of folks? were there any disrespectful comments? etc.

Once done, the groups switch and the Outer Circle now becomes the Inner Circle, and the groups' roles reverse.

There is also a variation of this where I break students into small groups of 6 or so, and give each student a 10 minute chance to throw out a discussion question and lead their group in that discussion (pictured here).

Assignments consist of journal entries (five times throughout the semester), Present and Prepared grade



(a proxy for class participation), and a Writing Intensive final paper. By the time students are done with my class, they have generally written about 35 pages of material.

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