

Using Socratic Seminars In Expeditionary Learning Classrooms

The Socratic Seminar is used in many Expeditionary Learning classrooms to promote student thinking and meaning making, and the ability to debate, use evidence, and build on one another's thinking. When well designed and implemented, the seminar provides an active role for every student, engages students in complex thinking about rich content, and teaches students discussion skills. One format for the seminar is as follows:

PROCEDURES:

- The teacher picks a significant piece of text that is related to the current learning expedition. This may be an article from a magazine, a journal, or a newspaper. It might also be a moving poem, short story, or personal memoir. The text needs to be rich with possibilities for diverse points of view.
- The teacher, or whoever is to lead the seminar, develops an open-ended, provocative question as the starting point for the seminar discussion. Again, the question should be worded to elicit differing perspectives and complex thinking.
- Students prepare for the seminar by reading the chosen piece of text in an active manner that helps them build background knowledge for participation in the discussion. The completion of the pre-seminar task is the student's "ticket" to participate in the seminar. The pre-seminar assignment could easily incorporate work on reading strategies. For example, students might be asked to read the article in advance and to "text code" by underlining important information, putting question marks by segments they wonder about, and exclamation points next to parts that surprise them.
- **Using a fishbowl:** When it is time for the seminar, students are divided into two groups. One group forms the inner circle (the "fish") that will be discussing the text. The other group forms the outer circle that will give feedback on content, contributions, and group skills.
- Each person in the outer circle is assigned to observe one of the participants in the inner circle. Criteria or a rubric for the observations should be developed in advance. At a minimum, the rubric or criteria should include:
 - Comments should make specific reference to the text.
 - Participants should use good communications skills such as eye contact, active listening, and appropriate questioning.
 - Participants should build on each other's thinking.
 - All participants should be involved and should make sure others in the group are drawn into the discussion.
- Participants in the outer circle are given a scoring sheet to be used during their observations. The sheet should include a section to show evidence for each rating.
- The seminar leader begins the discussion with the open-ended question designed to provoke inquiry and diverse perspectives. Inner circle participants may choose to move to a different question if the group agrees, or the facilitator may pose follow-up questions.
- The discussion proceeds until the seminar leader calls time. At that time, the inner group debriefs and the outer circle members report their ratings of the inner group participants.
- The seminar leader may then allow participants in the outer circle to add comments or questions they thought of while the discussion was in progress.
- The entire process should be debriefed.