



The Socratic Circle

What does Socratic mean?

The word “Socratic” comes from the name Socrates (ca. 470-399 B.C.), a Classical Greek philosopher who developed a Theory of Knowledge.

What was Socrates' Theory of Knowledge?

Socrates believed that the answers to all human questions and problems reside within us. Unfortunately, as human beings we are often unaware of the answers and solutions we possess. Socrates was convinced that the surest way to discover those answers and attain reliable knowledge was through the practice of disciplined conversation. He called this method the dialectic.

What does dialectic mean?

Dialectic is the art or practice of examining opinions or ideas logically, often by the method of question and answer, so as to determine their validity.

How did Socrates use the dialectic?

Socrates believed that through the process of dialogue, where all parties to the conversation were forced to clarify their ideas, the final outcome of the conversation would be a clear statement of what was meant. The technique appears simple but it is intensely rigorous. Socrates would feign ignorance about a subject and try to draw out from the other person his fullest possible knowledge about it. Socrates’ assumption was that by progressively correcting incomplete or inaccurate notions through discussion, one could coax the truth out of anyone.

What is a Socratic circle?

A Socratic circle (also called Socratic seminar) is a process to try to understand information by creating the dialectic in class in regards to a specific text. In a Socratic circle, participants seek deeper understanding of complex ideas in the text through thoughtful dialogue, rather than by memorizing bits of information. A Socratic Circle is not debate. The goal of this activity is to have participants work together to construct

meaning and arrive at an answer, not for one student or one group to “win the argument.”

How does a Socratic Circle work?

The ritualistic structure of a Socratic Circle is one that appears complex to participants at first, but ultimately that structure is what provides the students’ growth and ownership of the conversation. The basic procedure for a Socratic Circle is as follows:

1. On the day before a Socratic Circle is scheduled, the teacher hands out a short passage of text.
2. That night at home, students spend time reading, analyzing, and taking notes over the section of text.
3. At the beginning of class the next day, students are randomly divided into two concentric circles: an inner circle and an outer circle.
4. Students in the inner circle read the passage aloud and then engage in a discussion of the text for approximately ten minutes, while the outer circle observes the human behavior and performance of the inner circle.
5. Following this discussion of the text, the outer circle then assesses the inner circle’s performance and offers ten minutes of feedback for the inner circle.
6. Students in the inner and outer circle now exchange roles and positions within the classroom.
7. The new inner circle (the students who began in the outer circle) holds a ten-minute discussion and then receives ten minutes of feedback from the new outer circle.

Of course there are many variations to the time limits of each aspect of Socratic Circle, but maintaining the discussion-feedback-discussion-feedback pattern is essential.

The Text:

Socratic Circle texts are chosen for their richness in ideas, issues, and values and their ability to stimulate extended, thoughtful dialogue. A text can be drawn from readings in literature, history, science, math, health, and philosophy or from works of art or music. A good text raises important questions in the participants' minds, questions for which there are no right or wrong answers. At the end of a successful Socratic Circle, participants often leave with more questions than they brought with them. (This is a good thing!)

The Opening Question:

A Socratic Circle opens with a question either posed by the leader or solicited from participants. An opening question has no right answer; instead it reflects a genuine curiosity on the part of the questioner. A good opening question leads participants back to the text as they speculate, evaluate, define, and clarify the issues involved. Responses to the opening question generate new questions from the leader and participants, leading to new responses. In this way, the line of inquiry in a Socratic Circle evolves on the spot rather than being pre-determined by the leader.

The Teacher:

The teacher's role in this process is four-fold: 1) to select the text for discussion, 2) to keep the discussion of the inner circle focused and moving, 3) to direct the feedback offered by the outer circle, and 4) to assess the individual student and the group's performance.

First, selecting a quality piece of text is crucial to the success of a Circle. The text should be insightful, thought provoking, and relevant to the lives of students.

Second, teachers should strive to interrupt the discussion of the inner circle as infrequently as possible. The teacher's job is to act as a facilitator or coach for the discussion, not as the discussion's leader. For example, if the discussion begins to drift off-topic the teacher might pose a question to the group to help refocus and stimulate additional conversation. Or if the comments of one student need to be clarified or repeated for the group's understanding, the teacher should assist in that endeavor.

Third, teachers should guide the discussion of the outer circle as they provide feedback and constructive criticism for the inner circle. One of the most successful ways to accomplish this process is to simply go around the circle and ask for initial observations. Once each student has offered an observation, the teacher can highlight particular points made and ask the group to brainstorm/predict solutions to any obstacle or problems noted following the cycle of reflective learning.

Fourth, the teacher should assess each individual student and the group's performance as a whole in some manner, whether formally or informally. The teacher may use a rubric and/or take on the task of scorekeeper or mapmaker (see below) but should also offer students verbal feedback at the conclusion of the discussion.

The Leader:

Sometimes the leader is the teacher, oftentimes it is not. In a Socratic Circle, the leader plays a dual role as leader and participant. The leader consciously demonstrates habits of mind that lead to a thoughtful exploration of the ideas in the text by keeping the discussion focused on the text, asking follow-up questions, helping participants clarify their positions when arguments become confused, and involving reluctant participants while restraining their more vocal peers.

As a participant, the leader actively engages in the group's exploration of the text. To do this effectively, the leader must know the text well enough to anticipate varied interpretations and recognize important possibilities in each. The leader must also be patient enough to allow participants' understandings to evolve and be willing to help participants explore non-traditional insights and unexpected interpretations.

Assuming this dual role of leader and participant is easier if the opening question is one that truly interests the leader as well as the participants. Oftentimes, the role of the leader will move between participants within a group quite frequently and naturally.

The Participants:

In a Socratic Circle, participants carry the burden of responsibility for the quality of the seminar. Good seminars occur when participants study the text closely in advance, listen actively, share their ideas and questions in response to the ideas and questions of

others, and search for evidence in the text to support their ideas. Eventually, when participants realize that the leader is not looking for right answers but is encouraging them to think out loud and to exchange ideas openly, they discover the excitement of exploring important issues through shared inquiry. This excitement creates willing participants, eager to examine ideas in a rigorous, thoughtful manner.

10 Suggestions for Participants in a Socratic Circle

1. Refer to the text when needed during the discussion. This is not a test of memory. You are not "learning a subject"; your goal is to understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in the text.
2. Do not participate if you are not prepared. This should not be a bull session.
3. Do not stay confused; ask for clarification.
4. Stick to the point currently under discussion; make notes about ideas you want to return to.
5. Don't raise hands; take turns speaking.
6. Listen carefully.
7. Speak up so that all can hear you.
8. Talk to each other, not just to the leader or teacher.
9. Discuss ideas rather than each other's opinions.
10. You are responsible for the seminar, even if you don't know it or admit it.

For more information on Socratic Circles, check out LitTunes Author Matt Copeland's book on the topic: *Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in the Middle and High School*.

For the Student:**A Response to the Idea of a Socratic Circle**

Your Name _____

Date _____

For tomorrow you need to read and interact with the previous explanation of the Socratic Circle by marking your questions and reactions in the margin next to the text. Some people think of this as having a dialogue or conversation with the actual words on the page. It is extremely effective to use different colors to mark different ideas in order to organize your thoughts. Things you should consider doing include:

-  circling and then looking up any vocabulary words that you do not know
-  underlining key phrases
-  keeping track of the story or idea as it unfolds
-  noting word patterns, repetitions, or anything that strikes as confusing or important
-  writing down questions