**How to Create and Use Socratic Seminars**

**Definition of Socratic Seminar**

* A scholarly discussion of an essential question in which student arguments are shared, proven, refuted, and refined through dialogue and use of evidence
* If more than fifteen students, the fishbowl format for Socratic seminars should be used.
  + Teacher or seminar leader facilitates the discussion
  + Half the class (seated in an inner circle) participates in the discussion at one time
  + Other half of the class (seated in an outer circle) act as observers and coaches
  + All students participate in a role

**Purpose of Socratic Seminars**

Participants engage in an essential question and gain deeper understanding of laws, ideas, issues, values, and/or principles presented in a text(s) through rigorous and thoughtful dialogue; reading, speaking and listening goals

**Advantages of Socratic Seminars**

* Provides opportunities for critical readings of texts and application of text-based evidence
* Teaches respect for diverse ideas, people, and practices
* Enhances students' knowledge and research base
* Creates a community of inquiry
* Develops critical thinking, problem solving, speaking, and listening skills
* Maximizes student participation
* Encourages divergent thinking

**Steps for Socratic Seminars**

**Preparation:**

* Teacher selects an appropriately complex text, rich in ideas that promote thinking and discussion
  + All students will read the text prior to the discussion.
* Teacher develops the essential question (and follow-up questions) for the discussion.
  + Text-based; open-ended; discussion promoting questions
* Prior to the seminar, students will record the essential question, develop their answer, and identify evidence for the answer

**Pre-Conference**:

* Teacher will determine students’ roles
  + Consideration of students’ thinking, listening, speaking, and reading skills
* Just before the seminar, each participant and his/her coach will meet for a pre-conference to discuss the participant's goals for the discussion.

**Seminar:**

* Students sit in one of two circles (inner circle for participants, outer circle for coaches).
* Teacher/leader poses the essential or opening question.
* The teacher/leader may need to ask follow up questions to lead the participants to greater understanding of the text.
* Students respond to the question orally or in writing.
* Teacher/leader facilitates the seminar discussion by guiding students to a deeper and clarified consideration of the ideas of the text, a respect for varying points of view, and adherence to and respect for the seminar process.
* Students cite evidence from the text, ask questions, speak, listen, make connections, and add insight or new knowledge to discuss their point of view in regards to the opening question.
* Teacher/leader takes notes for evaluative purposes but provides no verbal or nonverbal feedback that either affirms or challenges what the students say.  The teacher/leader may ask follow-up questions; however, teacher questions are used sparingly and deliberately.
* When satisfied that the opening question has been thoroughly explored, the teacher/leader asks one or more additional questions to examine central points of the text.
* Students may pose new questions when the discussion is exhausted. New questions posed must relate to students’ ideas and contributions in response to the initial essential question.
* Once the text has been explored thoroughly the teacher/leader may ask a closing question.
* The teacher/leader will thank students for their participation and summarize the main ideas and concepts examined during the discussion.
* After the discussion, the coaches/leaders provide feedback

**Rules and Roles for Socratic Seminars**

**The Participants:**

* May only participate in the discussion if they have read the selection
* Must support their arguments with evidence from the text
* May speak at any time during the seminar with respect for the other participants
* May refer to other works the class has read
* May write notes to themselves during the discussion
* May ask relevant questions of other participants

**The Coaches:**

* Must evaluate the participant's performance during the seminar
* Must provide oral and written feedback to the participant after the seminar
* May not speak to their participants during the seminar
* May not speak to other participants or coaches at any time

**The Teacher/Leader:**

* Must provide adequate "think time" for students to respond appropriately
* Can only ask questions; cannot state his or her opinions or interpretations
* Must require participants to support their arguments with evidence from the text
* Must encourage participants to agree and disagree for substantial reasons
* May record the number and quality of participant responses

**Management Tips for Socratic Seminars**

* First seminar plan about 30 minutes; subsequent seminars might be 45-50 minutes
* Share rules, expectations, and criteria for evaluation with students prior to the seminar
* Select students for inner and outer circles carefully to prevent off-task behaviors
* Distribute an equal number of tokens or “talking chips” to all participants; require participants to use all their tokens or chips prior to the end of the discussion
* Eliminate the outer circle when using Socratic Seminars in classes of fifteen students or less
* Roles might include: speaker, coach, general evaluator, timekeeper, evidence counter, transition keeper, quote tracker, comment counter, big board note-taker