

Socratic Circle as a discussion format

A fully student-led discussion to cultivate understanding and listening skills

What is the main idea of SC?

Socratic Circle is primarily a student-led discussion centred around a single text. It implies preparation from the students' side, active participation in the discussion, giving feedback to peers, self-assessing, and lastly reflecting on own participation.

The teacher's role is principally in conveying the rules of the discussion, selecting thought-provoking text, and creating a container/safe environment for the discussion to unfold. As such tutors take the observer's role, and let the students resolve any questions that emerge. *This might be challenging for teachers, but the successful Socratic Circle implies some degree of resigning from regulating or directing the discussion and trusting students' ability to reach depth through questioning each other.*

What is new in SC?

- The discussion is fully student-led;
- Emphasis is put on a slow dialogue, as opposed to speedy debate;
- Skills such as deep thinking and reflection are nurtured;
- Students are rewarded for compassionate and active listening;
- The traditional roles of teacher-student interaction are adapted;
- Grading is a combination of teachers, peer and self-assessment.

Why such a format?

Throughout my experience of being a teaching assistant (tutor at various bachelor programs) I have observed different types of students; some silent, who prefer not to engage in class discussions, others active and outspoken, always eager to voice their own opinion. I have employed various forms of activation and formats of discussion and debates. Through my observation (that is anecdotal evidence, nonetheless an insightful source of reflection to me) – was the absence of good listening skills. Students in my groups were often outstanding in arguing, but mostly in advancing their own views, as opposed to truly listening, understanding, questioning each other, and thereby reaching greater depth in the discussions.

Moreover, I observed that in-class discussions seemed to never challenge the status quo, never leave a certain framework of accepted ideas, and even though rhetoric, speaking, and arguing skills were excellent, the students seemed trapped in their own assumptions and views. It seemed that debating was a skill that students performed very well, regardless of the content that was debated. I realized, that my students were vigorously trained in debating but drastically lacked listening skills.

I made it in an undertaking to create a safe space for students where they would have been encouraged to listen to each other, not to immediately counterargue, but to first understand, and then question. This problem led me to research various formats of having student-led discussions in class that empathized understanding, higher-order cognitive skills, and that transcended mere debate with pre-assigned statements to defend or refute.

In this document you will find recommendations and further sources how to set up Socratic Circles in your classroom.

Sincerely,

Lela Mosemghvdlishvili

How to introduce SC in class?

Create positive anticipation by introducing that this type of discussion is radically different from what students are commonly used during in-class discussions/debates. Emphasize that the most important in this discussion is not winning an argument, but listening and understanding each other. Through an understanding, we mean compassionately exploring what are the sources and underlying, sometimes even taken for granted assumptions that lay at the core of individual viewpoints. Socratic Circle is a dialogue, an empathetic inquiry into the wisdom of the group, rather than a debate between two polar stances when one student or one group wins over the other.

Before introducing the specific steps of the activity, it is helpful to address the following aspects:

1. What are good listening skills?
 - a. Body language and behavioural cues - discuss with students non-verbal cues which reveal that a person is an engaged listener or shows inattentiveness. *For example*, a listener appears bored, uninterested, avoids eye contact, or engages in-side activities such as doodling), as opposed to when a student while listening maintains eye contact, nods and smiles when appropriate, keeps attention and focus on the speaker.
 - b. Demonstrating empathy in listening - discuss with students when they feel that a listener is empathetic, and when they feel dismissed. *For example*, sentences such as 'I don't understand why you feel that way' sound dismissive. An empathetic inquiry would lead to the question 'why do you feel that way?'.
2. What is Socratic questioning?
 - a. Explain briefly what is the Socratic method (Socratic questioning) and how this method lays at the source of the Socratic circle.
 - b. Discuss breadth and depth of suitable questions for such discussion (for inspiration see Appendix 1).

Further readings:

Acim, R. (2018). The Socratic method of instruction: An experience with a reading comprehension course. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 8(1), 41-53

Altorf, H. M. (2019). Dialogue and discussion: Reflections on a Socratic method. Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 18(1), 60–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022216670607>

Chowning J. T. (2009). SOCRATIC SEMINARS IN SCIENCE CLASS: Providing a structured format to promote dialogue and understanding. *Science teacher (Normal, Ill.)*, 76(7), 36–41.

Questioning Cheat Sheet

Adapted from AVID Socratic Seminar Teacher Materials, Seminar Questioning Cheat Sheet, pp 8-9

Clarification Questions:

- What do you mean by _____?
- What is your main point?
- How does _____ relate to _____?
- Could you put that another way?
- What do you think is the main issue here?
- Let me see if I understand you; do you mean _____ or _____?
- Jane, would you summarize in your own words what Juan has said?... Juan, is that what you meant?
- Could you give me an example?
- Would this be an example: _____?
- Could you explain that further?
- Could you expand upon that?

Questions About the Initial Question or Issue:

- How can we find out?
- What does this question assume?
- Would _____ put the question differently?
- How could someone settle this question?
- Can we break this question down at all?
- Is the question clear? Do we understand it?
- Is this question easy or hard to answer? Why?
- Does this question ask us to evaluate something?
- Do we all agree that this is the question?
- To answer this question, what question would we have to answer first?
- I'm not sure I understand how you are interpreting the main question at issue.
- Is this the same issue as _____?
- How would _____ put this issue?
- Why is this question important?
- Does this question lead to other questions or issues?

Assumption Probes:

- What are you assuming?
- What is Erika assuming?
- What could we assume instead?
- You seem to be assuming _____. Do I understand you correctly?
 - All of your reasoning depends on the idea that ___. Why have you based your reasoning on _____ rather than _____?
- You seem to be assuming _____. How would you justify taking this for granted?

- Why would someone make this assumption?

Reason and Evidence Probes:

- What would be an example?
- How do you know?
- Why do you think that is true?
- Do you have any evidence for that?
- What difference does that make?
- What are your reasons for saying that?
- What other information do we need?
- Could you explain your reason to use?

Reason and Evidence Probes (continued):

- Are these reasons adequate?
- Can you explain how you logically got from _____ to ____?
- Do you see any difficulties with their reasoning here?
- Why did you say that?
- What led you to that belief?
- How does that apply to this case?
- What would change your mind?
- But is that good evidence to believe that?
- Is there a reason to doubt that evidence?
- Who is in a position to know if that is so?
- What would you say to someone who said _____?
- Can someone else give evidence to support that response?
- By what reasoning did you come to that conclusion?
- How could we find out whether that is true?

Origin or Source Questions:

- Where did you get this idea?
- Do your friends or family feel the same way?
- Has the media influenced you?
- Have you always felt this way?
- What caused you to feel this way?
- Did you originate this idea or get it from someone else?

Implication and Consequence Probes:

- What are you implying by that?
- When you say _____, are you implying _____?
- But if that happened, what else would happen as a result? Why?
- What effect would that have?
- Would that necessarily happen or only probably happen?
- What is the probability of this result?
- What is an alternative?
- If this and this are the case, then what else must also be true?

- If we say that this is unethical, how about that?

Viewpoint Questions:

- You seem to be approaching this issue from _____ perspective. Why have you chosen this rather than that perspective?
- How would other groups/types of people respond? Why? What would influence them?
- How could you answer the objection that _____ would make?
- What might someone who believed _____ think?
- Can/did anyone see this another way?
- What would someone who disagrees say?
- What is an alternative?
- How are Hillary and Tom's ideas alike? Different?