

Civil Rights - "I Have a Dream"

Teacher Overview - Socratic Seminar

A Socratic Seminar is a useful classroom strategy in order to have your students explore a topic in a deep and meaningful way. It is also excellent for having your students explore a text and use specific evidence from the text when creating an argument or making a point.

The strategy requires a bit of preparation, but much of that has been included in this package. The following is a brief overview for your use when using this strategy with your students. It has been broken into stages and contains my notes for ease of use. This Socratic Seminar should be used only after the students have learned about the topic. The students will feel more comfortable with the process if they are informed of the topic they are to discuss in the Seminar. The Seminar could also act as a great introductory activity to having students write an essay response or other writing response related to the topic. After the Seminar the students should have a deep understanding of the topic and the complexities of the issue.

This overview package is broken into the following sections, and the steps that the teacher should follow when facilitating a Socratic Seminar:

1. Preparation: The Explanation
2. Preparation: Before the Seminar
3. The Seminar
4. After the Seminar

Preparation: The Explanation

1. If the students have never used this strategy before they will be naturally apprehensive and unsure of the process. Therefore, the teacher must fully explain the process beforehand to the students.
 - a. Start by telling the students that they are to do a close reading of a piece of text related to the Civil Rights Movement. Students may already have an understanding of the text.
 - b. Next tell the students that they will mark (annotate) the text using the strategies on page 4 of the student handout. Go over page 4 of the student handout now with students to discuss your expectations. The focus question for the Seminar is on page 1 of the student handout and should guide how they mark (annotate the text). Go over the focus question with students and clarify if needed.
 - i. My students usually require 1 class (40-60 min) to complete this process, and sometimes I will annotate the first page with them, as a group, to get them going on the process. I sometimes use the annotations as an entry ticket into the Socratic Seminar. Those who have not properly prepared don't participate.
 - c. Now tell the students that they will each need to create open-ended questions relate to the text that will help create discussion. The open-ended questions they create cannot be the same as the focus question. They need to consider the text and ask questions that they need clarification on, or questions that they want to bring up with other students. The questions need to create discussion and go beyond "yes" or "no". Question starters are included on page 3 of the student handout. Go over this page with students now. These are only examples to help get students thinking.
 - i. I usually require my students to create at least 3 questions each, but this can be adjusted based on teachers discretion. The questions that students create should be done in the annotation phase and most of my students include their questions in the margins of the text, but the teacher could require a much more formal submission from students.
 - d. Next tell students that once the class is prepared they will participate in the Seminar. Tell students that the class will arrange the chairs into two concentric circles. (An inner circle and an outer circle). The inner circle will participate in the discussion based on the focus question and student created questions about the text. When participating in a Socratic

Seminar all discussion must come from the text. Students need to use the numbers on each line to reference specific passages as they speak. This way each student can quickly turn to the passage as well and see their own annotations and notes. During the discussion the students in the inner circle speak directly to each other and respond to each other without raising their hands. The discussion is to be respectful and productive. The outer circle will remain quiet while discussion occurs as well as complete a form based on the inner circle's discussion.

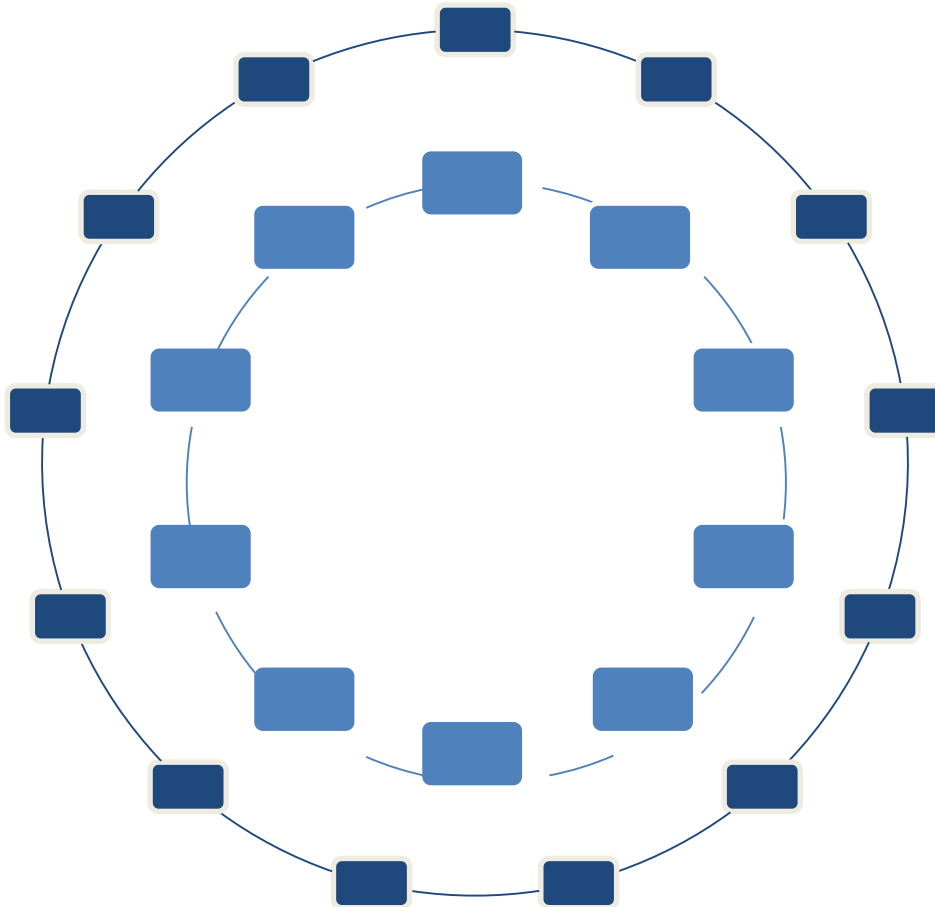
- i. A good size for the inner circle is with about 10 students. Any more and it might feel overwhelming, but this should be determined by the teacher based on the nature of the students in the classroom. You can also have the students switch halfway through the Seminar so the entire class sits in the inner circle at one point. As well, I have also run Seminars with a "fire seat". This means there is 1 seat in the inner circle that is empty and students from the outer circle can briefly join the discussion by sitting in the "fire seat" to ask their question or make their statement. This sometimes helps to keep the outer circle engaged knowing that they still have the opportunity to participate.
- e. Show students an example of what a Socratic Circle looks like.
 - i. For a group that has never done a Socratic Seminar before I like to find a video on YouTube to show them what it looks like. They are often able to make more sense of what is expected if they can see it in action. I like the following:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pGVR6ZF_2M

Preparation: Before the Seminar

1. This is the stage where students begin doing the actual work of preparing for the seminar. They may need guidance in these stages if they have never participated in a Socratic Seminar before.
 - a. First, have students complete a close reading of the text using their annotation strategies from page 4 of the student handout that they reviewed earlier. As they read and annotate the students need to begin thinking of and creating open-ended questions. The question starters included on page 3 can be used to help students create their questions.
 - i. Depending on the needs of the class you may choose to have the students complete this individually, in pairs or in small groups. I sometimes go over my expectations for annotation with the class and complete the first page with them showing them what I expect. The students should be given ample time to complete this. My classes usually need a day for this stage and then we begin the seminar the next day.
 - b. Go around to the students as they work to ensure they are annotating and creating questions as you would expect.
 - i. Again, I use the annotated notes as an entry ticket into the Seminar itself. I see little point in having students participate if they have not properly prepared.

The Seminar

1. This is the stage where students participate in the actual seminar. This stage should occur after the students have had ample opportunity to prepare and annotate the text as well as create questions.
 - a. Before the students arrive for the Seminar the teacher should have the chairs/desks already arranged into two concentric circles. (An inner circle and an outer circle.)
 - i. This way you don't waste the first part of the class arranging desks and chairs and can get the students immediately ready for the seminar. It would be at this point that you as the teacher check the annotated notes for who will and who will not participate in the Seminar. I have had those who weren't ready do one of two things: sit in the outer circle and complete the included outer circle form, or complete an alternate assignment.



- b. Once you have arranged who will sit where, review the rules/guidelines of the Seminar with the students. You could post the page I included in this package or you could just write them on the front board.
- c. Next, give the students in the outer circle their form to complete. Explain to them that they will speak after the Seminar is completed about the notes they have created and the overall process.
 - i. If you are going to use a "fire seat" you would also want to explain that at this time.
- d. Begin the Seminar with the inner circle by writing the focus question on the front board and having a student begin the discussion. The student will need to reference specific lines from the text using their annotated notes. The lines in the text have been numbered for ease of reference. When students are referencing a passage from the text they need to reference the page and line number so the rest of the groups can quickly turn to the correct page to see the reference as well. Students should stay focused on the focus question at first.
 - i. I usually tell one student the day before, who is well prepared, that they will speak first. This allows the conversation to get going and for that student to properly "prep" themselves for going first.
- e. Allow students to discuss the focus question using references from the text as much as possible. A well flowing Seminar has the students offering their insights to the focus questions while referencing specific lines from the text. Students build on the ideas of others or bring others ideas into question and offer alternative references to the text. It is not a debate or a chance to argue. Rather it is a discussion and an uncovering of the information in a text. It is cooperative more than it is competitive. The teacher does not play a role in this portion other than as a facilitator to keep the conversation going. Students should stay focused on the focus question at first, but once they have exhausted their conversation of the focus they can begin to bring in their own questions in order to delve deeper into the discussion and uncover the information in the text. The outer circle completes their form and focuses on the inner circle's discussion.
 - i. In the past, when doing this with students for the first time, I usually take an active role in the inner circle to model the conversation for the students.
Students might be apprehensive about speaking but I've always been able to

develop a good discussion after 5-10 minutes. Allow the students ample time to think and formulate their ideas. If the conversation centered on the focus question begins to become stale or is stuck in a certain spot, I usually ask the students to begin bringing up their own questions related to the text. You may decide to rotate students between the inner and outer circles.

After the Seminar

1. When the discussion ends naturally, or when you decide to end it, have the outer circle speak for a bit about the overall process and the answer to their questions on the form. The conversation should center on the Seminar itself and not the topic. Did the students find it helpful? How could it have been better? Did it help the students understand the text to a better degree?
 - a. My students always appreciate this opportunity to reflect on the discussion and the overall process. It allows us the chance to better the discussion for next time and to maybe even delve deeper into the understandings that we developed in the inner circle. This step could occur the next day based on timeframes, which would also allow the class more time to reflect.
 - b. I typically don't assess Socratic Seminars in a formal way. They are meant to be formal class discussions that create a positive atmosphere for learning. I sometimes give completion marks for the annotated notes. A rubric has been included for assessing the Seminar if the teacher so chooses.