

## **SOCRATIC SEMINARS: LEARNING TO THINK FIRST-HAND**

**By Marsha Familaro Enright**

**SOCRATIC SEMINARS** are a method of teaching, which, if properly implemented, significantly increases the participants' ability to think for themselves. This term is used variously, but the following describes the kind I am talking about:

A discussion in which all participants read a common text, or study a common work of art, or scientific experiment, or film, etc. and examine its meaning and implications *together* by a set of principles in which Reason is the only authority.

Also called a **Collaborative Seminar** because participants *reason together* to understand the work.

Most methods of teaching assume the teacher's goal is merely to convey a given body of information. Lecture, testing, review are preferred. What good things are left out of conventional education?

- **INSTRUCTION AND GUIDANCE IN FIRST-HAND THINKING:** e.g. in how to look at any aspect of reality for oneself which is a fundamental skill to be an independent human being.
- **EXPLICIT TUTELAGE IN THINKING SKILLS:** in a conventional classroom, questions about the ideas being taught are often quashed as interfering with the business of information acquisition.
- **TUTELAGE IN CREATIVITY SKILLS:** thinking of many different possibilities and combinations of ideas and facts—the substance of creativity—is very often quashed. This has been especially true with the focus on testing, e.g. there's only one right answer on the test. Creativity researcher Ken Robinson has a very informative talk about this at [TED.com](http://TED.com).
- **INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE:** Very little is done to connect subjects across domains of knowledge. Students aren't taught the relationship of math to history, science to English, geography to politics, or the relationship of philosophy to all the subjects, and to one's life. Yet, the integration of one's knowledge is crucial to its use and strength, practically, creatively, and productively.
- **CONNECTION OF ABSTRACT TO CONCRETE:** Very often students are given little help in connecting the ideas and theories they are taught to the facts, or what they are learning to the practical. What's the connection between the Napoleonic Wars and my contemporary life? Yet, there is a crucial connection.
- **PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT:** No special learning or guidance is taught about inner development and interpersonal skills.

Here's what one of my students said about her education before coming to our [The Great Connections](#) summer seminar, which uses Socratic seminars:

“I knew about dates and facts, but I wasn't able to view processes along history, the connection between the facts and philosophy...in many cases, learning is not meaningful for the student.”

### **LEARNING TO THINK FOR YOURSELF ISN'T EASY.**

Identifying your own opinions, how you arrived at them, and whether they comport with the facts is difficult. It's a lot of work to continuously analyze ideas and assumptions down to their base. One has only a limited amount of time to think; it's hard to constantly stop and think about fundamentals. But that's exactly why it's so important to develop the habits of mind that make it easy to think about fundamentals in every day life. Once you have developed these habits, you can analyze and understand events, ideas, readings, people, etc. much more quickly.

Thinking in fundamentals also leads to more creative thinking, because you're going to the root of the ideas, to the actual reality on which the ideas are based. You are looking directly at the facts, and not accepting the conventional package of thinking, the conventional “box” about the issue or problem. This is how hugely productive, innovative thinkers such as Aristotle or Michelangelo or Michael Faraday or Thomas Edison or Steve Jobs proceeded.

### **PRINCIPLES TO STRENGTHEN THINKING**

1. **CHECK YOUR PREMISES:** Identify the facts and ideas on which your conclusions rest and their justification, follow the chain of ideas from the abstract to the fact it rests upon;
2. **LOOK FOR THE CASH VALUE OF IDEAS:** Connect the abstract with the concrete;
3. **INTEGRATION:** Connect the facts and meaning related to one set of ideas to all your others. Important for understanding, living, and creativity;
4. **PHILOSOPHICAL DETECTION:** Identify the moral implications, the implications for living, of any set of ideas. What would idea X mean if I put it into practice?;
5. **KNOW YOURSELF:** Like Socrates, identify information/data about yourself and your motivations; learn how to introspect successfully.

All of these skills and values—and more—can be developed through Socratic Seminars.

**A PREPARED ENVIRONMENT IS CRUCIAL FOR LEARNING:** It has three elements:

The text or work.  
The teacher.  
The physical set up.

**1. Role of the Work:** You must use a text or work (art, movie, scientific experiment, musical composition) of stimulating depth and interest, because of the CENTRAL ACTIVITY, which is: Participants discuss the exact meaning of the text or work, carefully thinking about the wording (or aspects relevant to the kind of work it is) and their implications, and inferences.

PARTICIPANTS ACT AS SCIENTISTS, with the work as the reality to explain, the facts to grasp and analyze, and to integrate with their knowledge and life.

THE WORK must be able to elicit deep thought, significant insight, and add much to knowledge, which is why the Classics or Great Books are so often used. Examples of useful works:

- The Pledge of Allegiance,
- Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*,
- Film: "Gattaca."
- Sculpture: The Winged Victory

**2. The Role of the Teacher:** The teacher is a guide who demonstrates rather than talks about ways of investigating. He or she must be a highly self-reflective person with a great love of learning, whose passionate aim is the nurturance of minds and spirits.

The teacher must present himself as the *Expert Learner* who serves as an example of rational inquiry, independent examination, and discovery—rather than an expert in the information. The discussion follows these principles:

1. Each person recognizes that Reason is the only authority in the discussion.
2. Participants must ask questions of the text and each other.
3. Participants must cite the text to give evidence for their ideas and interpretations.
4. References to material outside of the text must be cogently linked to the text and discussion at hand, and explained in general principle, comprehensible to general reasoning. References dependent on knowledge not available to each participant are not considered cogent to the discussion.
5. Participants should try to make connections to their lives.
6. Each person takes responsibility for his or her own learning and for the quality of the conversation.

Each person treats the other participants respectfully.

The teacher guides the discussion, helping participants reason together by asking questions that encourage participants to actively think about the work and its meaning, such as:

- What does the author mean by using this word instead of that word?
- How does what the author says in this paragraph relate to what is said in that paragraph?
- How do these ideas relate to other ideas I know? How can I relate these ideas to general principles I know?
- If I tried to do what the author suggests in real life, what would happen?

The teacher also models how to respectfully talk to others in the discussion.

At the end of the seminar, the teacher leads a DEBRIEF: a five-minute self-reflective discussion about the *process* of the discussion, including the reasoning and the personal behavior. The teacher asks what ideas, comments, principles, or conclusions advanced or detracted from learning and how to improve the conversation and the behavior for the next time.

The Debrief improves future discussions and develops self-awareness and responsibility, by encouraging each person to reflect on what they could have done differently or better to improve their or their classmates' understanding of the work or their understanding of what others said, how they could have encouraged others to speak, or how they could have modified detracting discussion habits.

### **The Teacher's Guiding Principles:**

- Find exceptional works which require careful thinking and analysis to understand, and which have complex import.
- Help students with careful questions to understand these texts or other material (artworks, scientific experiments, musical compositions, etc).
- Keep his own opinions mainly to himself; instead, lead by example as a most enthusiastic and careful inquirer into the meaning of the study material; showing relationships to other important ideas, with reason as the only authority.

Encourage students to:

- Voice their own responses to the work and point to evidence in the work to demonstrate what gave rise to these responses.
- Be unafraid to admit thoughts about the work that don't seem, at first glance, obvious conclusions, and then explore why they may think this.
- Carefully listen to and respond to the *meaning* of what others are saying.
- Help other participants voice their reasons.

Gently discourage:

- Competitive displays of knowledge. References to other works and sets of ideas which cannot be simply explained to other seminar members and/or related directly to the material studied.
- Anything but respectful comments and behavior towards other participants.

All must be done subtly and artfully, so as not to take away the initiative of students or squash their egos.

The teacher must also give students lots of rein in the direction of the discussion, even if it gets off the specific topic of the text, as long as the discussion still actively and seriously explores ideas.

### **The Role of the Physical Environment**

The discussion group should be small, preferably not over 15 people.

- Enables a controllable discussion.
- Develops personal relationships among the students; they get to know and care about each other, and gain a depth of understanding which galvanizes the discussion, just like a talk with a good friend.

The discussion should be held in a quiet room, with chairs in a circle, no materials except the works being discussed and water, paper, and pen. This environment:

- Encourages each member to view others as co-learners;
- Emphasizes that each person's mind is his or her ultimate authority.
- Allows concentration on learning.
- Establishes seriousness and respect for the learning endeavor.

### **The Value of the Group Interaction**

- Each person brings a different focus to the work, thereby drawing participants' attention to far more aspects and meanings in the work than one person could think on his own.
- In the discussion, students learn different ways in which the same information can be reasoned about and integrated.
- The respectful atmosphere can lead to close personal relationships, which can be encouraging and psychologically validating.
- Students learn how to collaborate to achieve understanding, a very valuable skill in adult life in which trade requires collaboration between buyer and seller and in teams of workers.

### **The RESULTS:**

- The ability to ask good questions to find the meaning of any work, skill, or situation in reading and analyzing any text or problem, even outside one's area of knowledge.
- The ability to be exact about the meaning of words and their definitions, which sharpens thinking and knowledge tremendously.
- The ability to identify the logic of arguments.
- A vastly expanded network of information and knowledge, particularly about some of the greatest, most influential thinkers, writers, artists and scientists.
- The ability to be self-responsible about learning, not dependent on what a teacher says to learn or think.
- The confidence and ability to question anything and anybody;
- The confidence that one's mind is capable to grasp reality and the most difficult ideas, theories, and works available in any domain of knowledge;

The confidence that one can learn anything.

- **CHECKING PREMISES:** The habit and ability of identifying the fundamentals of an argument or work.
- **INTEGRATING KNOWLEDGE:** This method of discussion emphasizes connections between ideas. Combined with the study of the Classics, this leads to much integration of one's knowledge. That's because many of the Classics cover issues and questions that span multiple domains of knowledge, such as Plato's *Symposium*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, or Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*.
- **PHILOSOPHICAL DETECTION:** Questioning the works leads to thinking about how their ideas apply to one's own life.
- **CASH VALUE:** The kind of questioning encouraged in this seminar connects abstract ideas to concrete reality.

## **EFFECTIVENESS**

Michael Strong is an expert in Socratic Seminars and the author of the book *The Habit of Thought: From Socratic Seminars to Socratic Practice*. In addition to this book, you can find him discussing Socratic Seminars on YouTube. He created five high schools based on a Socratic Seminar curriculum over a period of 15 years.

He administered the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (WGCTA), a cognitive skills test, to his students before beginning his program (of five-day-a-week classes), after four months, and then at the end of the school year.

Here are some of his results:

- 9 of 12 minority females gained a 20% or more increase in their WGCTA scores in four months.
- One inner city student tested at the 1<sup>st</sup> percentile at the start, then at the 85<sup>th</sup> after four months.

- Even highly achieving upper middle class Montessori students gained cognitive skills. In four months, the average 8<sup>th</sup> grade Socratic seminar student (n=71) scored 6% higher than the national average.

And here's what a former Great Connections student said about her experience:

Liz Parker was a senior at George Mason University in Economics when she attended in July 2009, interviewed in the fall of 2010:

“When my college classes started they were a big disappointment.

“I normally struggle with ideas on my own and say to myself, “It’s not too important to understand.”

“But when you share with people, you’re not so scared about getting the wrong conclusion because, together, you find different ways to think about the readings and the ideas. It makes it more fun to read really hard texts.

“For example, we were reading Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* on the Principle of Non-Contradiction and we spent so long on just the first sentence, we were going crazy—

“And then, all of a sudden, someone said something that made it all clear, and I thought “Yes, that’s exactly what I understand it to mean!”

“When two people find that same common understanding, that same interpretation of words that someone else wrote hundreds of years ago, that’s so precious—you hardly ever get that moment of understanding with anybody.

“And there’s no upstaging one another or seeing who knows the most. The way you gauge someone is not whether they get all the answers right because the questions you’re asking don’t necessarily have an answer. It’s more how do you interpret this word or sentence or paragraph, or what does that mean.

“Now when I’m reading something about politics, I can take things to their logical conclusion and see if they’re contradicting themselves—it makes a big difference.

“It helped me at an IHS seminar last year with students from Harvard and MIT who were really intimidating political science guys.

“You could tell who really pays attention to the fundamental ideas, who knows the principles.

“I often found that their ideas were just wrong. Maybe they were just following the ideas of their teachers or maybe some intellectual they like, but they really didn’t have good reasons for what they said.

“What the seminar taught me was that no matter what text I have in front of me, or what my knowledge on a subject, I can understand something that the author is trying to say. I can interpret it from their words. I don’t need to do a lot of research or to consult a lot of experts. I can use my reason, and their words and the text and find my own opinion, and their opinion. It was so empowering just to know I can figure out such difficult ideas.

“Also, now when I go to job interviews, I’m not shy and timid about what I have to offer. I think that I can contribute good work and I’m productive. I think ‘Not only do I have technical skills, I can analyze texts, no matter what they are, I can figure them out, even if I’m ignorant on the subject.’”

You can read the full interview and that of two other students on our website:  
[www.rifinst.org](http://www.rifinst.org).

## **PRINCIPLES OF SOCRATIC SEMINARS**

THE GOAL OF THE DISCUSSION IS TO THINK CLEARLY AND TO THINK CLEARLY TOGETHER.

### **Rules of the discussion:**

- Ask questions of the text and each other.
- Don’t be afraid to ask questions about what you don’t understand, no matter how trivial it may seem—the goal is to understand the meaning of the text clearly.
- Cite the text to give evidence for your opinions/conclusions.
- References to material outside of the text must be cogently linked to the text and discussion at hand, and explained in general principle, comprehensible to general reasoning.
- References dependent on knowledge not available to each participant are not considered cogent to the discussion.
- Be concise.
- Keep comments related to the text —make the connections with your other ideas and experiences.
- In the discussion, reason is the only authority.
- Each person takes responsibility for his or her own learning and for the quality of the conversation.
- Each person treats the other participants respectfully.