

# Standards in Action: Scaffolding Socratic Seminars



## Introduction

The Socratic seminar dates back to the fifth century BCE when the Greek philosopher Socrates focused his lessons around critically exploring questions rather than lecturing. Today, this method is still used across grade levels and content areas as a student-centered approach to academic discussions.

Socratic seminars can be conducted in many ways. Students may sit in one large circle as a class, in a fishbowl with observers, at a round table with smaller classes, in breakout groups, or online.

Regardless of the arrangement, you will want to consider the following when setting up your Socratic seminar.

## Before Your Socratic Seminar

- Set norms for expected behavior during the discussion.
- Build background knowledge of the content topic for students.
- Engage in one or more shared texts to reference throughout discussions.
- Develop sample open-ended questions (these may be co-created with the class).

## During Your Socratic Seminar

- Have students discuss questions referencing their knowledge and texts without the interference of the teacher.
- Close the Socratic seminar with some time to reflect on new learning and the experience of participating in the seminar.

## Socratic Seminars in Action



**Teacher:** Karely Spence-Osorio

**Context:** 6th-grade English Language Arts teacher for multilingual learners in North Carolina

### Karely's Socratic Seminar Practice

At the end of each quarter, Karely holds Socratic seminars with her multilingual students who are mostly around proficiency levels 3 and 4. She has developed multiple scaffolding practices to support her students' participation: intentional grouping, assigned roles, and sentence starters.

- **Intentional Grouping:** Students are placed in a fishbowl setup with each student assigned to a person who is listening and supporting or speaking and participating in the seminar. Pairs can use any language to support each other. Karely intentionally assigns stronger English speakers with those who could use more support.
- **Assigned Roles:** Each student is given a variety of colored shapes that correspond to how they are expected to participate. Students at the earlier stages of expressing themselves in English will be assigned red and blue shapes, while those at the intermediate stages will be assigned yellow and orange shapes. Ultimately, Karely chooses roles and purposes of communication based on what she knows about her students.
  - Level 1: Red
  - Level 2: Blue
  - Level 3: Yellow
  - Level 4: Orange
- **Sentence Starters:** Each role has sample sentence starters that prompt useful language to fulfill the purpose of communication.

### Karely's Tips to Set Up a Socratic Seminar

- Make a routine of it.
- Have students practice first with a topic that they feel passionate about.
- Model Socratic seminar language throughout lessons and provide time to practice it.
- Include a prep day to write questions that students will ask and answer.
- Have students work in small groups to attain background information around questions.

## Socratic Seminar: Speaker Participation

### Ask a Question



Ask a classmate one of the discussion questions.

\_\_\_\_\_, what do you think?

### Share Your Opinion



I think that . . .

I believe that . . . If I . . ., then . . .

### Summarize and Agree/ Disagree/Add



I heard you say that . . . and I agree because . . .

I heard you say that . . . and I disagree because . . .

I want to add to what \_\_\_\_\_ said . . .

### Clarify



Can you give a reason why you think \_\_\_\_\_?

Can you explain what you meant when you said \_\_\_\_\_?

## Listener Participation Checklist

- ☐ I found someone who agrees with me. (What do they agree with you about?)
- ☐ I found someone who disagrees with me. (What do they disagree with you about?)
- ☐ I found someone who gave a new reason for my argument. (What was the reason?)
- ☐ I heard something I hadn't thought of before. (What did you learn?)

I was watching \_\_\_\_\_ (name of student). They (check all that apply):

- ☐ Asked a question
- ☐ Shared their opinion
- ☐ Summarized an idea
- ☐ Agreed with someone
- ☐ Disagreed with someone
- ☐ Added information
- ☐ Clarified an idea