

Socratic Circle

The unexamined life is not worth living.
~Socrates

Rationale:

Socrates did indeed love to think, to examine, and to postulate. He loved questions. And as teachers, we often do too. In fact, research has shown that generating and answering questions are two types of instruction that improves comprehension of non-impaired readers (National Reading Panel, 2000). No comprehension activity has a longer or more pervasive tradition than asking students questions about their reading; and teaching students to ask their own questions as they read improves their processing of text and their comprehension. (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001; Duke & Pearson, 2002).

One way to develop question generating and answering with your students, while integrating both, is through the use of the “Socratic Circle” strategy. Taken from the name of Greek philosopher Socrates, this strategy enables teachers and students to move beyond simple *yes* and *no* answers and flow into the realm of critical analysis and key observations of a given text. Socrates, known well for his philosophical inquiries of his students to think beyond themselves and their initial beliefs, used questioning, critical thinking, and discussion to probe into serious matters of the day. “Socratic questioning is a systematic process for examining the ideas, questions, and answers that form the basis of human beliefs” (Copeland, 2005, p. 7). As teachers, we can use the same techniques Socrates used to enhance our classroom discussions and help our students gain insights from not only the author and text, but also one another.

Socratic circles lend themselves well to building academic and social skills. Academic skills in the areas of reading, literacy, listening, critical thinking, reflection, and participation are incorporated in many of the steps to using this strategy. Students can also gain practice in various social skills such as team building, conflict resolution, and community building skills. Socratic circles can spark interest and allow students to develop a lifelong love of reading. “Through the repeated readings and the thorough analysis of the material, students learn to take their time while reading and explore the possibility of multiple meanings and interpretations” (Copeland, 2005, p. 15).

How to Use the Strategy:

Having a quality discussion in a classroom is not always easy to create with students. The Socratic circle method assists students in developing dialogue, building knowledge based on prior experiences and applying them to new situations, creating hypotheses, and challenging perceptions of themselves and others while working through rhetoric and discourse (Copeland, 2005). As you read through the description below, think about the steps you will need to take to plan for, implement, and assess this strategy.

The Basic Procedure (Copeland, 2005)

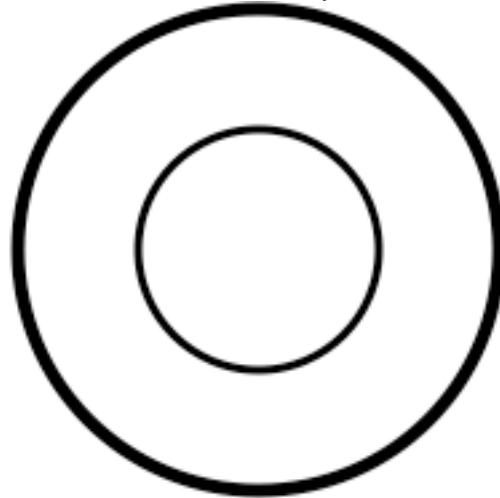
1. On the day before the Socratic circle, the teacher hands out the text. The text should not be too long, but should raise questions for students as they read.
2. Students should spend that evening, as homework, reading and analyzing the text.
3. The next day during class, students are randomly chosen to be either in the inner or outer circle.
4. The students that form the inner circle read the passage aloud and then engage in a discussion of the text for 10 minutes. Students in the outer circle observe silently and take mental notes.
5. After the inner circle concludes their discussion, the outer circle assesses the performance and gives feedback on the group or on an individual.
6. Students in the inner circle exchange positions and roles with the outer circle.
7. The new inner circle holds a ten-minute discussion and then receives feedback from the new outer circle.

Before Beginning Socratic Circles

Before you begin using Socratic circles, you will want to consider the needs of your classroom and the role you will take as the teacher.

Is your classroom conducive to Socratic circles?

The classroom environment is a key part to having a successful Socratic circle. Both the physical classroom and emotional climate need to be considered in planning for a successful session. Desks or chairs need to be arranged into an inner circle and an outer circle. (You can also have students sit directly on the floor.) The goal is for members of the inner circle to have an outer circle member directly behind them.



What's the Teacher's Role in Socratic circles?

The teacher's role during Socratic circles has four different parts:

- **Select the text for the discussion.** Make sure to select high quality text that will expand the content of the class. Good text raises questions and allows for students to look at the world around them.
- **Keep the discussion of the inner circle focused.** The teacher will take on the role of facilitator or coach and direct the conversation. The teacher will not overly bombard students with questions, but allow for a flow to be created by the conversation and dialogue. Students should take ownership of the material. During the beginning stages, teachers will need to model what is expected.
- **Direct the feedback of the outer circle.** The feedback provided by the outer circle is extremely important. Teachers should spend time sharing what quality feedback sounds like and allow time for practice in other settings. At first, the comments of the outer group can be basic observations and the teacher can highlight specific points made.
- **Assess and evaluate individual and group performance.** Assessment can be done formally or informally. The teacher can use and develop a rubric that will allow a type of scorecard that students can review. But, the most important type of feedback the teacher can provide is at the conclusion of the activity, verbally describing the level of achievement and ways to improve the discussion.

Strategies that Assist with Socratic Circle Development

Motivating students to engage in discussion and dialogue in the classroom is an important part of the Socratic circle method. Students that feel comfortable with what they want to talk about and what they know about the context of the material will do better than those that are unprepared and have a lack of background knowledge on the subject. **KWL** The KWL chart provides teachers a way to initiate a new topic or subject. The KWL is a simple way to generate a short list of questions that students may want to consider when they read the text and participate in the discussion.

Double-Entry Diary Prepared students often do better than those simply discussing information off the cuff. While ultimately the Socratic method is seen as mostly a verbal activity, the double-entry diary can assist students with writing their thoughts as they read through the text and plan for the discussion. Double-entry diaries are flexible and allow students to show what they are thinking about the text.

Questioning the Author This strategy includes a wonderful description on how to develop queries as a way to create quality discussions. Teachers may want to review the ideas for queries and discussion moves.

Cubing Cubing requires students to apply information they have been studying in new ways. The cubing method allows the student to look the many perspectives of a topic. This is especially important for Socratic circles as each student has the potential to share differing opinions and even change their opinion.

Follow-Up Activities

Reflective Writing

Journals can be extremely useful as a way for students to reflect on what they learned during the Socratic circle activity. Students can use the reflective writing pieces with their double-entry diary entries to create a Socratic circle portfolio.

Thesis Statements

Having students generate thesis statements as a way to review the material/text covered will benefit them in both their reading and writing skills. A simple thesis statement framework can be employed in the early stages of the activity, but can be used less often as students begin to create their own.

Sample Thesis Statement Framework (Copland, 2005)

In _____ (title of piece), _____ (author)
employs _____ (method) to reveal _____ (message).

Assessment:

Assessment for Socratic circles is ongoing as the teacher and both outer circles offer insights and observation both during and after the strategy process. Along with the necessary verbal feedback, teachers may want to use the following rubric to provide each student with a guide on the level they are at during the Socratic circle and areas they need to improve upon.

Resources:

Best Practices Instructional Practices and Techniques for Socratic Circles

<http://wblrd.sk.ca/%7Ebestpractice/socratic/index.html>

Students are given the opportunity to demonstrate their level of understanding text and the ability to apply the ideas through communication from Socratic circles.

Socratic Seminars

http://everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=1341992

This pages outlines the importance of socratic circles and their implementation in the classroom.

Kids and Socrates

<http://thereflectiveteacher.wordpress.com/2007/01/05/kids-and-socrates/>

A teacher shares her experiences with using socratic circles and how her students were impacted.

References:

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