

TOMORROW Magazine Volume 1: Houston 2035

Socratic Seminar: What Direction Should Urban Planning Take for the Houston Area?

Introduction:

Socratic Seminars originated from the teachings of the classical Greek philosopher, Socrates (ca.470-399 B.C.). He believed the best way to attain knowledge was through disciplined conversation. His concept was to examine opinions or ideas logically, using inquiry to determine their validity. The seminar is different from a debate, in which the participants are looking to win an opponent over or prove each other wrong. In this form of dialog, the participants are asked to be open to arguments from both sides, to find common ground, to suspend ones assumptions or beliefs, and to come to a greater understanding. There are other ways to proceed in Socratic questioning but this method is designed to work in, but not limited to, a classroom.

Participation:

Participants should read the background information that the seminar leader has provided before the seminar. Participants can develop questions relevant to the reading to submit to the leader. The leader will make statements and ask questions to which there are no 'right' answers. The questions are designed to encourage the participants to explore the important issues. The participants will be encouraged to think out loud and exchange ideas openly. Ultimately, the participants are responsible for the outcome and quality of the seminar and the learning that takes place.

Participant Guidelines:

This is a different type of conversation than one you may have on a cell phone with your best friend in which you use lingo no one else understands. You are only half listening because you are also shopping or eating lunch. You finish each others sentences or assume you know what they will say and cut them off. You reply with emotional or judgmental responses such as: "No way!", "You gotta be kidding!", "Wrong!", "I think I would die if..."; or more colorful phrases which I am sure you can imagine.

Participant guidelines for an effective Socratic Seminar are summarized below:

1. Listen carefully.
2. Refrain from interrupting. One person should speak at a time.
3. Focus on the ideas, not the opinions.
4. Be open to other data and viewpoints.
5. Respond with reflective comments, or provide your own idea or information.
6. Ask questions that will clarify your understanding of the other person's information or point of view. It is OK to say, 'I don't understand.'
7. Refrain from emotional or dramatic responses or from using inappropriate language.
8. Stay with the current topic, make notes of something you may want to come back to or ask about.
9. Speak so people can hear you.
10. Speak in complete sentences.
11. Speak with each other, not just the leader. Use eye contact.
12. It is O.K. to "pass" when you are asked to contribute, take your time to organize your thoughts.
13. Support your ideas or opinions from the text.
14. Look for common ground.
15. Demonstrate respect for all participants.
16. Encourage everyone in the circle to participate.
17. Take responsibility for the quality, tone, and content of the seminar.
18. Do not participate if you are not prepared (i.e. haven't read the material). Refrain from making rogue comments.

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Participation Rubric

Participant Being Assessed: _____

Assessor: _____

Directions: As you observe the participant you are assessing, circle the participant qualities that apply.

Grade	A	B	C	D/F
Participant Qualities	<p>The participant:</p> <p>Offers solid analysis</p> <p>Demonstrates deep knowledge and understanding</p> <p>Comes prepared with text and notes</p> <p>Refers to notes and text, quotes text</p> <p>Speaks without prompting</p> <p>Speaks clearly</p> <p>Demonstrates active listening</p> <p>Offers clarification or follow-up</p>	<p>The participant:</p> <p>Offers solid analysis</p> <p>Demonstrates good knowledge and understanding</p> <p>Comes prepared with text and notes</p> <p>Refers to text or notes</p> <p>Speaks without prompting</p> <p>Speaks clearly</p> <p>Demonstrates active listening</p> <p>Offers clarification or follow-up</p>	<p>The participant:</p> <p>Offers some analysis</p> <p>Demonstrates general knowledge and understanding</p> <p>Comes less prepared, without notes</p> <p>Does not refer to text or notes</p> <p>Requires some prompting to speak</p> <p>Speaks fairly clearly</p> <p>Appears to be listening</p>	<p>The participant:</p> <p>Offers little or no commentary</p> <p>Demonstrates poor understanding of the material</p> <p>Does not come prepared</p> <p>Requires prompting to speak</p> <p>Does not speak clearly</p> <p>Does not listen to others</p>
Comments				

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Leader Guidelines

The leader should be comfortable with the background information of the issue that will be discussed. S/he should prepare statements that will trigger an agree/disagree response; or ask open-ended questions which lead the participants to discuss the important issues. Questions can be solicited from the participants after they have finished their reading. Sample statements/questions* could include:

- Make a statement about the issue. What do you think about this statement?
- Who are the people or organizations involved in this issue?
- How does this issue affect them?
- What is their opinion regarding the issue? What facts support their opinion?
- What are the proposed solutions/outcomes to this issue?
- What are social, economic, political, or environmental impacts of this issue?
- Is there more information that you (the participants) need or want to know before you can form an opinion?
- Is this issue relevant to other groups/societies/countries?
- What have you learned from this discussion?
- Have you changed your opinion about this issue? Why?

*These sample questions are general and should be tailored to the topic discussed.

The leader should refrain from presenting his/her own opinion, but can clarify information if participants do not understand a term or have a question about their participation. The leader should discourage participants from raising their hands to be called on and looking for permission to speak. Rather they should take turns speaking, taking their cues from other participants. Discourage inappropriate language and behavior. Encourage a safe, respectful environment in which everyone feels comfortable to express their opinion.

Post-Seminar Optional Activities:

1. Discuss in small groups or as a class what the participants learned from the seminar.
2. Discuss in small groups or as a class what the participants thought of the process. How would they improve the process?
3. Participants should write a position paper on the issue, utilizing what they learned from the seminar and personal research.

General Procedure for Conducting a Socratic Seminar

The procedure for a Socratic Seminar can be varied depending on the group size and make-up, and the topic being discussed. As a leader, you will need to make it work for your group. Variation and creativity are encouraged. The only step that is required is mutual respect and maintaining an open mind.

1. Provide copies of background reading materials for the participants a head of time so that they can prepare for the seminar. Encourage them to highlight or use sticky notes to identify key points as they read.
2. Provide different parts of the class additional information or an essay that proposes one point of view or explores one aspect of the issue. You may divide the class into two, three, or four groups regarding the content that they read, depending on the size of the class and the issue you are discussing.
3. Ask participants to generate questions from their readings to turn in to the leader. (optional)
4. Distribute the Introduction and Participant Guidelines to all participants and discuss as needed.
5. On the day of the seminar, set enough chairs for all participants in two concentric circles.
6. Divide the class into two groups, an inner and outer circle. People from different 'opinion or aspect camps' should be equally distributed between both circles.
7. Assign assessment partners, someone from the outside circle that is sitting on the opposite side of the inside circle from someone on the inside circle so that they can observe them.
8. Initially, the inner circle is the only one that participates in the dialog. The participants in the outer circle listen, take notes, and observe the inner circle participants. A rubric is provided to allow the participants to earn a grade for their participation in the seminar, measured by their partner in the outer circle. Students are encouraged to participate if they know their grade depends on it.
9. The leader should begin by reviewing participant guidelines as needed and indicate the time frame for the discussion. S/he can then begin with her/his prepared questions, spacing the questions as needed to keep the dialog moving. Half of the questions should be saved for when the outer circle participants move to the inner circle. Questions should be given to the group at large. Students reluctant to participate can be asked for a contribution or opinion.
10. Half way through the time period allowed for the seminar, have the participants switch between the inner and outer circles. Save the last few minutes to ask for summary statements, conclusions, or opinions.