



Socratic Seminars as a Tool in Teacher Education Classrooms: Preparing Teachers to Engage their Future Multilingual Learners in Classroom Discussion

Tina Keller¹

Abstract

Reading complex texts, listening to conflicting ideas, engaging in reflective discussion, and forming thoughts through writing are key components in developing both language and critical thinking. Socratic Seminars can be used as a tool to harness classroom processes that incorporate reading, writing, listening, and speaking in a holistic fashion. In this technique, students are assigned a text and writing prompt prior to the discussion, and then classroom discussions are student facilitated with open-ended questions which culminates in reflective writing. Using Socratic Seminars in several courses in a teacher education program allows preservice teachers the opportunity to experience the technique multiple times over the course their education. In addition to investigating college course texts and content, this process also embeds metacognitive elements which encourages reflection on socio-cultural aspects of discussions. The hope is that as preservice teachers participate in Socratic Seminars in their college classroom it will both provide a deeper connection to course material as well as act as a model that can be used in their future classrooms with English Learners. The strengths and challenges of implementing this tool will be discussed.

Keywords: classroom discussions, Socratic seminars, teacher preparation, English learners.

1. Introduction

Teacher educators are charged with the responsibility to prepare the next generation of teachers to face the joys and challenges of tomorrow's classrooms. The uncertainties of future educational needs and potentials can prove difficult when planning curricular methods in teacher education. However, regardless of advances in technology or changes in ideology and structure, it remains that teachers must be able to read, think, and discuss critically. Reading complex texts, listening to conflicting ideas, engaging in reflective discussion, and forming thoughts through writing are key components in developing both language and critical thinking. Socratic Seminars can be used as a tool to harness classroom processes that incorporate reading, writing, listening, and speaking in a holistic fashion. Teacher educators can use Socratic Seminars in their college level classes as a method which both enhances teacher preparation and provides a model for future teaching practice.

2. Theoretical Under Pinning

Socratic Seminars originate with the questioning style and teaching method of Socrates [1]. His examination of themes such as wisdom and justice through asking questions rather than delivering lectures encouraged learners to make new meaning from conventional wisdom. The Socratic Seminar method also draws upon the work of many leading educational theorists [2]. From John Dewey to Lev Vygotsky, theorists have recognized the importance and value of constructing knowledge within a social relationship mediated through dialogue. Paulo Freire, [3] encouraged educators to see their students as agents with lived experiences able to critically read their world. Mortimer Adler, [4] in his creation of the Paideia seminar sought to find ways to assist and support students in their own sense of wonder or curiosity in learning as active member of a democracy (p.47).

3. Socratic Seminars

Socratic Seminars can be described as a classroom method or process that is embedded into a course or educational sequence which fosters metacognitively situated classroom dialogues integrating the four domains of language; reading, writing, speaking, and listening [5]. Seminars should occur multiple times over the course of a semester, ideally once a week or every other week. There are three stages to a Socratic Seminar. First, the process begins with students independently completing an assigned common text and reflective writing prompt. This, along with prewritten discussion questions, ensures that students are prepared to fully participate in the discussion.

¹ Messiah College, USA



Students come to the class with the materials printed and complete. Second, during the in-class seminar students reflect upon their past conversations and set private individual and group goals for the discussion. The seminar continues with students leading the conversation, asking their own prewritten or spontaneous questions of one another based upon their reading of the text. Students also take notes to reflect upon their learning during the discussion. The third phase is a writing activity that occurs at the conclusion of the seminar. This could take place in class immediately following the seminar, or could function as a follow-up homework assignment. Students reflect upon their progress on their individual goal and record the ways that their thinking about the text or overarching theme shifted as a result of the conversation.

4. Implications for Teacher Education

Using Socratic Seminars in several courses in a teacher education program allows preservice teachers the opportunity to experience the technique multiple times over the course their education. In addition to investigating college course texts and content, this process also embeds metacognitive elements which encourage reflection on socio-cultural aspects of discussions. Seminars encourage the critical yet collective thought process needed in preparing teachers to meet the needs of future students. Posing questions to classmates and reflectively responding to the ideas of others is an essential characteristic of a teacher. The following section will address the strengths and challenges of implementing this tool.

4.2 Strengths

The format of Socratic Seminars shifts the focus of class time from traditional professor centered lectures to student focused dialogic instruction [6]. This process privileges group meaning making and allows students to take control of the content and discussion. In this process, Socratic Seminars create natural opportunities for teacher educators to learn from their college students. Freire noted, "There is no *teaching* without *learning*, ...what I mean is that teaching and learning take place in such a way that those who teach learn..."[7]. The line between faculty and student begin to blur as participants co-examine issues and learn from the ideas of others.

Since Socratic Seminars are not debates, the focus of the time is to ask thoughtful questions that push one another to deeper understanding of a text, or more broadly speaking, to a more sophisticated understanding of an overarching theme. This inherently encourages reflection and collaboration.

4.3 Challenges

As with all methods, there are potentially challenging aspects with each pedagogical choice. One of the most important decisions is in regards to text selection. Finding a text that is challenging, thought provoking, and worthy of a prolonged discussion can be difficult. Also, it takes class time to teach the method before substantial conversations are ready to unfold. It is useful to scaffold seminars by beginning with shorter texts and seminars while spending more time teaching the process. Then, once students have experienced several seminars, they are better able to address more complicated or controversial topics.

5. Applications for Teaching English Language Learners

Socratic Seminars are useful in the preparation of teachers to meet the needs of their future English language learners (ELs). As teacher education students participate in these seminars, it is the hope they will act as a model that can be used in their future classrooms with ELs. Using Socratic Seminars in an EL classroom provides children with the ability to practice English in an authentic way. Not only do children build confidence and vocabulary, they also have a forum to think metacognitively about their thinking and class discussion [8]. The format of the seminar holistically addresses the four domains of English; reading, writing, speaking, and listening authentically.

As teacher education students examine Socratic Seminars, it becomes evident that thoughtful, critical discussions involve more than an understanding of vocabulary. The complexities of Discourse [9] in a newly emerging language can be difficult skills to teach ELs. Using Socratic Seminars, especially the aspects of goal setting and classroom seminar debriefs, allows the teacher to uncover often hidden pragmatics and cultural expectations surrounding group dialogue. Children become more aware of how they participate in discussions and can see their improvement over the course of a school year.



6. Conclusion

Certainly there are no panaceas or simple fixes in providing college students with the necessary tools and experiences to become effective teachers. Preparing teachers is a complex task. However, one potential tool that teacher educators may choose to utilize is a Socratic Seminar. Additionally, in considering how to best prepare teachers to meet the needs of ELs, Socratic Seminars offer valuable experiences and a model for future classroom practice.

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