

The Students Are Doing
Most of the Talking and
Thinking:
Socratic Seminars for
Every Classroom

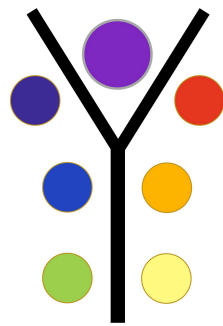
Charles Ames Fischer
June 24, 2011

Workshop Plan:

Introduction
Powerpoint
Seminar Text I (*An Ominous Baby*)
Seminar Text II (*The Two Brothers*)
Debrief
Q & A
Starting Soon: The Ten Components

Contact:

Please feel free to contact me with any questions you have about Socratic Seminars or anything we talked about today. I'd be happy to help! I work with individual teachers and entire school districts on implementing critical and creative thinking skills, habits of mind, collaboration and communication skills through Socratic Seminar.



Charles Ames Fischer

Education Consultant

www.CharlesAmesFischer.com

aragornfischer@gmail.com

(303) 521-6694

Students will develop better skills in four main areas of communication: reading, writing, listening and speaking. They will develop strong habits of mind or scholarly dispositions as they work better cooperatively. They will develop wonder as they hunger for proof and integrity, and confidence as they get excited about ideas.

- Read deeply and critically for multiple purposes
- Increased confidence and reading comprehension
- Write with sophistication
- Learn to actively listen
- Speak with greater clarity
- Become better at solving problems both alone and in a variety of groups
- How to use language for critical & creative thinking

Teachers will learn very practical strategies to significantly increase learning time. By adopting the role of *facilitator*, teachers can develop better listening and questioning skills, leading to stronger reflective practice. As *researchers*, teachers can experience amazing professional growth leading to better formative and authentic assessments, differentiation and other areas of teaching and learning often considered “best practices.”

- Find more time to teach using better classroom management
- Ask a variety of better questions
- Transform class discussions into more meaningful dialogues
- Create responsible learners
- Build collaboration & social skills
- Energize your own inquiry
- Challenge and engage more students in many settings
- Learn how to recognize and assess quality dialogue, or “reasoned talk”

Text	examples
Poetry	“anyone lived in a pretty how town” by e.e. cummings
Short Story	<i>An Ominous Baby</i> by Stephen Crane
Short Text	Tao Te Ching chapter 2
Children’s book	<i>The Sneetches</i> by Doctor Seuss
Movie Clip	Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark
Painting	<i>Persistence of Memory</i> by Dali
Excerpt from novel	Opening paragraph to <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>
Question	“What is boredom?”
Quotation	“First they came...” by Martin Niemoller
Song + Lyrics	<i>Daughter</i> by Pearl Jam
Song + Lyrics + Visual	<i>Naive Melody</i> by Talking Heads and contemporary art from <i>What the Songs Look Like</i>
Classical Music	<i>The Planets</i> by Gustav Holst
Math Proof	Euclid’s <i>Book of the Elements</i>
Chart or Graph	Immigration in the 19th Century
Performance	Jerome Murat’s <i>The Living Statue</i>
Demonstration	Center of Gravity: Difference Between Males & Females
Primary Resource	Columbus’s journal
Political Cartoon	“Join or Die”
Map	The Spread of Islam
TV Show	Star Trek: Voyager episode 191: <i>Living Witness</i>
Paradox	“This sentence is false.” (True or False?)

Name: _____ Date: _____

Annotate (make notes on) the following for Socratic Seminar. You may develop your own style of making notes and preparing a piece, but the following are areas to stay mindful about:

- vocabulary
- structure
- symbols
- **QUESTIONS** that arise in you as you read
- strange phrases
- unusual grammar
- viewpoint(s)
- word choice
- repetition
- imagery
- posture
- shape
- color

AN OMINOUS BABY

May 1894

BY STEPHEN CRANE

A BABY was wandering in a strange country. He was a tattered child with a frowsled wealth of yellow hair. His dress, of a checked stuff, was soiled and showed the marks of many conflicts like the chain-shirt of a warrior. His sun-tanned knees shone above wrinkled stockings which he pulled up occasionally with an impatient movement when they entangled his feet. From a gaping shoe there appeared an array of tiny toes.

He was toddling along an avenue between rows of stolid, brown houses. He went slowly, with a look of absorbed interest on his small, flushed face. His blue eyes stared curiously. Carriages went with a musical rumble over the smooth asphalt. A man with a chrysanthemum was going up steps. Two nursery-maids chatted as they walked slowly, while their charges hob-nobbed amiably between perambulators. A truck wagon roared thunderously in the distance.

The child from the poor district made way along the brown street filled with dull gray shadows. High up, near the roofs, glancing sun-rays changed cornices to blazing gold and silvered the fronts of windows. The wandering baby stopped and stared at the two children laughing and playing in their carriages among the heaps of rugs and cushions. He braced his legs apart in an attitude of earnest attention. His lower jaw fell and disclosed his small even teeth. As they moved on, he followed the carriages with awe in his face as if contemplating a pageant. Once one of the babies, with twittering laughter, shook a gorgeous rattle at him. He smiled jovially in return.

Finally a nursery maid ceased conversation and, turning, made a gesture of annoyance.

"Go 'way, little boy," she said to him. "Go 'way. You're all dirty."

He gazed at her with infant tranquillity for a moment and then went slowly off, dragging behind him a bit of rope he had acquired in another street. He continued to investigate the new scenes. The people and houses struck him with interest as would flowers and trees. Passengers had to avoid the small, absorbed figure in the middle of the sidewalk. They glanced at the intent baby face covered with scratches and dust as with scars and powder smoke.

After a time, the wanderer discovered upon the pavement, a pretty child in fine clothes playing with a toy. It was a tiny fire engine painted brilliantly in crimson and gold. The wheels rattled as its small owner dragged it uproariously about by means of a string. The babe with his bit of rope trailing behind him paused and regarded the child and the toy. For a long while he remained motionless, save for his eyes, which followed all movements of the glittering thing.

The owner paid no attention to the spectator but continued his joyous imitations of phases of the career of a fire engine. His gleeful baby laugh rang against the calm fronts of the houses. After a little, the wandering baby began quietly to sidle nearer. His bit of rope, now forgotten, dropped at his feet. He removed his eyes from the toy and glanced expectantly at the other child.

"Say," he breathed, softly.

The owner of the toy was running down the walk at top speed. His tongue was clanging like a bell and his legs were galloping. An iron post on the corner was all ablaze. He did not look around at the coaxing call from the small, tattered figure on the curb.

The wandering baby approached still nearer and, presently, spoke again. "Say," he murmured, "le' me play wif it?"

The other child interrupted some shrill tootings. He bended his head and spoke disdainfully over his shoulder.

"No," he said.

The wanderer retreated to the curb. He failed to notice the bit of rope, once treasured. His eyes followed as before the winding course of the engine, and his tender mouth twitched.

"Say," he ventured at last, "is dat yours?"

"Yes," said the other, tilting his round chin. He drew his property suddenly behind him as if it were menaced. "Yes," he repeated, "it's mine."

"Well, le' me play wif it?" said the wandering baby, with a trembling note of desire in his voice.

"No," cried the pretty child with determined lips. "It's mine! My ma-ma buyed it."

"Well, tan't I play wif it?" His voice was a sob. He stretched forth little, covetous hands.

"No," the pretty child continued to repeat. "No, it's mine."

"Well, I want to play wif it," wailed the other. A sudden, fierce frown mantled his baby face. He clenched his thin hands and advanced with a formidable gesture. He looked some wee battler in a war.

"It's mine! It's mine," cried the pretty child, his voice in the treble of outraged rights.

"I want it," roared the wanderer.

"It's mine! It's mine!"

"I want it!"

"It's mine!"

The pretty child retreated to the fence, and there paused at bay. He protected his property with outstretched arms. The small vandal made a charge. There was a short scuffle at the fence. Each grasped the string to the toy and tugged. Their faces were wrinkled with baby rage, the verge of tears.

Finally, the child in tatters gave a supreme tug and wrenched the string from the other's hands. He set off rapidly down the street, bearing the toy in his arms. He was weeping with the air of a wronged one who has at last succeeded in achieving his rights. The other baby was squalling lustily. He seemed quite helpless. He wrung his chubby hands and railed.

After the small barbarian had got some distance away, he paused and regarded his booty. His little form curved with pride. A soft, gleeful smile loomed through the storm of tears. With great care, he prepared the toy for travelling. He stopped a moment on a corner and gazed at the pretty child whose small figure was quivering with sobs. As the latter began to show signs of beginning pursuit, the little vandal turned and vanished down a dark side street as into a swallowing cavern.

Syntopicon: The Big Ideas

Mortimer J. Adler / Paideia Institute

Angel	Justice	Science
Animal	Knowledge	Sense
Aristocracy	Labor	Sign and Symbol
Art	Language	Sin
Astronomy	Law	Slavery
Beauty	Liberty	Soul
Being	Life and Death	Space
Cause	Logic	State
Chance	Love	Temperance
Change	Man	Theology
Citizen	Mathematics	Time
Constitution	Matter	Truth
Courage	Mechanics	Tyranny
Custom and Convention	Medicine	Universal and Particular
Definition	Memory and Imagination	Virtue and Vice
Democracy	Metaphysics	War and Peace
Desire	Mind	Wealth
Dialectic	Monarchy	Will
Duty	Nature	Wisdom
Education	Necessity and Contingency	World
Element	Oligarchy	
Emotion	One and Many	
Eternity	Opinion	
Evolution	Opposition	
Experience	Philosophy	
Family	Physics	
Fate	Pleasure and Pain	
Form	Poetry	
God	Principle	
Good and Evil	Progress	
Government	Prophecy	
Habit	Prudence	
Happiness	Punishment	
History	Quality	
Honor	Quantity	
Hypothesis	Reasoning	
Idea	Relation	
Immortality	Religion	
Induction	Revolution	
Infinity	Rhetoric	
Judgment	Same and Other	

Other possibilities:

Fear
Forgiveness
Free Will
Illusion
Pity
Pride
Regret
Value

Sample Seminar Plan for *An Ominous Baby*

Ideas, Issues, Values

Some of the big ideas and issues in the text are: Cause, Chance, Desire, Equality, Fate, Greed, Happiness, Justice, Language, Law, Man, Nature, Necessity & Contingency, Principle, Prudence, Punishment, Quality, Sharing, Tyranny & Despotism, Virtue & Vice, Wealth, and Will.

There is the apparent class difference between the “tattered child with a **wealth** of frowsled hair” and the other people in the story who had carriages, toys, and gorgeous rattles. The “**wealth** of hair” is fascinating because in all other aspects this child is poor. Is this really wealth?

An interesting conversation could be facilitated about greed and sharing. What would have happened if the other child had simply shared the toy? Would the “little vandal” have taken it? Where did he get that first piece of string, anyway?

Other questions: What causes the “little vandal” to take it? Are there other forces at play? Is this just Robin Hood on a smaller level? Are his actions justified in ANY way? Is this encounter just chance? Where can justice be seen in the story? Is this somehow “an eye for an eye?” Is this an early picture of man’s nature? What would be an appropriate punishment? Why is this an *ominous* baby? What is the omen? Why are these two babies? Why is it a *swallowing* cave? Why is it a strange country?

Prep Work

Because Socratic Seminar can be intimidating to shy students, a short, paired conversation can help get them involved early.

The question for the prep work is: “*What is more important in this story Wealth or Equality?*” I will poll the students to see how the answers play out. I will use the poll to move the prep work forward: perhaps investigating the minority answer, asking certain groups to defend their answers with citation from the text, etc.

Opening Question

“What does this story say about the concept of Happiness?”

Ten Starting Components

There are four considerations before beginning the actual seminars and they have to do with establishing the purpose of the seminars, the expectations, the procedures involved, and evaluation. Then there are six basic parts to the seminars themselves:

Purpose	Considerations	Components of Seminar
Why do you want to start a Socratic Seminar? What do you hope to accomplish? How does the seminar connect to your curriculum goals and objectives? How will the students benefit?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Purpose 2. Expectations 3. Procedures 4. Evaluation 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pre-seminar activity 2. Text 3. Opening question 4. Facilitator 5. Students 6. Post-seminar activity

An important part of establishing purpose is deciding how the seminar is connected to the curriculum. Michael Strong has suggested four models for using Socratic seminars in content focused classrooms: seminar as a supplement to content, seminar for deep concept

Goal	=	Text Selection
Grow as teacher	=	Choose text with no right answer
Critical thinking skills	=	Choose a rich, difficult text
Curriculum magnifying glass	=	Primary source / complementary piece
Values clarification	=	Text that examines a value or issue

development, seminar as prerequisite to content, and seminar as the content itself.

Expectations

Because Socratic seminars are different from typical class periods, prepare the students for the experience. Some students, for example, will have to get used to not constantly being told what to do. Others are not used to working so hard and will exclaim, “My brain hurts!” Make a few things clear:

- The seminar is about thinking and not about getting the right answer.
- It is cooperative and not about the individual.
- The students will be doing most of the work, intellectually and socially.

Procedures

Procedures are simply things you want the students to do. Before starting your first seminar, I suggest making a list of everything you think you want students to do, starting from when they enter your classroom. Write them all down and then have the students practice them before your first seminar.

Pre-seminar Activity

The pre-seminar activity is for getting the students ready to have a quality conversation. Essentially, this part of the seminar process helps students find avenues into the text. It can involve looking up vocabulary words, journaling, reading historical context, etc.

Pre-seminar activities can also include mini-lessons on skills that the students need for the seminars. Journaling about an idea such as Stephen Covey's phrase "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" can help students think about how to better participate in the conversation. Short activities where students practice active listening or serialized questioning can help them experience new and better ways to participate.

Text

The "text" for a Socratic seminar can be anything that will promote thinking, typically a poem, a short piece of fiction, an excerpt from a novel, a work of art, a question or quotation, a geometric proof, a movie clip, a song, etc. In less formal settings, a seminar could even be about how a hole in a fence got there or about how tracks in sand create different impressions.

- The text should be relatively short – typically only a few paragraphs so that the conversation can stay focused.
- The text should be difficult for the participants to comprehend as individuals so that everyone is needed in order to create meaning.
- The text should have widespread "big idea" appeal.
- In the beginning, use a concrete text in order to anchor the conversation.

Opening question

The opening question is usually the way the seminar itself starts. Because the goal is to have genuine conversation, the opening question should not have a right answer. Instead, it should challenge students to look

"Good" Opening Questions

- Are broad enough to engage most students
- Deal with large philosophical issues
- Invite complex conversation

"Bad" Opening Questions

- Are narrow and engage few students
- Focus only on details or specifics
- Invite simple answers, such as yes/no

closely at the text and to think about it in new ways.

A good opening question is immediately provocative and engaging for most students, and leads to conversation about the text or specific parts of it. A bad opening question will polarize students and cause arguing and debating.

When your opening questions falter or flop, ask procedural questions in order to rescue the situation. This gets them talking about the seminar itself and not necessarily about the text, but at least they are conversing. Ask a question like, “How can we make meaning out line 6?” Or perhaps, “What do we need to do in order to get unstuck?” Questions of this nature help pass the responsibility of the seminar over to the students.

Facilitator

A good way to begin facilitating is to only ask questions. Ask the opening question, and, if it works, sit back and watch. If the initial question doesn't work, ask another until the conversation takes off. Some programs strongly suggest that facilitators only ask questions. This is decent advice at first, but later actually hinders the process. However, just asking questions in the beginning is a great way to move yourself away from didactic instruction. In the beginning, the students will often need procedural comments from you:

Sample Procedural Comments

“Tom, you just interrupted Sasha. Sasha please continue.”

“Where in the text do you see that stated?”

”What about this idea? How does it relate to what we said yesterday?”

“Jessica wanted to say something about this I think.”

“What about the second stanza? Are we going to skip it?”

“I'd like to hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet.”

Students

Students should conduct themselves as indicated in the expectations and procedures that you established for your classroom. But that is only the beginning. They must participate, listen effectively, pose questions, draw conclusions, summarize and synthesize information, and much more. In terms of basic expectations, I always start by telling my students that they must contribute at least once.

Since students are often not accustomed to genuine conversation in the classroom, begin by establishing conversation guidelines. Things to do might include: taking turns, citing the

text, and building upon what others have stated. Things not to do might include: not repeating what's been stated, not interrupting, and not telling elaborate stories. In addition to the skills, the students must feel safe and have enough confidence to participate fully.

Safety must be established by prior experience. The most sensitive students will not speak at all until they first see what happens when (if) others are mocked, whether or not sarcastic comments are allowed, if there are such things as “dumb” questions or comments, etc. Teachers must establish a culture of genuine, safe inquiry in the classroom before attempting Socratic Seminars so that everyone will be willing to contribute.

Post-seminar activity

There are three typical objectives for post-seminar activities: having students connect to previous ideas or themes, having students reflect on the seminar and their participation, or having students further research and explore. To be simple, I like to think about these as connecting to the past (previous work), the present (the seminar), or the future (extension work). These include journaling, projects, papers, debates and many other products.

Evaluation

Many teachers avoid assessment issues by using Socratic Seminars to supplement the curriculum. Because the seminars are part of an entire curriculum unit, they assess the students at a later time using the standard methods of quizzes, tests, writing assignments and so on. Rubrics and/or self-assessments are typically used to assess the seminar itself.

Making Adjustments After a Quick Start

After any seminar there are a lot of questions for the facilitator to consider. How did the seminar leave you feeling? How was the conversation? How deep was the analysis? Did everyone participate effectively? How will you assess or give feedback to the students? And the list goes on.

Guidelines for Socratic Seminar Leaders

1. Give enough of an introduction to set the stage, but get the group focused as soon as possible.
2. Keep it short at first and build toward longer seminars once you have practice facilitating and once the students understand their roles better.
3. Beware aware of trying to be perfect. Take the plunge. Be willing to be awkward and uncertain. You can rely on human curiosity and wonder.
4. The content of Socratic Seminar is conceptual understanding, not specific information. Seminars are not for “covering” material.
5. Consider ONLY asking questions. This will relieve you of the standard top-down delivery of content.
6. Set group and individual goals before digging into the text.
7. Thoroughly prepare texts for seminar so that students have conversation points and questions.
8. Use chalkboard and whiteboard for opening questions, taking surveys, key words, etc. Again, be cautious of lecturing.
9. Stay anchored in the text. When in doubt, ask another question or refer back to the text.
10. Encourage the students to build on answers, even if they disagree.
11. For the sake of clarity, rephrase and paraphrase as needed.
12. Remember to wait 3-5 seconds or more for students to reply to questions. Really good questions always require a lot of think time.
13. Insist that answers be clear and adequately explained. Be patient, Socratic Seminar is for building skills.
14. Do not insist on agreement or consensus. Encourage conversation about differences.
15. There is no need to reach resolution, compromise, or closure. In fact, a good seminar will continue outside of the classroom.
16. Recognize listening as a form of participation. Teach students how to listen effectively.
17. Coach students on how to improve: reading, listening, speaking, writing, making notes, taking turns, citing texts, defending their views, etc.
18. Handle silent, monopolizing or obnoxious students outside of the seminar.
19. As the students become more experienced, have them do more work. They can ask more questions, paraphrase, encourage each other, etc.
20. Tally or map student contributions.
21. Reflect with the students after each seminar in order to improve and set new goals.

Recommended Resources

Great Books Foundation www.greatbooks.org

Paideia Institute www.paideia.org

- Adler, M. J. (1982). *The paideia proposal*. New York: MacMillan.
- Adler, M. J. (1983). *Paideia problems and possibilities*. New York: MacMillan.
- Adler, M. J. (1984). *The paideia program*. New York: MacMillan.
- Armstrong, H. W. (1995). *Study is hard work*. Jaffrey, NH: David R. Godine, Publisher.
- Ball, H. W. & Brewer, P. (2000). *Socratic seminars in the block*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education, Inc.
- Copeland, M. (2005). *Socratic circles: fostering critical and creative thinking in middle and high school*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Covey, S.R. (1989). *The seven habits of highly effective people*. New York, New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- Daniels, H. (1994). *Literature circles: voice and choice in the student-centered classroom*. York, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Garlikov, R. *The Socratic method: teaching by asking instead of by telling*. Retrieved July 30, 2007, from http://www.garlikov.com/Soc_Meth.html.
- Garlikov, R. *Teaching effectively: helping students absorb and assimilate material*. Retrieved July 30, 2007, from <http://www.garlikov.com/teaching/absorb.html>.
- Moeller, J. V & Moeller, V. M. (2002). *Socratic seminars and literature circles for middle and high school english*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education, Inc.
- Postman, N. & Weingartner, C. (1969). *Teaching as a subversive activity*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Strong, M. (1997). *The habit of thought: from Socratic seminars to Socratic practice*. Chapel Hill, NC: New View Publications.
- Wiggins, G. (1998). *Educative assessment: designing assessments to inform and improve student performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers.
- Zeiderman, H. (1989). *A guide for leading discussions using touchstones, volume I*. Annapolis, MD: Touchstones.