

SOCRATIC SEMINAR

Critical questions, irony, provocation, the disproof of assumed knowledge, the confession of nescience and confusion are all parts of Socratic philosophy. The Socratic Dialogue is a didactical method which has been developed based on this approach. It offers a learning concept which allows students to unfold their own knowledge through purposeful dialogues.

“You know it. But you don’t know that you know it.” (Mäeutik)

The Socratic Dialogues can begin with concrete examples of common day to day phenomenons. After that, the participants express and verify their opinions based on defined rules in order to achieve an iterative consensus on the relevant question. Important for this step is not only a symmetric and equitable communication-structure, but also the dispensation of authorities and the willingness to face criticism of one’s personal opinion. Furthermore, a clear argumentation and a mutual conversation should be achieved.

A leading role in the Socratic Dialogue belongs to the moderator, who should take care that the group complies with the regulations and respects the conditions. Additionally, he/she should advance the conversation and pay attention that the group stays focused on the relevant topic. Another important aspect is that the moderator needs to enrich the conversation with interesting and productive approaches.

Furthermore, there are various central rules in order to achieve a gainful and productive discussion. As a principal matter, every participant should seriously respect the input of others and not interrupt somebody else. Additionally it is very important that the participants focus on the topic and don’t lose the thread.

The Socratic Dialogue is a great opportunity to arrange a lesson in which pupils or students do not only have a large active part, but also become sensible for different topics or opinions and gain new knowledge due to the conversation. Additionally, it trains several skills like the competency to lead a group, the adequate behavior during a discussion or the ability to express one’s opinion. It also underlines the importance of benefiting from a mutual conversation, having a critical view and advancing one’s personal view. Especially when teaching a second language the Socratic Dialogue is a perfect method to encourage students to speak and discuss in the foreign language and thus to advance their ability to actively use the language.

It is also optimal to enforce the pupils to take an active part in the conversational process of the lesson and to explain a concept or their opinion in their own words. By discussing in groups - compared to traditional classroom discussions - the pupils have the possibility to be more active and to feel less pressure to suit their own to the teacher's opinion.

“However, as the teacher shares power and authority, students are invited to assume more active, even challenging roles where the level of cognitive engagement is wider spread.”¹

Socratic Seminar – an example: “The Rabbit and the Turtle”

My example for a Socratic Dialogue is based on a fable, which, in my opinion, primarily fits to children and pupils from the third to the sixth grade. It should be an examination of social and personal differences and a helpful approach for the pupils to identify advantages in their personal weaknesses.

The fable “The Rabbit and the Turtle” puts emphasis on the fact that it is not particularly advantageous to underestimate another person, since every weakness can also bring a positive side with it. In the end, the turtle wins the race because the rabbit didn't accept the turtle as a serious opponent. As a pre-seminar assignment, the pupils should have a look at the assigned fable “The Rabbit and the Turtle” and have the main ideas in mind. They should also prepare the vocabulary in order to understand the content and to be able to discuss the short story later on. This way, the students have the possibility to reflect the story and its contents at home.

After the pupils prepared and read the fable at home, the seminar process could start with a question. There are different types of questions which can help the students to decode the content of a text. An opening question is usually open-ended and refers to the main message or moral of the text. The core question requires the pupils to identify specific ideas in the text, whereas the closing question asks the pupils to put emphasis on a certain situation or to state the development process of their opinion during the conversation.²

Regarding the fable, the following questions would be possible:

Opening questions:

- * Is it possible to transform your weakness into strengths?
- * Are there disadvantages of being too self-confident?

¹ *Sociocognitive Analysis of Socratic Dialogue: A Blend of Theories*. Billings & Philgren: Page 4

² cf: *Socrates in the Classroom: Rationales and Effects of Philosophizing with Children*. Ann S. Philgren: Page 61

Core questions:

- * Why is it a surprise for the rabbit that the turtle challenged him by a race?
- * Why did the turtle challenge the rabbit by a race? Did he sense what would happen?

Closing questions:

- * If you were the rabbit, how would you feel?
- * What are your personal weak points?
- * Have you ever underestimated someone?

The conversation takes place in small groups, which are physically arranged in chair circles. The leader or moderator of the discussion should be among the others in order to control the process of the conversation and to pay attention that the group stays focused on the relevant topic. To start the discussion, the pupils should interpret the text by stating a “pre-judgment, a fore-structure of understanding allowing what is to be interpreted or understood to be grasped in a preliminary fashion.”³

The opening question “Is it possible to transform your weakness into strengths?” encourages the pupils to explain their “pre-judgment” without being influenced by the following cooperative group discussion. After that, the text can be analyzed by some core questions like, for example, “Why is it a surprise for the rabbit that the turtle challenged him by a race?” This enables the pupils to detach themselves from their opinion and to focus on the text. Thus, the pupils should feel free to think in a different way and to express their estimation. In the next step, the pupils should individually focus on their ideas and opinions.⁴ They should connect the main ideas to their own life in order to gain a new point of view and insight into the moral of the text. This way, they are able to reflect their own weaknesses and strengths and thus think about possible connections. During the post-seminar, personal and group goals can be set.

The Socratic Seminar enables the pupils to develop different skills like an open-mindedness, the awareness of their own opinion and adequate discussion techniques. By arguing in their second language, they additionally improve their language skills and learn words or expressions from their classmates during the discussion. Furthermore, they get the opportunity to discuss “without the teacher” – and thus feel less pressured to fit to certain expectations. In my opinion, it is an outstanding chance to improve social and personal skills, to broaden one’s mind and to actively use the second language.

³ *The Features of Socratic Seminar*. Ann S. Philgren: page 4

⁴ cf: *The Features of Socratic Seminar* Ann S. Philgren: page 5