Chapter 3
Critical Thinking, Socratic Seminars, and the College Classroom

John D. Long
Lindenwood University, USA

ABSTRACT

In many college classrooms, the requirement that students engage in critical thinking is missing. Students have become point gatherers and not thinkers. The Socratic Seminar, derived from the teaching techniques of Socrates, is a proven method to increase the critical thinking in class, and out. This structured discussion is not a debate. This chapter includes a description of, the purpose for, and successful strategies for conducting a Socratic Seminar, based on the researcher's experiences. The use of a foundational reading grounds the discussion on a common reference point. The purpose of the seminar is to improve the quality of discussion by having the students be more precise in their questions and answers. Questioning clarity, precision, accuracy, relevance, depth, and breadth of statements forces graduate students to move past the shallow parts of discussion to areas which more fully explore a topic. Graduate level work requires this depth of understanding and this method improves their ability for in-depth discussion.

INTRODUCTION

Picture a professor standing in front of a classroom. That is easy to do; it happens almost every day of the week. Now picture that same professor asking her class what they think about a topic they were assigned to read about as homework following the last class session. Again, it's not hard to imagine. Now picture the class looking back blankly at the teacher. This part is easy to picture if you have ever stood in front of a college classroom, because it

has probably happened to you as well. The teacher, with rising frustration, rephrases the question and ultimately calls on a student she hopes knows the answer, or simply answers the question herself. Sound familiar?

It was to me as I transitioned to the college classroom as a fulltime professor after serving in public education for 25 years. I knew there was both a need for helping the students develop and demonstrate their critical thinking skills and a method to facilitate both. The method is the

Socratic Seminar. This method has risen and fallen in popularity in various classrooms around the globe over the last 2,000 years and is worth the time and effort it takes to develop the skills needed to implement it in a wide variety of college classrooms from the undergraduate to the doctoral level.

Like many college professors, I felt I had been hired because of my subject matter expertise. As a retired K-12 teacher, principal, and superintendent, I felt prepared to share with aspiring teachers and administrators the lessons I had learned in a career of public education in several states. That sharing often involved my explaining the realities of education from my perspective, or lecture, punctuated with case studies demonstrating the veracity of my words, or war stories. My desire to have my students think and demonstrate their thinking was not helped by this teaching method. As Maiorana (1991) said:

Many teachers believe that the purpose of education is to learn facts, ideas, and skills and to learn to think critically. Yet the road followed by most classroom teachers in the delivery of subject matter has been straight, narrow, and unbroken and has emphasized rote learning, not critical thinking. That road began in Sicily around 450 B.C. as the art of rhetoric. It survives to this day in many forms including the classroom lecture. (p. 53)

I take slight solace in knowing I am falling back on a multi millennial old instructional method. I am saddened that the method I chose was the wrong one. Instead, I should have been using an instructional technique of similar vintage: The Socratic Seminar. In this chapter we will briefly explore the origins of the Socratic Seminar, tie it to the widely known Bloom's taxonomy, discuss in a straightforward manner how this can be implemented in college classrooms to great advantage, and finally discuss why this proven method is not more readily utilized in colleges today.

BACKGROUND

Socrates as a historical figure dates to his birth in 469 BCE and his death by execution in 399 BCE in Athens (Ahbel-Rappe, 2009). While Socrates was many things, including a philosopher and a teacher, what he was not was a writer. He did not take the time to write his philosophies and beliefs. All of the thoughts attributed to Socrates were written down by others. Some of these writers had actually studied with him, as in the case of Plato. There is speculation that other writers perhaps had never even met him personally (Ahbel-Rappe, 2009). This leaves us with images of a man that may, or may not, be entirely accurate. However, we will press forward with what are the most commonly accepted tenets of his philosophy and leave the arguments about the historical accuracy to another day and venue.

According to Cookson (2009), "Socrates believed that we learn best by asking essential questions and testing tentative answers against reason and fact in a continual and virtuous circle of honest debate" (p. 8). The need for, and importance of, questioning is then held as the central tenet of his philosophical practice. While true, it does not adequately explain the translation of his philosophy into the current classroom. A closer reading of the quote does shed some light on the actual practice, specifically the need for the questioning to be 'continuous' and 'virtuous.'

The use of questions as a means of gaining knowledge is well known. However, the person asking the question in a typical classroom is the student, with the teacher providing answers based on her own experience or knowledge. While this might be sufficient in some instances, such as fact based questions, it does not always result in the desired learning if the desire is for a more nuanced answer. In our efforts to educate the students in our classrooms we should consider for a moment the origin of the word *educate*. "Interestingly, the word *educate* comes from the Latin *educere* = e',

18 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/critical-thinking-socratic-seminars-and-the-college-classroom/133711

Related Content

Integrating Service-Learning Pedagogy Into Community College Coursework: A Phenomenological Study
Timothy Leonardand Patrick J. Flink (2020). *International Journal of Innovative Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (pp. 25-36).*
www.irma-international.org/article/integrating-service-learning-pedagogy-into-community-college-coursework/245771

A Cost-Effective Model to Address Student Readiness Through the Lens of a College Physics Course
Rebecca Forrest, Donna Pattison, Jacqueline Hawkins, Monica Martens, Laura Taylor Jacobsand Shuo Chen (2021). *International Journal of Innovative Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (pp. 1-17).*
www.irma-international.org/article/a-cost-effective-model-to-address-student-readiness-through-the-lens-of-a-college-physics-course/289945

"The Fact That the Author Was Male Instead of Female Provided for an Objective Opinion": Implicit Bias in the Classroom
Julia Ferrara Waity, Jennifer Vandermindenand Kristin Robeson (2020). *International Journal of Innovative Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (pp. 44-60).*
www.irma-international.org/article/the-fact-that-the-author-was-male-instead-of-female-provided-for-an-objective-opinion/265506

Collaborative Discussion Using Padlet to Enhance the Teaching and Learning of Essay Writing in Mandarin Language
Yap Teng Teng, Azlin Zaiti Zainal, Vinothini Vasodavanand Emily Lau Kui-Ling (2020). *ICT-Based Assessment, Methods, and Programs in Tertiary Education (pp. 169-190).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/collaborative-discussion-using-padlet-to-enhance-the-teaching-and-learning-of-essay-writing-in-mandarin-language/255259

Certifications in Cybersecurity Workforce Development: A Case Study
Ping Wangand Hubert D'Cruze (2022). *Research Anthology on Advancements in Cybersecurity Education (pp. 119-138).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/certifications-in-cybersecurity-workforce-development/292107