Chapter 3
Social Justice Through Socratic Seminars:
Promoting Critical Engagement in a Virtual Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

The need to critically engage learners whether the classroom space is traditional, hybrid, or virtual is one of the most pressing educational issues teachers face today. Engaging learners specifically in an online environment requires the examination of both the content being taught as well as the methods or pedagogical models used to deliver the content. This chapter highlights how both the content, and the delivery can be filtered in ways that are relevant to the learners, that value their home and community assets, and that provide them with tangible touch points to transfer classroom information into the real world to maximize student engagement. The core of this chapter focuses on the use of Socratic Seminars as a means of engaging learning through targeted and purposeful conversations around social justice issues. This chapter demonstrates how the original tenets of Socratic Seminar can be used to present content in a manner that leverages students' cultural and linguistic wealth, develops personal and social identities, and builds critical competencies and global awareness in all learners. Specific connections between justice oriented Socratic Seminar, anti-bias teaching frameworks, and online learning environments are made.

INTRODUCTION

The Need to Critically Engage

Education in the 21ˢᵗ Century calls for students to *engage* – to think critically, to problem-solve, and to become contributing members of society that can adapt to a changing and globalized set of norms. The need to critically *engage* and to transfer learning from one situation to another has never been more apparent. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent quarantine has extended the need for remote learning to the equivalent (in many cases) to multiple school years and has forever altered the way that students *engage* in the classroom. "Nearly everything about teaching has changed for teachers over the last few months" (Lemov & Woolway, 2020, p. 2). The image of the "ideal classroom" that teachers had in their minds no longer exists. Their walls, painstakingly designed with bulletin boards, flexible seating arrangements constructed to promote conversation and collegiality, and carefully curated classroom libraries have been replaced with Zoom rooms, Web-Ex sessions, and Google Meetings. But that does not mean that the *ideals* of classroom teaching that educators value have been abandoned. Ideal classrooms are ones where people are *engaged*, where they share ideas, where they are valued, and where they are encouraged to contribute in ways that reflect their community and culture (Ladson-Billings, 2014). The question then becomes: How can we take the ideals of traditional classrooms and translate them into relevant and *engaging* virtual learning experiences?

One of the major struggles teachers faced (and continue to face) in the transition from in-person to remote learning is the building and sustaining of student *engagement* in an online environment (Ali & Herrera, 2020; Kurt, Atay, & Ozturk, 2021). According to Wu (2016), *how* educators structure a virtual learning environment impacts the degree to which students *engage* in the learning experience. Any framework or pedagogical model for remote learning should take into account the intersection between content delivery, assessment, and engagement (Green, 2020). Content focuses on the subject matter and the resources provided to meet both the needs of the learners and the objectives of the learning experience (Green, 2020). Assessment addresses the formative and summative opportunities students have to demonstrate knowledge. Finally, *engagement* is defined as the amount of energy students devote to the learning experience and to their overall sense of joy as a learner (Beymer & Thomson, 2015; Shan & Cheng, 2019). This chapter highlights how the inquiry pedagogy of Socratic Seminar, traditionally presented in-person in Humanities classrooms, can be effectively implemented in a virtual learning environment to generate student interest and sustain critical *engagement*.

According to Driggs and Brillante (2020), building a culture of *engagement* in an online classroom relies on employing instructional methods that are hands-on,

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