

USING SOCRATIC SEMINARS IN A HIGH-SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASS

(Originally titled “What Is the Value of Life? and Other Socratic Questions”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, California English teacher/PD coach/ELA coordinator Casey Cuny says that for years, the student essays at the end of her carefully crafted unit on the meaning of life were “horrible.” Then she began using Socratic seminars and students’ participation, enthusiasm, and learning improved dramatically. “Socratic seminars are essentially scaffolded critical thinking sessions that enable the entire class to engage in critical thinking at their own level,” says Cuny. “The seminar provides an environment for addressing the essential question with real depth.” Here are her implementation suggestions:

Create a list of prior questions. Backtracking from her unit’s essential question – “What is the value of life?” – Cuny created these provocations:

- What gives something value?
- How does the concept of scarcity relate to life?
- If a whole item is made up of parts, what is one’s life made up of?
- Who or what is part of your life?
- How can the value of life be determined?
- Other teachers in her school have also launched Socratic seminars. A physical education teacher’s essential question was, “Is pain necessary for gain?” The history department’s question was, “Why did Lincoln fight the war?”

Explain the basic guidelines. All students must answer each question in their notes. Students raise their hands to be added to the speaking list. Students must wait their turn before speaking. Students must take notes on their peers’ responses. Everyone must be respectful and tolerant. Everyone must use evidence from texts to support their claims and preface comments with the title of the text and page number so everyone can follow along. With these ground rules established, Cuny posts the first question, gives students several minutes to answer it in their notes, and asks who wants to speak. Hands go up, she jots down students’ names, and they respond in order. As more students volunteer, Cuny adds them to the list. “Students must listen to all their peers’ responses and summarize each response in their notes,” she says. “I model the process in the beginning by reading back the notes I wrote for the first few people.”

Guide the discussion. Cuny believes it’s essential for the teacher to sit at students’ level and model taking notes, but the teacher is also “the leader, clarifier, summarizer, and moderator,” reminding students to provide evidence for their statements, asking follow-up questions, and deciding when to move on to the next question.

Step back. “Part of the challenge of running a Socratic seminar is letting go of control,” says Cuny. “I am always a little nervous before starting a Socratic seminar, but I am surprised and delighted by the end. Time and time again, students surprise me.”

In a sidebar within the article, Cuny has the following practical suggestions for running seminars:

- Be patient. Things can be awkward at first. “Fight the urge to tell them the answers.”
- Embrace silence. Give students time to think and use their notes. Ask another question only if it’s silent for more than a minute.
- Ask follow-up questions. “Do you mean...?” “Are you saying that...” “What do you mean by...?”
- Use questions as a blueprint, not a rigid plan. Some of the best moments come by nimbly adapting the original plan.
- Scaffold the process. In one class, Cuny wrote on the board, *Claim, Support, Explanation*.
- Be an exemplar. Students should do most of the talking, but there are times when the teacher needs to step in and model the best responses.
- Be flexible. Seminars can take several class periods. The goal is depth of knowledge.
- End the seminar with a performance task or assessment that provides a culminating demonstration of knowledge and understanding.

“What Is the Value of Life? and Other Socratic Questions” by Casey Cuny in *Educational Leadership*, November 2014 (Vol. 72, #3, p.54-58), <http://bit.ly/1y9gGGL>; Cuny can be reached at ccuny@hartdistrict.org.