

A short introduction and handout to the workshop: Socratic Seminar in the Tradition of Early Swedish Popular Education, *Folkbildning*

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Abstract

This paper is a short introduction, a handout at my workshop where we will carry out a Socratic seminar in the tradition of early Swedish Popular Education, *Folkbildning*. In this tradition, the “best of mankind” are to be our teachers of the essentials of life. The tradition introduces a group activity intended to increase critical thinking, self responsibility and self-reliance- all seen as necessary qualities in a democracy. A fairly simple methodology is utilized to improve the complex interplay of dialogical and intellectual skills.

Keywords: critical thinking, democracy, dialogue, interaction, Socratic, virtue, *bildning*

“The question is not to be merely educated or merely artist nor politician, but human being.”
Hans Larsson (1993, originally 1908), my translation

1. The Socratic tradition and *bildning* in Swedish Popular Education

In the early works of Swedish Popular Education, *Folkbildning*, Hans Larsson, professor of philosophy in Lund, inspired by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle as well as Kant and Fichte, emphasized and developed the idea of knowledge as an activity through intellect. To Larsson, the intellectual activity is an absolute condition if we are to develop consciousness. In daily life, the important things are hidden to us. When educating ourselves, we must try to integrate thought, will and feeling and by intuition reach beyond the conceptions of daily life (Larsson, 1904). Man has a free choice, but every individual participates in the total development of mankind and this development is also integrated in the individual. Larsson’s ideas are closely connected to the concept of *bildning* in Swedish, with equivalences as *Bildung* in German, *dannelse* in Danish, *obrazjenie* in Russian and *Paideia* in Greek. There is no exact translation in English or French. English texts use either “general education”, “liberal education” or just “culture” but none is quite equivalent to *bildning*. The inner core of *bildning* lies in the nature of knowledge and understanding. *Bildning* can be looked upon as a free activity where the individual develops in a life long learning process. It gives a sense of meaning, of being part of a bigger context. *Bildning* to Larsson is a way of life rather than attaining a certain amount of knowledge. Larsson’s concept of *bildning* is that it’s something open to everyone. The best way to self-education is to concentrate on a problem in a discipline and by this problem reach the depth where all disciplines unite, in the human consciousness. “*Not all, but the whole – in the particular*” (Gustavsson, 1991, p.144) is to be interpreted. The concept of *bildning* is by no means easily understood and there are several ways of interpreting its meaning. It develops dynamically during the period of self-education among members of the manual working class and in the Free Church movement in the early Swedish popular education programs around 1880-1930 (Gustavsson, 1991). Hans Larsson developed a new path in educational philosophy, necessary for the forthcoming development of self-education. He also popularized the idea of *bildning* and his books were read in wide circles both within and outside the popular movements. Similar ways to conduct Socratic seminars are found in the tradition of Leonard Nelsons Socratic interlocution, philosophizing with children (Gareth B Mathews, Mathew Lipman and others), Robert M Hutchins’ tradition of “Great Books” and Mortimer Adler’s “Paideia Seminar”.

1.1 The study circle and its origin

The most adopted form of studies within popular education was the study circle. The circles emerged as bible study circles in England and similar circles and study camps of the Chautauqua movements in the USA, where Oscar Olsson, “father of the Swedish study circle”, was inspired. Olsson graduated in Lund as a PhD in literature history in 1899 and spent the rest of his life working with popular education both in the working class movement, in the Order of Good Templars, and as a member of the Swedish Parliament. He kept close contact with Hans Larsson. Oscar Olsson carried out the first circle in Lund 1899-1902 and later, together with several other people, formed the ideological construction of self-education through study circles (Olsson, 1911, 1921). Olsson was inspired by Plato’s Socratic dialogues, but as opposed to the “classicists”, Olsson rejected the aristocratic part of the Greek heritage.

1.2 The personal functions of the study circle

In Olsson’s study circle, the library was the heart and starting point of learning, a place where the participants as a first step in the *bildning* process would search for knowledge. The second step was reflective reading, carried out either individually at home or by someone reading aloud to the group (reading circles to make it possible for people who could not read fluently or who could not read at all to be able to participate in the circles). The reflective reading was a phase in the process, where the participants should meet with the ideas of the text, reflect and deepen their understanding on a personal level, relating the read to themselves and to everyday life, like “*a voice in one’s own heart*” (Gustavsson, 1991). Olsson stressed the importance of preparing carefully for the next step by reading the text, commenting and marking. In the third step, the group met in dialogue to reflect on the text and to relate it to their shared experiences. This made it possible for the participants to distance themselves from their everyday experiences and ideas. He stressed the importance of thinking of the ideas presented not as ones own, but as the ideas of the group. Participants listening to others, refraining from trying to “win” discussions or from mere talking would make the circle a safe place for boldly trying different ideas and to delight in thinking. Olsson claimed that all this will result in better self-reliance and an approval of the own experience and of the group, where all are equal.

1.3 The democratic functions of the study circle

Oscar Olsson had important contact with Ellen Key, who had a central position within the early popular movements due to her strong engagement in education, childcare and women’s liberation. She greatly stressed the importance of aesthetic *bildning* for personal development. We have to rise above our every day life to see the greater picture (Key, 1906, 1992). Only art can give this experience. Key regarded dialogue as the important method of self-education. In Olsson’s and Key’s experiences, attending study circles systematically results in the participants’ gradually growing interest in good literature and art and disinterest in mass culture. The participants also gain the ability to cope with different views, to examine views logically, and to form their own opinion, not just uncritically listening to authorities. These outcomes were stressed even more by Professor Alf Alberg, another one of Hans Larsson’s disciples from Lund who brought the work of Olsson, Key and Larsson into post world wars’ pedagogy. Ahlberg (1986, first published in 1934) argues that free thinking is endangered because of the force of propaganda. In a complex society, it will be impossible for the masses to cope with all the information they need to be able to make decisions in a democratic order. We will have to rely on experts and let them rule, like Plato is suggesting. But when the experts disagree, there is a risk that propaganda effectively will turn the democracy into

dictatorship. The solution, according to Ahlberg, is an enlightened democracy. But this will require an energetic struggle to free the “life of thought” (*tankelivet*). By true *bildning*, helping us to understand the limits of our knowledge and to separate right from wrong, popular education can teach us to choose the right leaders and to see through propaganda.

2 Methodology within the study circle

2.1 The dialogical virtues

Professor Lars Lindström introduced, or rather re-introduced the Socratic seminars in Sweden when working with teachers training at University College of Arts Crafts and Design and later at the Stockholm Institute of Education in the middle of the 1980ies and I have been working with him since and on my own on various projects using the Socratic seminars. Lindström’s thesis is that dialogue is not primarily a method but a disposition, a habit of mind to be attained and a relation to be established. When establishing dialogue, perhaps the hardest and most demanding task is to reach an open and inquiring disposition, embracing all participants. The participants have to nurture a culture, where some principles and values regulate the intercourse. Lindström (2000) presents a number of communicative or dialogical virtues signifying a prosperous dialogue culture and inspired by Aristotle’s intellectual virtues and of Burbules’ communicative virtues. The participant ought to display:

- **Docility**
One is prepared to listen to and be affected by what other people have to say
- **Orderliness**
One submits oneself to some simple rules of conduct, like “build upon the comments of other participants”, etc.
- **Justification**
Participants are trying to support their points (interpretations, arguments) by referring to evidence from the text or their own experience
- **Concentration**
Participants help keeping a focus by identifying and sustaining a genuine issue
- **Sincereness**
One says what oneself believes is true without hiding behind authorities or withholding relevant ideas
- **Courage**
One is ready to formulate “brave guesses” or interpretation possibilities that bring new perspectives into the discussion
- **Concern**
Each participant is regarded as sufficiently interesting to be asked and listened to
- **Generosity**
Everyone will be allowed time and space to formulate and reformulate an idea without being interrupted
- **Courtesy**
One is prepared to temporarily withhold one’s point of view in order to help someone else to articulate his or her idea
- **Humility**
One is prepared to withhold one’s own point altogether because the other person or the mainstream of the argument is more important.

The virtues are reflecting the twofold features of the Socratic seminar: at the same time an intellectual process, promoting critical inquiry, and a communicative process, promoting a prosperous dialogue culture where participants will feel safe to take intellectual risks. When working with groups for the first time I use this set of simplified seminar “rules”:

- **Shared inquiry through thoughtful dialogue.**
Dialogue is here presented as opposed to debate where the meaning is to expose different points of views in order to have one participant or one idea “win”, rather than to explore ideas. Dialogue is presented as a “groupthinking”, where every individual helps everyone in the group to come to some

- understanding; everyone “wins” together
- Listen attentively to what others say
- There are many possible answers to questions presented.
More or less logical or supported ideas might be found, analyzing the text or the ideas. A productive seminar will leave participants with more questions than they had when starting and will probably not end in consensus but in a variety of ideas
- Be open and prepared to reconsider and maybe change your opinion

I use the following plan (cp. Oscar Olsson, 1911), as a basis of the seminar:

1. Individual reading/interpreting
If the seminar concerns a text, this will have to be read thoroughly before the seminar. A picture or an object can be distributed directly at the seminar. Some individual preparation is to prefer.
2. Pre seminar: Personal and group goals set.
Participants are encouraged to think of their usual behaviour during group dialogues and to try to improve this by setting a personal goal for this seminar. The personal goal is noted by each participant on a piece of paper. The group is in the same way encouraged to set a goal for group communication. This is noted by facilitator.
3. Socratic seminar:
 - a. Opening question that everyone can answer, that has more than one answer and that can be answered from knowledge of the text and from one’s own standpoint.
 - b. Text analysis, using interpreting questions
 - c. “Socratic question” dealing with the ideas and values of the text in relation to the participants’ own experiences
4. Post seminar: Evaluation of personal and group goals and of seminar in general.
Personal goal is evaluated by every individual. Sharing goals with the rest of the group is encouraged. Group goal is evaluated in group discussion.

2.2 Practical advice

The seminar leader (or the group) should chose “rich” and ambiguous “texts” that produce many questions; and should during preparation and seminar ask questions of which they are not sure of the answer. As “texts” all sorts of material can be considered, literature, art, maths problems, videos etc, as long as they deal with important ideas and values, moral, intellectual, scientific. Teachers are encouraged to use seminars as part of educational projects, in thematic studies or as a part of the subjects taught. A group of 12-15 participants placed in a circle is recommended (not more than 6 children when 5 years and younger) and seminar covering 20 minutes (5 year olds) to one and a half hour (adults). The seminars preferably should be held on a regular and recurrent basis to achieve the anticipated outcomes: help the participants to ethic and moral judgement through inner dialogue and also to critical thinking, and abilities in logic, listening and reading.

2.3 Results of using the Socratic seminars in education

I’m at the moment working on a project closely studying the interplay of groups of students 4-16 years of age meeting every other week for Socratic seminars for 1-4 years. The result of this study is not yet at hand. The evaluations of experienced effects among teachers and students during the project however supports the results from other studies made on similar types of activities (e.g. Paideia Seminars, Great Books): Children and youngsters participating in recurrent seminars seem to develop their critical thinking skills, self-esteem and a higher awareness of self as well as improving on their reading and writing skills and “identificatory” reading abilities (Bird 1984, Feiertag & Chernoff (1987, Robinson 2006). The interaction in seminars can play a central role in construction of students’ identities, both

positive (Haroutunian-Gordon, 1991) and negative (Wortham, 2003) (at least when it comes to high school students). The facilitator has an important but difficult role as to making the seminar successful and with positive outcomes (Bender, 1994; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002). The facilitating teacher seems to go through a transition from traditional teaching towards more eliciting dialogic discussion. Finally, adult teams repeatedly participating in Paideia seminars develop a more “polyphonic” interaction, a better social climate and a more professional culture (Mangrum 2004).

“The existence will not disclose its secret if we put the revolver to the forehead and shout “hands up!” It will only do so if we resolutely approach it with sympathy and a spirit to understand.”
Alf Ahlberg (1986)

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