

Socratic Conversation II – Ann S. Philgren

Task: Write a short paper (max. 3 pages) presenting how you might use the Socratic seminar in your subject discipline or work, using the literature to support your ideas.

The Socratic seminar presents a concept which is concentrated on promoting intellectual as well as dialogical skills to its participants. The seminar is based on group activities which intend to have a positive and increasing impact on the individual's ability to think and reflect critically and to act in a self-responsible and self-reliant way.

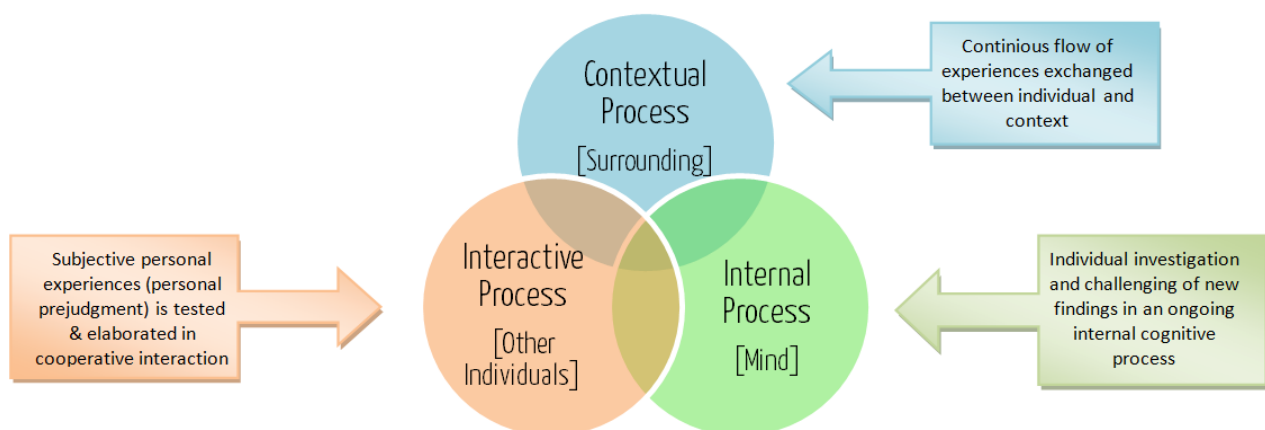
The development through contextual dialogue and interaction effects the constitutional "habits of mind"¹ and mindsets which are necessary in order to "form a democratic society in cooperation with others"² and to maintain this concept of our society.

The overall intention of the Socratic seminars – to secure and enhance democracy – is realized by enabling the participants to their very individual process of learning how to think and how to participate in dialogues.

Thus, this concept has positive effects on the individual as well as on the society: the individual achieves internal maturity and education ("Bildning"³) and assumes thereby his responsibility as a citizen of the society in which he participates actively and critically.

The actual learning process throughout the seminar is interactive and achieved through the communication in the group dealing with personal experiences as well as with given context. "Habits of mind"⁴ such as the already mentioned intellectual and dialogical competencies are being formed and internalized. The main objective of this process becomes the outcome of the intellectual and moral character of each participant, "Practical Wisdom"⁵ is enforced to be accessed.

This learning process can be divided into three main parts:



¹ cf. Philgren, A. S. (2007). The Features of Socratic Seminars. Stockholm Institute of Education.

² Philgren, A. S. (2007). The Features of Socratic Seminars. Stockholm Institute of Education. (p. 6)

³ see above (p. 2)

⁴ Philgren, A. S. (2011). Socrates in the Classroom. Presentation hold at Stockholm University. (p.5)

⁵ A concept taken from Aristotle: "finding ways to act, when confronted with a multiplicity of ideas and incongruent values" (see above, p. 2)

The role of the seminar leader (teacher) is not to dictate “true” prepositions and definite answers⁶ but much more to fulfill a social task within the seminar and discussion – he controls the process from the beginning to the end.

He should enable every participant to discover knowledge through critical inquiry and investigation, emphasize the importance of the seminar rules and promote a productive course of action from the participants by conducting the dialogue without taking any impact/manipulation on the expressed thoughts.

The concept of the Socratic seminar can be applied with a multiplicity of topics. In an English class at school an interesting topic can be “**Interculturality and Immigration**”.

This topic is a very up-to-date issue which concerns especially new challenges in German education politics – this has a direct and visible impact on the everyday life of society and also on the everyday life of pupils at school. All the more, this is a complexity which is tangent to the idea of a democratic society – on the part of its advantages as well as problems democracy has to cope with.

The Seminar itself is sectioned into four stages. During the **individual preparation (I.)** - before the seminar - each participant takes a look into the given text⁷ and starts an individual interpretation process. A text on the topic “Interculturality and Immigration” could possibly be an excerpt from the novel “The Tortilla Curtain” by T. Coraghessan Boyle⁸.

In this phase, the participant activates his very individual thinking, makes pre-assumptions and prejudgements, agrees or disagrees with ideas of the text.

In the **pre-seminar discussion (II.)** personal and group goals for the seminar are being set. Since the group dialogue is the most important part in the seminar, it is essential to focus in the seminar rules during this step of the seminar. A shared critical inquiry in a thoughtful dialogue on matters which the given text provides is only possible if every participant listens attentively to arguments of others. Everyone should keep an open mind towards other opinions; many answers are possible solutions on a topic. A flexible attitude and the preparedness to reconsider or even to change one's own point of view are necessary in order to achieve the seminar's objective.⁹

The three steps of the seminar itself contain first of all **opening questions (III. a)** as for example:

- “With which character from this dialogue can you identify yourself the most? Why?”
- “Choose the sentence/statement from the dialogue, with which you disagree the most.”

These questions refer to ideas expressed in the text and draw a link to the participant's present understanding (pre-judgement and individual interpretation).

In a second step the ideas of the text are examined by **interpretive questions (III. b)**. In this part, the text is analyzed by going deeper into the content and using critical questions in group cooperation. Possible questions can be:

- *“The ones coming in through the Tortilla Curtain down there, those are the ones that are killing us.”*
 - What is meant by “those are the ones who are killing us”? In what way might those people be a threat and why?
- *“Immigrants are the lifeblood of this country - we're a nation of immigrants - and neither of us would be standing here today if it wasn't.”*
 - Do you agree with this statement or not? Can you give an example of the situation in your home country?

⁶ cf. Pihlgren, A. S. (2008). Socrates in the Classroom. Rationales and Effects of Philosophizing with children. Stockholms universitet. (p.30)

⁷ „Text“ is here used not only to describe written work but can also refer to any other form, in which a given context could appear (art work, music, graphs, etc.).

⁸ see Appendix

⁹ cf. Pihlgren, A. S. (2011). Socrates in the Classroom. Presentation hold at Stockholm University. (p.7)

The text analysis in a group discussion gives the possibility to think freely out of the personal “barriers” – the participants get a chance to take a distance from the self. Moreover, the group dialogue provides the chance for developing the ability to adjust or change the own opinion in order to support the “better” argument instead of retaining own, less convenient thoughts¹⁰.

In the third step, new ideas are related to the participant’s individual everyday life by using **evaluative questions (III. c)**. This step is directly related to the first seminar step, the opening questions at the beginning of the seminar. The participants integrate new insights they might have got during the group analysis and realize possibly changed points of view. Due to this fact, it is quite interesting to ask as an evaluative question the almost same question as in the opening questions:

- “Choose the sentence/statement from the dialogue, with which you agree the most.”

Changes in the individual answers show clearly if the thinking process in the group had an influence on the personal opinion and moreover if a process of learning and intrapersonal creative adjustment¹¹ of the own opinion took place.

Especially for this topic (“Interculturality and Immigration”) this last step of the seminar itself is a very interesting way to see the direct impacts on the participant’s dialogical and intellectual virtues, as this topic holds usually innate very diverse points of view on given problems – based on each participant’s individual prejudgement, own background and everyday life. During the text analysis in the group discussion, the participants are cooperating and working on a shared inquiry, nobody is “held personally accountable”¹² and everyone can start thinking creatively and critically at the same time.

The seminar is closed with the evaluation of the goals which have been set in the beginning. The **post-seminar discussion (IV.)** once again focuses on the seminar rules in order to evaluate and improve personal and group behaviour¹³.

The intended outcome of the method of the Socratic seminar – enable its participants to think critically and to take active part in discussion – is exactly what the topic “Interculturality and Immigration” and the problems which are interconnected with this matter require. In order to understand problems which are caused by the current situation of immigrants (no matter in which country) in our society, it is indispensable to be able to take into consideration other points of view, to start thinking “beyond one’s own nose” and to develop the disposition to change the own way of thinking.

¹⁰ cf. Philgren, A. S. (2007). The Features of Socratic Seminars. Stockholm Institute of Education. (p. 4)

¹¹ cf. Billings, L.; Philgren, A. S. (2010). Socio-cognitive Analysis of Socratic Dialogue: A Blend of Theories, In: Petranika JSSH Special Issue. (p.3)

¹² Philgren, A. S. (2007). The Features of Socratic Seminars. Stockholm Institute of Education. (p. 5)

¹³ cf. Philgren, A. S. (2007). The Features of Socratic Seminars. Stockholm Institute of Education. (p. 5)

- Billings, L.; Pihlgren, A. S. (2010). *Socio-cognitive Analysis of Socratic Dialogue: A Blend of Theories*, In: Petranika JSSH Special Issue.
- Pihlgren, A. S. (2007). *The Features of Socratic Seminars*. Stockholm Institute of Education.
- Pihlgren, A. S. (2008). *Socrates in the Classroom. Rationales and Effects of Philosophizing with children*. Stockholms universitet.
- Pihlgren, A. S. (2011). *Socrates in the Classroom*. Presentation hold at Stockholm University.

Appendix

Excerpt from “The Tortilla Curtain”

by T. Coraghessan Boyle, 1995

Delaney and Kyra are a liberal white American couple living in California near the Mexican border with their six-year-old son Jordan. One day Delaney runs down a poor illegal immigrant from Mexican with his car and gives him money to compensate for the man's serious injuries. However, he soon feels he did not behave correctly. In this excerpt Jack Jardine, a friend and neighbour, is talking to Delaney in a supermarket, where they have met by accident.

"Did you know that the U.S. accepted more immigrants last year than all the other countries of the world combined - and that half of them settled in California? And that's legal immigrants, people with skills, money, education. The ones coming in through the Tortilla Curtain down there, those are the ones that are killing us. They're peasants, my friend. No education, no resources, no skills - all they've got to offer is a strong back, and the irony is we need fewer and fewer strong backs every day because we've got robotics and computers and farm machinery that can do the labor of a hundred men at a fraction of the cost." He dropped his hand in dismissal. "Its old news."

Delaney set the milk down on the floor. He was in a hurry, dinner on the stove, Jordan in the car, Kyra about to walk in the door, but in the heat of the moment he forgot all about it. "I can't believe you," he said, and he couldn't seem to control his free arm, waving it in an expanding loop. "Do you realize what you're saying? Immigrants are the lifeblood of this country - we're a nation of immigrants - and neither of us would be standing here today if it wasn't."

"Clichè. There's a point of saturation. Besides which, the Jardines fought in the Revolutionary War - you could hardly call us immigrants."

"Everybody's an immigrant from somewhere. My grandfather came over from Bremen and my grandmother was Irish - does that make me any less a citizen than the Jardines?" A woman with frosted hair and a face drawn tight as a drumskin ducked between them for a jar of olives. Jack worked a little grit into his voice: "That's not the point. Times have changed, my friend. Radically. Do you have any idea what these people are costing us, and not just in terms of crime, but in real tax dollars for social services? No? Well, you ought to. You must have seen that thing in the Times a couple weeks ago, about the San Diego study?"

Delaney shook his head. He felt his stomach sink.

"Look, Delaney," Jack went on, cool, reasonable, his voice in full song now, "It's a simple equation, so much in, so much out. The illegals in San Diego County contributed seventy million in tax revenues and at the same time they used up two hundred and forty million in services - welfare, emergency care, schooling and the like. You want to pay for that? And for the crime that comes with it? You want another crazy Mexican throwing himself under your wheels hoping for an insurance payoff? Or worse, you want one of them behind the wheel bearing down on you, no insurance, no brakes, no nothing?"

Delaney was trying to organize his thoughts. He wanted to tell Jack that he was wrong, that everyone deserved a chance in life and that the Mexicans would assimilate just like the Poles, Italians, Germans, Irish and Chinese and that besides which we'd stolen California from them in the first place, but he didn't get the chance. [.....]

And then they were moving in the direction of the cash registers - all three of them, as a group - Jack, the conciliatory Jack, Jack the politician, Jack the soother of gripes, grievances and hurts real or imaginary, put an arm over Delaney's shoulder and warbled his sweetest notes: "Listen, Delaney, I know how you feel, and I agree with you. It's not easy for me either - it's nothing less than rethinking your whole life, who you are and what you believe in. And trust me: when we get control of the border again - if we get control of it - I'll be the first to advocate taking that gate down. But don't kid yourself: it's not going to happen anytime soon."