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Socratic Conversations in Education – rationales and effects

Abstract

Socratic seminars have long been practiced internationally by educators and philosophers as a supplement to classroom teaching and coaching. However, the rationales and effects of this methodology including how these effects are achieved have not been thoroughly investigated or systematically analyzed. This paper reports a dissertational study investigating the rationales and effects of philosophizing with children in Socratic conversations (Pihlgren, 2008).

The various Socratic traditions describe a set of methodological steps to attain similar objectives. By using these steps, intellectual and dialogical habits of mind are expected to be internalized.

In the study sixteen seminars conducted over three years with children from five to sixteen years old were analyzed. The students' body language and group interaction were analyzed closely through a phenomenological approach. The analysis focused on how the seminar culture was taught and learned and whether the intended methodology made a difference.

The analysis shows that the skilled participants shifted their interaction towards an "inquiring" dialogue over time, and that the distribution of rhetorical power changed to a more cooperative communication. The students' learning proceeded through a series of stages, partly different from the anticipated ideal. The facilitator's ability to handle rule breaking, and to create a safe environment for intellectual exploration, was significant. The findings show that intricate "silent" moves like gestures and glances helped maintain a productive and egalitarian seminar culture. The participants developed their thinking skills over time, evolving from relativism to critical examination.

Key words: Socratic dialogue, habits of mind, group interaction, seminar culture

Introduction

The main thing would not be to win, not even to be right; the main thing would be to reach clarity as far as possible. This was what we should help each other with, and we would of course be sure to reach this goal closer by listening to each other rather than through endlessly listening to ourselves.

Oscar Olsson (1921).

Socratic seminars and similar activities have been practiced by educators and philosophers as a supplement to classroom teaching and coaching. However, the rationales and effects of this methodology including how these effects are achieved have not been thoroughly investigated or systematically analyzed.

In Sweden, as well as in the rest of the western world, discussions about how the educational system teaches ethics, values and democracy to students has increased during the recent years. One explanation for this increased interest seems to be the changes towards less static, predictable norms that are considered general in society (Bäckström et al. 2004, Friedman 2005, Hareide 2002). When society becomes less homogenous, values seem to go from conventions within a group to relativism or to heterogeneous values in many groups.

In Sweden, the latest national curriculum stresses the pedagogical importance of working with mutual fundamental values as a foundation for society, "värdegrund" (*Curriculum for the Compulsory School System, the Pre-school Class and the Leisure Centre Lgr 11*, Tham 2000). The problem is that it is hard to define natural fundamental values (Hedin, Lahdenperä 2002). There are also problems in finding methods to work with values and democracy. The Socratic seminar is one possible way to approach these questions (Frånberg & Kallós 2002, Hansen 2002, Villa 2001).

We know from various research studies that the teacher's voice dominates the classroom: a teacher talks 70-75 % of the time, even at classroom discussions, and with the following pattern: teacher-student-teacher-student (Dysthe 1996, Gustafson 1977, Liljestrand 2002, Nystrand 1997). Where individual work or work in small groups is practiced, this pattern changes: half to two thirds of the talk becomes "desk-talk", students talking to each other during teacher conducted discussions (Lindblad, Sahlström, 2001, Lindström, Arnegård et al. 2003, Tholander 2002).

The conversational pattern of the classroom is often restricted to I-R-E: teacher (I)nitiate question, gives instructions, answers; student (R)esponds, more than half the answers are given beforehand; teacher (E)valuates the answer (Liljestrand 2002). The lessons follow certain "rules" for interaction, during which the teacher dominates (Lemke 1990, Samuelsson 2008). The communication often results in the students trying to discern from the teacher's action and talk what the required solution is (Edwards & Mercer 1987). One percent of instructional time is devoted to open questioning where students have to interpret, analyze, or evaluate information (Goodlad 1983). Talk moves regarding knowledge or reasoning are relatively prevalent, but talk moves linking participants' ideas are not (Wolf et al. 2006). There are also great differences in verbal participation by students: a small group of students is talking a lot of the time and a large group rarely or never speaks (Dysthe 1996, Sahlström 1999).

The limited previous research studies on Socratic seminars show that the seminars achieve part of the intended positive effects (Billings 1999, Billings, Fitzgerald 2002, Bird 1984, Cashman 1977, Feiertag & Chernoff 1987, Graup 1985, Haroutunian-Gordon 1991, Orellana, 2008, Robinsson 2006, Wortham 2003, Tarkington 1989). However, most of this research has been conducted during a short time (i.e. a year) in groups of beginners and has concentrated on the teacher's role and interplay with individual students. By studying groups which have been participating in seminars for a longer time the reported study challenges and broadens earlier results concerning Socratic seminars.

Method and questions

The following questions were put:

- How are goals and effects of the Socratic dialogues described in literature? How are Socratic seminars described as a method in literature?

- How do the seminars differ from other types of classroom dialogues? How are the effects of Socratic dialogues achieved? What critical events and actions threaten the seminar? How do participants develop and protect the seminar culture?

In the literature study different traditions on Socratic interlocution were reviewed and analyzed from the rationales that guide the methodology of the different Socratic traditions. No overall description had been attempted before. Relevant literature about Socratic dialogue and similar traditions was read and organized from likeness and relevance, and finally compared and analyzed.

16 videotaped seminars with groups of children age five to sixteen, participating in dialogues for three years, were videotaped and the interplay was transcribed. Body language, direction of glances, and verbal group interaction were analyzed closely through a phenomenological approach. The analysis focused on how the seminar culture was taught and understood, and if the intended methodology was important. Closely reported extracts of the seminar actions after a new idea was presented, or after someone had broken the seminar rules, were made. The original transcripts were made in a matrix, where the participants' speech, gestures, and glances were transcribed (see example Appendix B).

I used Elliot W. Eisner's (1991) "educational connoisseurship" and "educational criticism" when analyzing. "Connoisseurship" comes from knowing the area under investigation thoroughly, allowing the "connoisseur" to sense the important nuances and features. "Connoisseurship" in this work refers to using my expertise in Socratic seminars. However, this is not enough. The "connoisseurship" has to be combined with a critical approach, where the findings are assessed. Eisner identifies some important dimensions in this work: describing the events or findings so that the reader can visualize and experience them, interpreting the events or findings so that they are decoded as to why and how they occur, evaluating them as to how they contribute to educational value, and finally formulating themes and dominant features, by identifying the recurrent messages. Thus conclusions are made from a qualitative, inductive analysis of the effects, trying to find clusters of reoccurring actions and reactions (Patton 1990). The findings from each film analysis were matched up with the notes made during transcription and compared to what was intended in seminar, sorted thematically, and presented in six themes: learning the game, teaching the game, rule breaking, playing the game, intellectual habits, and distribution of power, presented in the original thesis Pihlgren, 2008).

Literature

There are a number of traditions describing Socratic or similar dialogues as a pedagogical method (Pihlgren, 2008). Socrates is the main source of inspiration to the modern attempts to introduce seminars with recurrent methodological features. However, it is of importance to methodology to separate "Socrates voice" (as it is represented in Plato's earlier works) from the voice of Plato (represented in Plato's later works). The later works of Plato, probably displaying Plato's own ideas, consider all learning innate; recovering what is in the soul. The Socratic traditions are not concerned with reaching a final answer or agreement in dialogue; in fact, they seem to almost discourage it. The Socratic traditions also embrace Aristotle's idea that thinking and ethics are learnt as habits, later integrated as virtues and practical wisdom.

Two historic movements have contributed with relevant ideas about learning and thinking, attempting partly the same goals: the progressive pedagogy in Europe and the USA, and the

Bildung/bildning movement in Germany and Scandinavia. John Dewey's (1997) and Celestin Freinet's (1988) ideas about dialogue in education represent the progressive movement. The deliberative dialogues of today can be seen as modern versions. Here, dialogue is primarily used to reach mutual agreements in the cooperative work of a group. Within the *Bildung/bildning* tradition there are a series of branches. One of these, the Swedish *folkbildning* movement, produced methodological instructions for how the Socratic seminars could be carried out as study circles within the Order of Good Templars and the working class movement (Arvidson, 1985). We know this tradition mainly through the work of Hans Larsson (1925), Oscar Olsson (1911), and Alf Ahlberg (1986). The same methodology was also used by Leonard Nelson (1965) at German universities in *Das Sokratische Gespräch* in the beginning of the 1900's, by Great Books and in the Paideia seminars, chiefly known by the works of Mortimer J. Adler (1990) in the USA, and in the works of professor Lars Lindström (2000) on *Sokratiska samtal* in Sweden. A variation of other traditions working pedagogically with children represent similar methods: Gareth B Matthews (1992) and Matthew Lipman (Lipman et al., 1980), P4C and PWC (Børresen & Malmhøster, 2004).

By controlling some contextual and methodological factors the seminars will supposedly achieve positive effects (Pihlgren, 2008). The seminars preferably should be held on a regular basis. The participants should be seated so that all can see each other. The group should not be too big (10-15 participants), and everyone should have an opportunity to speak. Everyone should have a copy of the "text", and all participants should have read the "text" (except in *Das Sokratische Gespräch*, where "texts" are normally not used). Written texts are favored, but other "textual materials" (art work, music, graphs, and so on) are also considered and seem to work the same way. Choosing an open "text", which allows a variety of ideas and perspectives is very important. A "text" should be rich in ideas, complex but not moral or edifying, and not too easy for the participants to grasp. An important effect of the "text" is introducing the author, artist, scientist, or the characters in the "text" as a participant in the seminar. The "text" should help the participant to establish a distance, but should also allow "identificatory reading", reading to understand oneself and using the reading as a personal experience. The role of the facilitator differs from the role of the participants. Even if he/she is considered a human being in a democratic dialogue, the facilitator must control the methodological steps, so that the dialogue proceeds. On the other hand, the facilitator should refrain from controlling the content of what is said or the values and ideas evolving in the dialogue.

The Socratic traditions independently describe a set of similar, relatively simple methodological steps to reach the same goals and effects (Pihlgren, 2008). The central ideas are that one learns to think by cooperating and using language in this specific practice and that this will result in intellectual and moral development. Considering all the traditions here presented, there seem to be an agreement on that one of the major goals of staging Socratic (and similar) dialogues is to secure and enhance democracy. Not primarily to secure the parliamentary system, but as a way of preparing all citizens to participate in political planning and decision making in collaborative dialogues with other citizens. Most of the Socratic traditions presented here also stress the importance of the dialogues resulting in positive individual effects. One aspect of this is the individual attaining *bildning*, in itself regarded as something making life worthwhile. *Bildning* among the citizens is also regarded as a way to maintaining a democratic society. Fostering individuals with intellectual and moral character is intended as a guarantee for a prosperous society and as means to attain personal goods: living a good life and earning a good living. The presented traditions often have different philosophical or even political origins. It is hard to tell whether the different promoters of dialogue in Socratic or

similar fashions actually intend the same when using concepts like *democracy* and *bildning*, or if this was ever the outcome of their practices. However, this is not the chief interest of this study, since I am here looking for the intended methodology of the dialogues.

All these traditions seem to agree that values and ideas have to be negotiated and tested against life experience and that ethics must be interpreted (Pihlgren, 2008). This is also the view of the pragmatic tradition influenced by John Dewey and the deliberative tradition. But one of the major differences between the pragmatic viewpoint and the “Socratic” seems to be a consequence of a difference in philosophical standpoint: Is there one set of lasting, classical ideas OR do ideas always have to change with new conditions? The pragmatic traditions see ideas as changeable as times change. Contrary to the pragmatic (deliberative and progressive) traditions, the Socratic traditions seek no consensus in their dialogues, rather the opposite, since more ideas encourage to further investigations. To the Socratic traditions the ideas are recurrent, but the mission is not to “teach” the right set of ideas but to foster the ability to access “practical wisdom”: finding ways to act, when confronted with a multiplicity of ideas and incongruent values.

The methodology in the Socratic seminars presupposes that learning is interactive: the seminar culture is taught through role models. Through practice the intellectual and communicative habits of mind will be internalized to virtues (abilities) and “practical wisdom” (good judgment). The individual will test and search interpersonally in cooperative interaction but will also test his/her interactive experiences intrapersonally, in an internal, cognitive process. The intellectual process seems to presuppose two ways of coping with interpretation in seminar: interpreting cumulatively (cf. Gadamer 1994, cf. Piaget 1971) and interpreting as adjusting new ideas, insights, or understandings (cf. Piaget 1971, cf. Vygotsky 1978). Both ways start in a pre-judgment, a fore-structure of understanding allowing what is to be interpreted or understood to be grasped in a preliminary fashion. The seminar should make it possible for participants to adjust their ideas in favor of the “better argument” (and not to hold on to and defend one’s own, less functional ideas). The cumulative refuting interpretation is a systematic and critical analysis of the ideas, sorting out those which do not pass the test. The adjusting part of refuting interpretation is a result of a creative, intuitive process, where “bold” new ideas are found and tested. This is meant to apply both to the individual (intrapersonally) and to the group (interpersonally). These interpersonal and intrapersonal processes are dependent of each other. The actions of the group will gradually be internalized by the individual: the interpersonal ways of thinking will teach the individual a way to think, a habit that will be a virtue and later result in “practical wisdom” or character. This suggests the group acting as a “master” to the individual, the “apprentice”. The dialogue should function as a support to this internalization by creating an open atmosphere, an arena where intellectual risks can be taken. The seminar is a “game” to be played, with specific rules to learn and master.

The methodology in the seminar plan is constructed to promote the desired learning process and to activate different psychological and intellectual processes (Pihlgren 2007):

1. Before entering seminar: Individual reading/interpreting: *Function*: Activate the individual’s thinking and refuting. *Psychological process*: Taking a distance from self. *Intellectual process*: Intrapersonal-creative adjustment.
2. & 4. Pre- and post-seminar: Personal and group goals set and evaluated: *Function*: Focus on the “rules” of the seminar, the dialogical virtues. *Psychological process*: Evaluating and

improving personal and group behavior. *Intellectual process*: Intrapersonal and interpersonal-cumulative.

3. The Socratic seminar:

- a. First seminar step: Opening question. *Function*: Relate ideas to participant’s present pre-judgment, elicit ideas in the “text”. *Psychological process*: The participant is here accountable to the pre-judgment with what he/she starts before entering into cooperative group thinking. *Intellectual process*: Intrapersonal-cumulative.
- b. Second seminar step: Textual analysis. *Function*: Make it possible to distance from everyday experience by cooperating in group using critical *elenchus*/ Popper’s (2007) critical problem posing strategy examining the text. *Psychological process*: Be free to think differently, not personally held accountable. *Intellectual process*: Interpersonal-creative adjustment
- c. Third seminar step: Relating ideas to self. *Function*: To relate the new ideas to participants’ everyday life. *Psychological process*: Personally integrating new knowledge and in-sight. *Intellectual process*: Interpersonal-cumulative.

There is a paired relation between the functions of the steps, see figure 1. The first step in a pair starts a process; this is developed by the functions from other pairs and is finally consolidated by the last step in the pair. The individual interpreting (1) is related to textual analysis (3b), both promoting critical *elenchus*, taking a distance to self, by interlocution with “text”. The opening question (3a) starts a process of realizing, challenging and maybe changing points of view that is consolidated when relating the new ideas to self (3c). The goals set (2) will be consolidated when evaluated (4) and this will lead to new goals set in the next seminar.

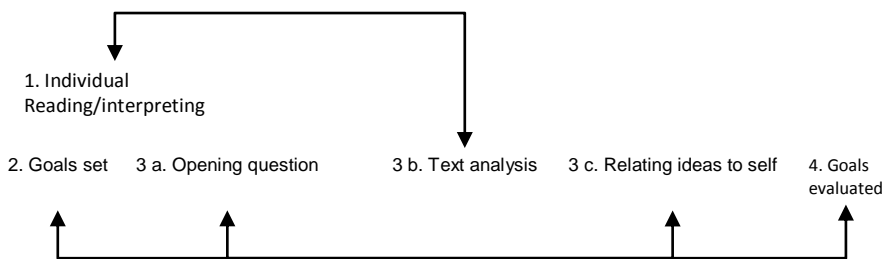


Figure 1. Pair-relations in functions

The goals are set and evaluated outside the seminar circle. The seminar circle is an arena where intellectual and dialogical virtues are trained in action. The process is closely assessed and the outcome is discussed before and after the seminar but not within. Mediation is thereby intended to take place between the steps outside and within the seminar circle. Learning is intended to have impact both on the practice of the following seminars and on general socio-cultural practices over time: the individual’s critical thinking, and self-reliance, and on citizenship skills.

The seminar study - extract

I here present the results and analysis of one of the 16 seminars that were part of the study, to give the reader an idea of the material¹. For further investigation I refer to the original work (Pihlgren, 2008). Sequences of the seminars are analyzed, showing actions after a new idea, which has not yet been heard in the seminar dialogue, or actions when the rules are broken. The original transcripts are not presented in the text. The verbal actions in the sequences are presented as a “manuscript”, with some (but not all) comments on gestures and glances. The “manuscript” presented as excerpts in the sequence analyses was consequently not the transcript used when making the analysis. The different steps, types of dialogues and distribution of verbal conversation are accounted for in the original transcript (see example Appendix B). The original analysis was made on the original Swedish transcript.

Fifth grade discussing a painting: “Diablo baby”

The group of 14 children in fifth grade has participated in seminars for one year when this seminar is filmed. The facilitator has conducted seminars for one year. The seminar takes place in a classroom. The door is closed. The participants are seated around an oval table. The work of art discussed is a painting: “Diablo Baby” (see illustration 1). The seminar lasts for 42 minutes. Participants: Kalle (m), Susanne (f), Anders (m), Åsa (f), Niclas (m), Cordelia (f) Conny (m), Lena (f), Sebastian (m), Lisa (f), Johan (m), Pia (f), Oscar (m), Anna (f). Facilitator: Maria.



Illustration 1: The textual material in the seminar is “Diablo Baby”, painting by Marianna Gartner

Main outline of the “Diablo baby” seminar

The seminar starts with individual goals being set and noted by each participant and the group goal “not to use the facilitator as a telephone switchboard” is chosen after some discussion. The picture is distributed and the opening question is: Do you think the baby is good or evil? There is a thinking pause for some minutes. The baby might look evil but has nice eyes or looks sad. It looks sweet but has horns and tattoos. Oscar comments that it might be the devil as young, but some of the others disagree: the baby looks kind. Anders now tries to get the others to listen (sequence 1, after nine minutes). How can one know if a person is good or evil? Åsa jokes that the baby might be half goat (sequence 2, after 21 minutes). What importance has upbringing if becoming good or evil? Can one

¹ Appendix A also offers the reader a glimpse into a seminar with three to five year olds.

chose to look evil and why would one? Is looking evil the same thing as being evil? Cordelia says that retarded people are as kind as “normal” people. Johan objects to this by sharing some of his own experience (sequence 3, after 37 minutes). The seminar ends by evaluating goals. They want to go on: the seminar was interesting.

Sequence 1: Anders getting an idea

In this sequence Anders presents a new idea, refuting the previously discussed hypothesis that the baby in the picture is the devil when young. He points out that the baby has the devil tattooed on his belly. Some of the other participants are occupied with the previous subject and don't notice that Anders tries to say something until the facilitator points this out:

9 **Anders:** But hello /He points at his picture/
10 **Facilitator:** Anders had something
11 **Anders:** but like if he's the DEVIL then it must be someone that (.) can predict the future 'cause he has the devil tattooed on his belly
12 **Lisa:** Oh ((laughs))
13 **Åsa, Lena, Lisa, Johan, Pia:** ((laugh)) /Cordelia, Conny and Anna smile/
14 **Susanne:** Yes
15 **Pia:** bu (.) it's like a cross above

His observation is obviously new to the rest of the group: they react by quickly turning to the picture to look at it. Pia is probably trying to refute or at least question his idea by pointing out that there is a cross tattooed above and Anders looks down at the picture (15). There are some quick speculations about what the tattoo might mean, and Pia laughs. The facilitator now asks Anders to repeat what he said so that everyone will understand it (21). This might seem strange since they obviously have understood his meaning immediately, showing this by turning to the picture, laughing and commenting. Anders is not really willing to do this, and the facilitator has to urge him, signaling that the idea is a good one (24).

21 **Facilitator:** „Cause can you elaborate on that again more Anders what you just said
22 **Pia:** ((laughs))
23 **Anders:** Bu I don't wa
24 **Facilitator:** Yesbut so that everyone can understand wha y (.) I I understand what you meant
25 **Susanne:** Yes
26 **Anders:** Yesbut
27 **Facilitator:** Yes

Pia is acting very contradictory: she laughs and smiles, which no one else does at this point; she looks intensely at Anders, has her hands and arms stretched out over the table towards Anders and taps her fingers drumming on the table surface. This might be one of the reasons why Anders hesitates. He doesn't look at Pia, but it must be hard not to notice her gestures and noises. Pia's reaction is not echoed by anything else in the group. She is probably acting out something concerning herself. She has made a statement that equals Anders' in status: he refutes the earlier ideas by pointing out the tattooed devil, and she refutes his idea by pointing out the tattooed cross. His idea is picked up and amplified by the facilitator, but hers isn't. She probably can't understand why and gets confused over what the seminar is about. This may be the reason why the facilitator chooses to amplify Anders' idea: Pia's actions can be interpreted as diminishing his idea (Anders seems to react to them as if they are), and the facilitator might want to correct this. Pia later tries to come back (37) by supporting Lisa and Susanne when they refute Anders' idea by suggesting an order of succession of devils. However, she does this in an affected voice, probably because she's unsure of how to act:

31 **Lisa:** like it must have been a devil before (.) that's what I think

32 **Susanne**: eh have some dad
33 **Pia** ((affected voice)): Yeah
34 **Susanne**: an“ he inherit sorta after
35 **Pia**: Yes
36 **Susanne**: e:h takes over
37 **Pia**: Yes after his dad
38 **Lisa**: Yes he can’t just become the devil
39 **Pia** ((affected voice)): Right okhay ((laughter)) okay

The others react by quickly looking at her and looking away or not looking at her at all. The participants mostly look at the speaker or at the picture. The facilitator interrupts Pia and Susann by turning to Cordelia (45), who also seems to have been trying to interrupt by changing the subject (40):

40 **Cordelia**: Is there someone who knows if there were any devils
41 **Susanne**: Ye well that cross might stand for his father being dead
42 **Pia**: YES
43 **Susanne**: Yes
44 **Pia** ((affected voice)): I agree with YOU
45 **Facilitator**: M Cordelia what do you think abouteh

Anders’ idea is refuted in favor of the succession idea but stays on as an active factor during the rest of the textual analysis.

Sequence 2: Balancing the intellectual inquiry

1 **Åsa**: How do we know this is a real baby what if it’s a mix of a goat then then it could be nasty
2 **Pia**: ((laughs))
3 **Oscar**: That then how do you know that
4 **Åsa**: Sorta evil then it could be born evil we we don’t know weh if they are kind or nasty or how they’re born
5 **Lisa**: But I think all babies like everything that is born I think is (.) like good from the start
6 **Åsa**: Yeh but I don’t think th

The discussion during this sequence starts off with Åsa suggesting that if the baby is partly animal (goat), we cannot know if it’s evil or not, since it’s not human in the way that we are (4). Lisa contradicts this by saying that all that is born is good (5) and introduces the idea of upbringing influencing the further discussion (6). Cordelia states in long and disrupted talk-turns that babies only can feel rudimentary things such as being sad or angry. The group looks alternately at her and the picture, probably trying to grasp what she’s referring to. She is finally interrupted by Lisa, claiming that babies aren’t evil all the same, causing almost the whole group to look at her. The discussion concludes in consensus about the importance of upbringing if people are to become evil or not. Cordelia tries to refute the idea that up-bringing is the sole cause by stating that one might get into bad company (56). Åsa and Susanne contradict this by claiming that company should to be considered a part of the upbringing (60, 61):

56 **Cordelia**: it can be that you hang out with t the wrong friends (.) crowd an’ sorta (.) wrong wrong friends
57 **Conny**: Yeh
58 **Sebastian**: Company
59 **Susanne**: But they’re people
60 **Åsa**: That’s also upbringing
61 **Susanne**: That’s also upbringing
62 **Lisa**: But then it’s parents
63 **Cordelia**: Yesbut it’s like not the upbringing with the parents like
64 **Susanne**: No but w“ haven’t said that it’s just the upbringing with the parents

The discussion almost seems at risk of turning into a debate, but the body language and the glances show respect. There are few movements and they look at the speaker and even smile and laugh during the toughest parts. An exception is Anders, who seems to alternate between following the seminar and what Pia is doing. Pia is gesturing a lot, drawing her hands over the table, touching her hair and face, but she is following the verbal interaction judging from her glances. She is also trying to

get into the verbal interaction three times. Twice she exclaims supportive things, not elaborated. Most of the participants glance quickly at her but then look away. The last exclamation seems to be directed towards Cordelia, who has been proven wrong:

67 Pia: RIGHTY
68 Åsa: Aahm (1) /Cordelia looks at Pia and wrings her hands/

It also seems to make Cordelia nervous (68). Pia also claims that she believes that the devil's child is born evil and is supported by Anders. The others notice them for some time but then turn away. Pia's idea is however picked up and refuted by Lisa right after the sequence.

Sequence 3: Contradicting by sharing a personal experience

Johan shares the very personal experience of being the brother of a retarded person (5). This seems to be a consequence of a long and reasonably uncritical appraisal of retarded people from Cordelia right before the sequence. The room gets very quiet, and there are almost no gestures after a while, and everybody is looking intensely at Johan with some few glances at the picture or at the facilitator. The facilitator, on the other hand, seems to intensify her humming to support him.

5 Johan: what's difficult is thateh (1) huh welleh some of them they they don't understand like ordinary things they cannot talk either (1) so it's really very hard for them it's a big burden (2)
6 Facilitator: M
7 Johan: I remember being a brother I myself think it's m hard to me (.) to have him as a brother
8 Facilitator: Yah
9 Johan: well think how hard for him then
10-12 Facilitator: M (1) M
13 Johan: not to be able to say what he thinks (.) 'exam' n not be able to say what sort of candy he wan" not be able to see w wha' film if he eve' wants to see a film

Johan is looking first at Susanne, who has been speaking most recently, and whom he is gently refuting by telling about his experiences, and later at the facilitator. Lisa supports Johan by pointing out the difficulty for the parents, and Susanne now changes her statement in favor of a more complex idea:

14 Lisa: I also think about when you see how hard it can be to be retarded the parents then it's like hav ing (.) baby your whole life (2) must be really hard
15 Facilitator: Mm
16 Susanne: An' but you probably think much more an' want to take care of you thenlike eh sure you might get irritated likethis 'cause (.) it's not what you've imagined

At the end, someone from outside enters through the door behind the facilitator, the door making a squeaking noise, disturbing and causing almost everyone to look at the door and back. Some participants have obviously seen the disturbance coming; they react with distressing gestures before the door opens. They are probably afraid of a disturbance at this delicate moment. However, Lisa connects back by talking about parental love.

Analyzing the "Diabolo baby" seminar

Seminar steps and intellectual process

The facilitator introduces the different steps in the intended seminar plan in the order suggested. Personal and group goals are set and evaluated, and the group is familiar with the proceedings. The participants dominate the verbal communication; they pose questions to each other and manage to carry out the conversation on their own in long sections. The "textual material" offers intellectual challenges. The intellectual process is lively and is developing during the seminar, with questions and refutations. The textual analysis is carried out rather quickly. The participants refer to the picture

when answering, but the facilitator doesn't explicitly urge them to go on with the analysis. Instead, she urges them to relate their own experiences soon after all have answered the opening question. This part of the seminar becomes a mixture of critical inquiry (more frequent in the beginning) and "storytelling" (more frequent at the end). However, the ideas are being thoroughly pursued (cf. sequence 2).

Dialogic process

The "rules" seems transparent to the participants. They have mastered how to contradict each other without getting into debate. Many new ideas are presented with few incidents of "rule" breaking. Pia is an exception, acting in a disturbing way in both sequences 1 and 2. In sequence 1 her statement isn't picked up by the facilitator, which seems to make her frustrated and/or insecure. When evaluating at the end, she says she didn't succeed in her personal goal to contradict, but the facilitator answers that she did but that she has to support her opinions.

"Silent" interaction

There are some indications during the seminar that the facilitator is reacting to Pia's actions or utterances by trying to silently discipline her to behave according to seminar procedures. The others react to her by looking away from her or not taking any notice of her statements as long as they are not substantial. Her two statements within the protocol are, however, picked up in the discussion by other participants. Another exception is Kalle, who seems occupied with other things during most of the seminar. His glances suggest that he is listening to the verbal interaction, even though he isn't signaling participation: he looks up when a new idea or something controversial is presented. In sequence 3 Johan shares a very personal experience, causing the others to show sympathy and respect by looking at him (or the paper) and by quieting their sounds and gestures while the facilitator signals general support by humming.

Summary conclusions

Taking all 16 analyzed seminars into account, the study shows that the skilled participants changed their interaction from conversation to an inquiring dialogue, and that the distribution of power in the classroom changed in favor of a more polyphonic and cooperative interaction if the facilitator and the participants realized and accepted the important element of the game and how these were learnt.

The intellectual and dialogical skills of participants developed over time in the seminars. It was not a linear process; it differed on an individual basis, depending on the interaction of the group and the skill of the facilitator. The early seminars tended to focus on understanding what the seminar was about. After gaining some experience, the group was less concerned with the intellectual process and seemed to focus almost entirely on the rules of the game. The experienced and functioning seminar group focused almost entirely on the intellectual content of the seminar. The results show that there were age differences when it comes to the use of gestures, language, experience, and ability to interact with the group, but there were even more differences between inexperienced learners of all ages and more skilled participants. The younger children (five to six years old) were more dependent on a close interaction with the adult facilitator, but participants of all ages were able to philosophize and improve this from practice.

Groups of learners often confused the inquiring seminar dialogue with other classroom conversations. The results show that when the seminars were mistaken to be the “classroom game”, both teacher and students looked for (and tried to find) a “right” answer. The disciplining was then done in a more concealed fashion. An important result is that when the group left the rules of the “classroom game” without actively using the seminar rules, the interaction was left open to manipulation with negative consequences.

Rule breaking tended to have different origins and had different effects on interaction and learning in seminar. Three categories emerged from the material:

1. In the beginning, the participant (and the facilitator) didn't entirely understand the rules and broke them unintentionally, still learning the game. Breaking the rules here promoted learning the game and shed light on the implicit rules. A risk here was the facilitator allowing, or promoting, the group to relapse into “classroom” interaction.

2. After some practice the participant (and the facilitator) understood the rules and broke them intentionally to test the game, or the facilitator's ability to control the situation, or used them for personal purposes (to control, obstruct, disturb, protest, or to harass someone or a group within the seminar). The rule-break was a result of someone deliberately trying to manipulate the interaction. How this was managed was vital to the further seminar practice. The seminar here was threatened if the facilitator didn't guard the seminar well enough, or her actions could be interpreted as if she was going along with the rule-breakers.

3. Further in practice the participant (and the facilitator) understood the rules and broke a rule to protect the seminar, a rule considered more important, or for some-thing else considered to be a higher purpose. Guarding the seminar or a rule was considered less risky and was probably a way of learning the particulars of the game. Imposing a “right value” here threatened the balance of power.

However, as long as the facilitator actively promoted the seminar by treating verbal interruptions in an intellectual manner or, when necessary, used open corrections, the seminar was safe, even if tested. The seminar outcome was dependent on whether the participants considered the seminar to be safe.

There were differences between the good intentions showed by several of the teachers to change towards the seminar practice, and their actual performance- they continued to use “classroom strategies”, often resulting in negative consequences for the participants. This suggests that the behavior must be made explicit, visualized, and discussed in teacher education.

Not introducing all seminar steps, or introducing them in another order than intended, was shown to threaten the outcome of the seminar, if not the seminar itself. Confusing the seminar game with the classroom game was one of the actions shown to threaten the seminar culture. When learning the seminar process, rule breaking shed light on the anticipated culture and was productive; when rule breaking was used to manipulate, it threatened the seminar. The study shows that it was essential that the facilitator learned to see this difference and how to handle rule breaking productively. Effective strategies were treating verbal actions intellectually or, when necessary, using open correction. The study reveals an interesting paradox: the rules of the game were in ways both the

cause and the effect when learning; they were revealed by the facilitator and at the same time constructed by the participants in interaction.

The seminar study shows that it was vital to seminar teaching that the seminar was interpreted as a closed arena, a safe circle for intellectual experiments. This was marked by the seating, a closed room, and by the ritualized structure. The construction of the methodological steps had consequences when teaching and playing the “game”. Contrary to some previous research, this study shows that the students developed their thinking skills over time, evolving from relativism to critical examination in the skilled groups. An explanation is that “textual” analysis helped the participants to take a distance to the personal self, and to look at ideas in new ways. Another way to reach a fruitful distance was accomplished by the participants reaching “silent” agreements through gestures and glances. The participants went from stating personal ideas (maybe picking some lines of thought up from others), to building ideas on the previous ideas of other participants. It was essential to grasp that all participants should take responsibility for the entire group’s ideas. This relation was built anew in every seminar by following the seminar steps. The skilled group spontaneously shared the roles, “personifying” different values during the seminar, as an effective way of learning to see the different arguments. At length, this probably teaches a strategy when thinking on one’s own.

Promoting the mutuality of the game in skilled groups was done primarily by “silent” interaction: actively promoting and protecting the game, and signaling acceptance and cooperation when contradicting another person’s statement. The intellectual process was carried out primarily by the verbal participation. The younger participants used more gestures, often expressing things when lacking words. The dialogue showed few differences from everyday conventions. Skilled participants accepted longer verbal pauses, and were not as occupied with “keeping the conversation going” as were the beginners; they were less accepting of manipulative turn-taking, and included several interlocutors at a time. At length this probably trained a strategy to examine the different angles of a problem or a dilemma. The group gradually learnt to cooperate and to use each other when investigating, by building the dialogue in steps like those presented by Karl Popper (2007) for critical, scientific thinking.

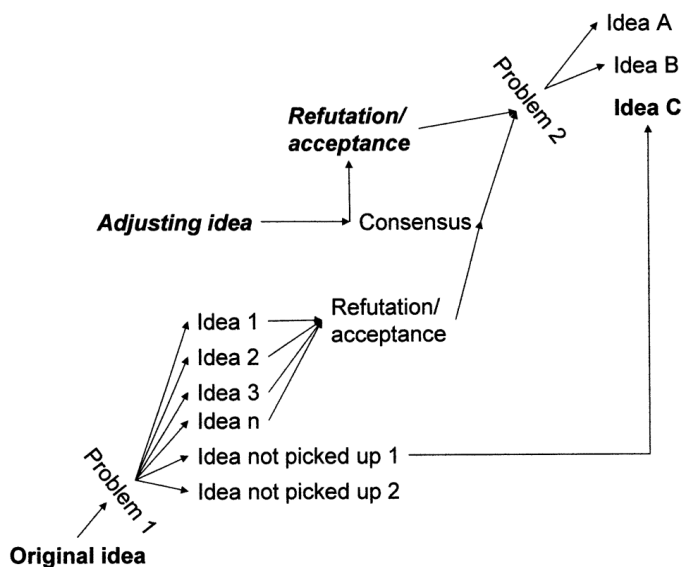


Figure 2. Advanced intellectual process in seminar

Starting with a problem/question, different participants presented different ideas. Some of these were dropped without being noticed or explored, but reappeared later in the discussion (Idea C in figure 3). Some ideas were elaborated and developed, and this resulted in refutation or acceptance. During this part of the process, the group often discussed “cumulatively”, building one idea on the other or presenting pro- and counter arguments in response to the idea. The group then accepted a consensus (sometimes with the facilitator’s help), a new platform to start off from, when continuing to probe into the questions, and the process started again (problem 2). A participant may have presented an adjusting idea, that challenged the consensus, and this would be refuted or accepted, changing consensus or not, but affecting the rest of the seminar (the *italicized* part in figure 3). The cumulative ideas tended to overrule the adjusting ideas. Furthermore, if the facilitator didn’t actively promote the intellectual process a new or challenging idea might not be heard. An example of this process is shown in the “Diablo baby” seminar, sequence 1, presented above.

Silent interaction was also used to show what was not accepted in the group. The individuals carried out an advanced “silent” interplay to communicate to each other, to cooperate or to oppose each other. The results show that verbally silent participants were actively participating in the dialogue. This calls for an extended interpretation of the concept of “participation”; it’s not a question of talking but of being interactively engaged.

Discussion

Schools around the world today are trying to cope not only with what in most countries is a growing body of students due to an increasing population, but also with the rapid change of technical development, the globalization of communication, markets, and ideas, and the demand for equal education for different groups in society. This calls for good educational practice in every classroom as well as for extensive changes in the structure of the traditional classroom practice, if these challenges are to be met. This paper has presented a study investigating Socratic seminars as a method of promoting thinking, language, social fostering, and character education to meet the demands of modern society. It has also highlighted some of the problems that teachers and students deal with, when introducing a new kind of pedagogy, different from traditional ways of teaching.

Educational research has, at least in the Western societies, during the last half century leaned heavily on the clinical practices of the discipline of psychology, tending to skew the interest towards explaining phenomena on an individual, intrapersonal basis and towards occurrences which could be measured and perceived in what could be considered a more clinically objective way. However, if education is to cope with the modern challenges, it calls for research adapted to the educational settings and conditions, and not only describing but also prescribing how productive education is and should be conducted.

The educational setting is one of life, of movement and changes, of group interaction, of contextual messages, and of hundreds of quick and subtle communicative messages sent and received within the group of students and to and by teachers. The contextual and communicational interplay is a vital part of what will make the educational project at hand successful or not. I believe we actively must try to find research methods to catch this turmoil and the important features which constitute the soul of educational practice. This study has been an attempt to do so, with the intention not only to contribute to pedagogical practice but also to research practice.

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Appendix A.

Socratic seminar with three to five year old preschool children

For a couple of days, the group has been watching a sequence from the film *Mardie* by Astrid Lindgren over and over again. They have been watching the sequence where the maid in the family household, Alva, has been invited to accompany the 19th century middleclass family to the high society Autumn Ball. Alva is looking forward to the ball: she loves to dance. Alva is pretty and at the ball it seems as if all the young gentlemen want to dance with her. However, this is prevented by the actions of the mayor's wife, who acts as hostess of the ball. I am seated in a circle with six children three to five years of age. I ask why they think Alva is happy when she is told that she will attend the ball. Everyone sits quiet for a while. A lot of ideas are then presented. She wants to dance, someone says. Someone else thinks that she is happy because she is to dance with the chimney sweeper. But does she know that she will dance with him? No, she doesn't of course. Maybe she is happy to be together with Mardie. But when she's not allowed to dance later on, that makes her sad. It's the one with the purple dress that doesn't want Alva to dance, the mayor's wife. Why not? She gets cross when Alva comes to the ball. Maybe Alva wasn't invited? Maybe the mayor's wife thinks that she will not get to dance herself? Maybe she wants all the guys to herself? The guys seem to like Alva. That will make it worse for the mayor's wife, if she wants the guys to herself. The mayor has done a number two in his pants earlier in the film: maybe that's why she wants a new man? When nobody wants to dance with Alva, she feels really sad, but then she falls in love with the chimney sweeper! The chimney sweeper is not invited to the ball either, but he goes in there just to dance with Alva. Why does he do that? Maybe he wants to save her. Or he might be in love with her.

If someone had a birthday party and you were not invited, would you go anyway? Everyone thinks silently for a minute or two. No, nobody would, the children agree. But why does Alva go to the ball if she's not invited? She wanted to go and meet guys, so she didn't think about having an invitation, someone suggests. She wanted to dance, someone else says. Did Alva do the right or the wrong thing? She probably didn't want to be home alone and not have anyone to speak to. Maybe it was more fun at the ball anyway: after all she did meet the chimney sweeper. It was not her fault: she did not know that she wasn't welcome. It was actually Mardie's mother who said she could come.

This ended the Socratic seminar and we thanked each other. The dialogue lasted for 20 intense minutes, and we had a lot of fun, but I can see that all are tired. It's hard work thinking. I realize to my surprise that I have discovered a couple of aspects to the film sequence that I hadn't thought of before. That the mayor's wife is jealous of or at least envious of Alva enriches my understanding. I have previously looked at the sequence as a debate about social classes. I had not thought that Mardie's mother was responsible for Alva being exposed to the cruel treatment of the upper class guests until the children pointed it out. She must have known that something like this was bound to happen. When I returned to the day-care centre the next week, Tom, Saari, and Marie wanted to continue the dialogue about the film sequence. They had new ideas that they had discussed together and now they wanted to try them on me².

² The text is a translation of Pihlgren (2006), p. 29-30. The film is a chapter from Astrid Lindgren's children's book *Mardie's Adventures* (1993).

Appendix B. Example of matrix transcript

Verbal communication							Gestures							Glances						
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Anders had some-thing		but like if he's the DEVIL then it must be someone that ()							Points quickly at picture repeated aily					At Anders	At facilitator, then at Anders	On the facilitator, then on picture, then on Lisa	On Anders	On Anders	On Anders	On Anders then on picture
		can predict the future 'cause he has the devil tattooed on his belly		((laugh))			Bends over picture, puts down pen	Hands separate d, head quickly stooping towards picture	Points at picture repeatedly	Looks down	Bends over the picture, puts hands on table	Lifts the picture	Bends over the picture	The picture	On the picture	On the picture, then on Lisa, then on the picture, then on Lisa	On the picture	On the picture	On the picture	On the picture
		Oh ((laughs))	((laugh))	((laugh))	((laugh))	((laugh))		Hands together, wrings	Takes out his card	Smiles	Smiles	Smiles	Smiles							
						bu (.) it's like a GROSS above							Puts cheek in right hand			On the picture	On Lisa			