

Workshop Socratic Seminar

PhD. Ann S. Pihlgren, Stockholm University, Sweden, ann.pihlgren@isd.su.se

The Socratic seminar – a short presentation

Thoughtful discussion as a school activity is being explored by methods like the Socratic seminar, philosophy for/with children, and deliberative dialogues. In these discussions, the teacher puts questions to promote inquiry and foster critical thinking, and the goal is the students' cooperative dialogue. The purpose of seminars is not to give the student an opportunity of free and uncontrolled chatting but to teach the students how to develop and enrich their thinking. If this training of intellectual habits is to take place, the culture will have to foster and promote an open disposition.

The educational philosopher Mortimer J. Adler suggests that all teaching activities must involve three complementary approaches to ensure that learning will take place: acquisition of organized knowledge, development of intellectual skills, and enlarged understanding of ideas and values by exploring/creating. The three columns suggest three different approaches for the teacher. In the first column, the teacher introduces the students to a body of factual knowledge, in the second the teacher coaches them in the intellectual skills necessary to manipulate and apply knowledge. The third column is a creative and investigating part of the learning process. If the student is to grasp the character and soul of the subject taught, he/she must on every level of understanding be given the opportunity to explore the central ideas in the area but also to create. This can be done by activities like painting, composing, designing, inventing, and by thoughtful dialogue, as a means for the student to be able to investigate and critically analyze central ideas, and as an opportunity to, with thoughts and in cooperation with others, present and evoke ideas. In the third column the teacher becomes a "mid-wife", facilitating the student's exploring or creating by asking evocative questions, but not planning the outcome of the discussion or of creativity.

The Socratic seminar can be carried out in pre-school as well as in secondary school and at the university and the workshop invites educators interested in all school levels. The kinds of discussions that occur within the seminar are characterized by having open-ended questions, using textual references to support ideas, producing rigorous, intellectual dialogue, examining challenging and ambiguous textual material (texts, works of art, graphs, maps etc), and fostering open participation. In this way, the seminars work as a process of taking participants from simple comprehension and recall, through analysis and synthesis, finally reaching a deeper understanding of the ideas through evaluation and creative thinking.

In this workshop, the rationales and the steps of the Socratic dialogue as a pedagogical method will be briefly presented and the participants will take part in a Socratic seminar, a structured discussion focused on a picture serving as a common reference point and including at least two or more key ideas or concepts. The workshop will also give participants opportunity to ask questions and to discuss the seminars as a promoter of language skills, thinking skills, social skills and character in the classroom, which are the positive outcome of recurrent seminars shown by research.