



# EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING

## Socratic Seminar Protocol

### Purpose

The Socratic Seminar is used in many Expeditionary Learning classrooms to promote student thinking and meaning making, and the ability to debate, use evidence, and build on one another's thinking. When well designed and implemented, the seminar provides an active role for every student, engages students in complex thinking about rich content, and teaches students discussion skills. One format for the seminar is as follows:

### Procedures

1. The teacher selects a significant piece of text or collection of short texts related to the current focus of study. This may be an excerpt from a book or an article from a magazine, journal, or newspaper. It might also be a poem, short story, or personal memoir. The text needs to be rich with possibilities for diverse points of view.
2. The teacher, or whoever is to facilitate the seminar, develops an open-ended, provocative question as the starting point for the seminar discussion. The question should be worded to elicit differing perspectives and complex thinking. Participants may also generate questions to discuss.
3. Participants prepare for the seminar by reading the chosen piece of text in an active manner that helps them build background knowledge for participation in the discussion. The completion of the pre-seminar task is the participant's "ticket" to participate in the seminar. The pre-seminar assignment could easily incorporate work on reading strategies. For example, participants might be asked to read the article in advance and to "text code" by underlining important information, putting question marks by segments they wonder about, and exclamation points next to parts that surprise them.
4. Once the seminar begins, all participants should be involved and should make sure others in the group are drawn into the discussion.
5. The seminar leader begins the discussion with the open-ended question designed to provoke inquiry and diverse perspectives. Inner circle participants may choose to move to a different question if the group agrees, or the facilitator may pose follow-up questions.
6. The discussion proceeds until the seminar leader calls time. At that time, the group debriefs their process; if using a fishbowl (see below), the outer circle members give their feedback sheets to the inner group participants.
7. If using a fishbowl, the seminar leader may allow participants in the outer circle to add comments or questions they thought of while the discussion was in progress.

### Criteria

Participants...

- **Respect other participants.** Exhibit open-mindedness; value others' contributions.
- **Are active listeners.** Build upon one another's ideas by referring to them when it is your turn to talk.
- **Stay focused on the topic.**
- **Make specific references to the text.** Use examples from the text to explain your point.

- **Give their input.** Ensure that you participate.
- **Ask questions.** As needed, ask clarifying questions to ensure that you understand the points others are trying to make, and ask probing questions which push the conversation further and deeper when appropriate.

**Sample Checklist of Specific Look-Fors**

Did the Participant...	Consistently	Occasionally	No	Notes/Comments
Respond to other participants' comments in a respectful way?				
Listen attentively without interruption?				
Use eye contact with peers?				
Exhibit preparation for the seminar?				
Reference the text to support response?				
Participate in the discussion?				
Ask clarifying and/or probing questions				

**Option: Using a Fishbowl**

When it is time for the seminar, participants are divided into two groups if there are enough people to warrant using a fishbowl approach. One group forms the inner circle (the “fish”) that will be discussing the text. The other group forms the outer circle that will give feedback on content, contributions, and/or group skills. (Note: “Fishbowls” may be used with other instructional practices such as peer critiques, literature circles, or group work. If the number of participants in the seminar is small, a fishbowl does not need to be used.)

Each person in the outer circle is asked to observe one of the participants in the inner circle. Criteria or a rubric for the observations should be developed by/shared with participants in advance.