



2023

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Morgan Taylor

Teacher's College, Columbia University

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Recommended Citation

Taylor, Morgan (2023) "Revamped Socratic Seminars: Great Ideas," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 12, Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol12/iss2023/12>

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Revamped Socratic Seminars: Great Ideas

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Marcelle Mentor of Columbia University for her invaluable support and guidance; her expertise and encouragement played a crucial role in the successful completion of this work.

Revamped Socratic Seminars: Great Ideas

MORGAN TAYLOR

Teachers College, Columbia University

In the modern age, the best thing we can do for our students is to have them be the drivers of discussion and give them true ownership over classroom learning. “Discussion is the primary way that reading knowledge, meanings, concepts, interpretations, and understandings are passed around and learned. The richer the discussion, the greater likelihood that subject matter will be understood, integrated with prior knowledge, recalled, and applied in the future” (Blanton et. al. 2007). I had heard of Socratic Seminars back when I first started teaching. However, I tried them and wasn’t a fan. I also hate when I try something in class and my students remark, “Ms. Taylor, we did this last year!” Each time they make such a proclamation, my soul dies just a bit more. So instead, I modeled my format for a classroom discussion based on what I enjoyed as a student; I stole this ‘Great Ideas’ idea. During my freshman year of college, I took a class entitled “Great Ideas Seminar,” and it was amazing. The classroom was small, and the layout was a conference room. The students all sat around the two professors, and we talked about literature for the entire hour. Each person was responsible for doing the reading and coming to class prepared to talk. Before this class, we read the short text *They Say, I Say*, which is *fantastic* for teaching accountable talk and how to participate in a discussion. Though this book is specifically geared toward writing persuasively, it merits being used in an open discussion forum. Many of the claims posed by the authors of *They Say, I Say* mirror the work of Martha Nussbaum, whose stance is that education aids in social democracy with the premise of teaching students to be active

participants in their democracy. Similarly, in the third edition of *They Say, I Say*, the preface reads: “Since reading and writing are deeply reciprocal activities, students who learn to make the rhetorical moves ... become more adept at identifying these same moves.... And if we are right that effective arguments are always in dialogue with other arguments, then it follows that to understand the types of challenging texts assigned in college, students need to identify the views to which those texts are responding” (Birkenstein, Graff, 2014). Essentially, Graff and Birkenstein are telling students to be constant questioners. I remembered how significant this was in my schooling and tried to come up with a way to use this in my classroom. I loved the opportunity to be an active participant in the learning process, as opposed to sitting in rows and being lectured.

Thus, my version of the Great Ideas Seminar began taking shape. First, I talk to my kids about what a discussion seminar looks like. We arrange all the desks into one giant circle; this way everyone is included. The kids have a copy of the text and a notebook/post-it or whatever is most comfortable for them to write on, so they can jot things down that they want to respond to or pull a quote or idea they thought of while reading. At the beginning, the kids create name signs of what they like to be called, since it is key in a discussion to refer to someone by name. As Kylene Beers says about this seemingly insignificant detail of students knowing each other by name, “the student is made to feel as if he or she certainly belongs in that room, as does everyone else” (Beers, 2002). This prompts students to acknowledge that they were

listening and is a way to affirm each other's ideas. Eventually, they won't need the signs, but it is good to start with them. Also, I have the kids rip up post-its into three strips. This was a modification I made later. The kids hang the three strips off the front of their desks. Once they have an opportunity to share, they remove a strip. This helps the class to visualize who hasn't yet had a chance to speak.

This sparked a new idea I've yet to implement with my students: different ways of engagement. I cannot assume that my classroom is one of comfort for all students; I work hard to create a classroom community, but some students take longer to open up than others. Later, in that same chapter by Beers, I came across her step-by-step guide to allow our learners to feel more comfortable, by mulling over their ideas, sharing in small groups, then participating with the larger community. With this, I decided to do a first discussion trial run with my students in their small table groups. This process can span across a series of classes or within a singular class period, depending on the number of students and their base knowledge of discussion. This would also be a great opportunity to show them how to track their conversation the same way I do, so they know the different ways to contribute. In chapter thirteen of Beer's *When Kids Can't Read*, she explains that her students start in small groups for roughly ten minutes explaining the novel to each other. By having the students first share out their ideas in small groups, with the questions posted for them a day in advance to prepare, I believe we can get them to truly engage authentically in the conversation.

However, does it truly follow Rosenblatt's aesthetic stance of experiencing a text if it is a requirement? Upon reflection, I thought of something a colleague of mine did. She had these makeshift passes she would use for tests and quizzes, so I thought

I could apply that same idea to my seminars. Each student at the beginning of the year would receive three passes to sit out of the seminar and instead complete a written response to the questions - no questions asked! I thought this would allow my students who needed some time before entering the discussion the liberty to sit back and watch beforehand to ease their comfort. Also, being "affectionate and interested in cultivating the children's emotional capacities along with their capacity for criticism" (Nussbaum, 2011) is key to being a good teacher. Especially in this modern age where social-emotional learning is at the forefront for our students, we don't know on any given day what they may be experiencing. If I want the students to truly enjoy and engage with the conversations, then the discussion itself cannot become a compulsory activity. After all, "reading is a social process" (Beers, 2002).

Then, we talk about the prep that goes into that day to prepare for our seminar. The students are responsible for reading whatever it is we're discussing, be it a few chapters, an article, a short story, etc. We talk about contributing to the whole, and how you need to show respect to your peers by partaking. We talk about the keys of body language to show respect for those talking, even if we don't always agree with them. Again, the idea is really about creating a climate of community to invite more students to take ownership of their reading and participation. Then, a day or two before the seminar, the kids are all responsible for drafting a question. I usually assign something like this: "Read the first three chapters of _____. On Dotstorming, write one question per chapter you are *dying* to discuss."

As part of this preparation, we discuss how to create open-ended questions, and there is a full lesson wherein I teach students to differentiate between open and closed

questions. I usually take a fun text and have them draft questions in table groups on post-its, and then have them categorize their post-its in a T-Chart. This provides them with the foundation for creating questions. Such examples could be something such as taking the question of, “Did Icarus die?” and transforming that into “Infer what could have happened to Icarus” or even, “What could be an alternate ending to the story if Icarus was found?” I even walked them through Bloom’s Taxonomy a bit to talk about pushing our thinking beyond just “How would you feel?” This way, they are given the sentence starter words to help them craft a higher-level question. I have the students become the crafters of the questions because, “by emphasizing each person’s active voice, we also promote a culture of accountability. When people see their ideas as their responsibility, they are more likely, too, to see their deeds as their responsibility” (Nussbaum, 2016). I have students take ownership of the ideas discussed; therefore, it is no longer a teacher-mandated activity, rather they are willing participants engaging in the Socratic practice.

Lastly, in preparation, I have them dissect each other’s questioning by anonymously putting them on the board; we talk about what makes for a successful open-ended question. To start, sometimes I will also add questions to theirs so we can scrutinize effective questions. But I have also done the reverse. I have pulled up closed questions like, “Why does Jonas leave the community?” and we talk as a class on how to make that question a discussion question, instead of just a question that can be answered directly by reading the book. We revise our questions and discuss whether something sounds more like a test question or can be easily answered with yes/no, versus something where multiple people have different responses. Sometimes the students need more modeling

to help them transition into creating the open-ended questions discussed in our introductory activity, using sentence starters when needed.

Now that the class has established the norms of types of questions and what to expect when we get to class, it’s time to figure out what it is they’re going to be discussing during our seminar. As I mentioned before, I teach the kids how to write questions. This is because no matter how great my questions might be, I am writing them from the scope of a teacher, and that might not be what the kids want to talk about. Therefore, I have them write the questions. DotStorming, an online collaborative brainstorming tool, also has the great feature of being able to vote on tiles. There are similar forums for this process such as Padlet or a Google Form, but in essence, it is a way to collect student responses and allow the class to look through a series of questions. The kids vote on their favorite question per chapter (they can’t vote for themselves), and then those favorites are the questions we answer. I used to reveal the questions the day of the discussion, but after talking with kids, they said that made them a little nervous. With “the right support, they [students] really can be successful” (Beers, 2002, 262), so, now I announce the questions the day before our discussion, either in class or on GoogleClassroom. This way, kids can prepare thoughts of what they may want to say, therefore alleviating the stress of more shy students and allowing more ambitious students to search for additional outside research — this then differentiates the lesson by default!

On the day of our discussion, once the chairs and such are prepped, I post the questions for the class to see on the board. We debrief the rules and points, then the kids start. I give them the entire class period for the three questions (or however we are

structuring the number of questions for the day) and guide them with the skills to advance the conversation to the next question on their own. I tell them that once they feel like they've been repeating a point over and over, they can ask to move on by politely interjecting in the group. If they agree, they move on to the next question. Each question does not need the same amount of time. It is up to the students to self-pace. This ties in with Nussbaum's claim that "Young children are active,

questioning beings whose capacity to probe and inquire ought to be respected and further developed" (Nussbaum, 2016). Some questions may just incite more debate than others, and that is okay!

Concerning tracking and assessing the discussion, I keep a "tracking circle" color-coded by various points. I catalog the discussion by creating a massive circle with the students' names, then I follow the discussion with lines. Here is an example:

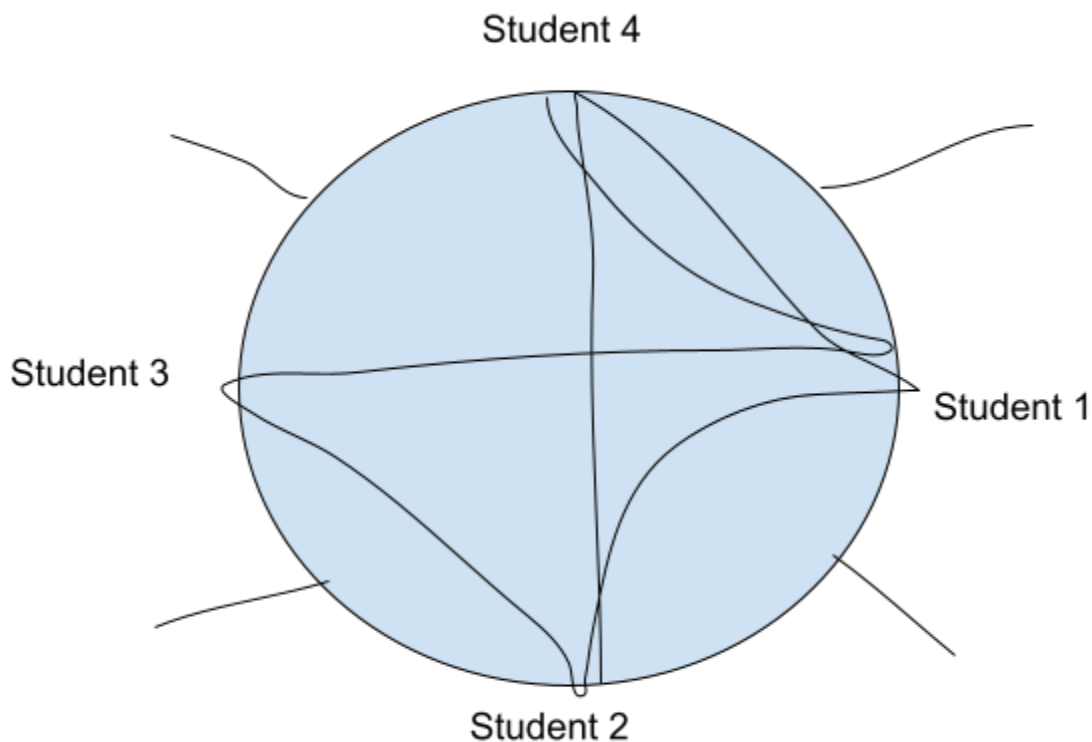


Fig. 1. Tracking circle for class discussion.

I would replace "Student 1," etc. with each student's name; I mirror the circle to look exactly like the circle in class that I am observing, so it is easy to follow. As shown in Fig. 1, I started with Student 4, who then "passed" to Student 1, then Student 3, Student 2, back to Student 1, to Student 4, and ended at Student 2. With this data so far,

I can see that all students except Student 3 have spoken twice so far. I can also see patterns of who the students call on next, so I can make sure everyone has an equal opportunity. With multiple questions, I keep the same circle but use different colored pens to accentuate the different questions (see fig. 2).

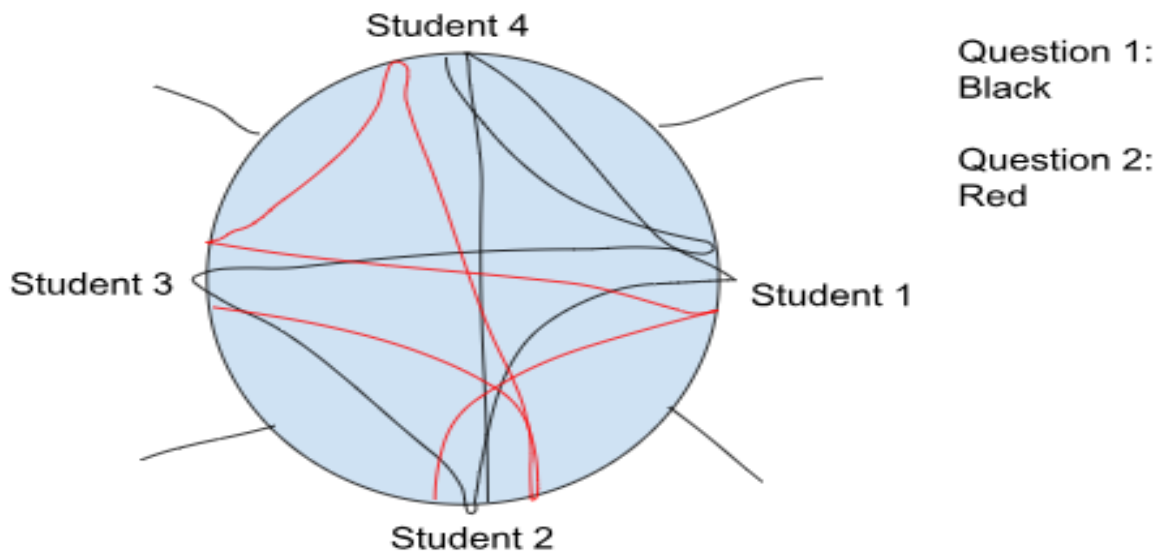


Fig. 2. Tracking circle documenting class discussion of two questions.

As you can see, I overlaid the two questions, but it is easy enough to follow with the color coding. The kids get excited to look at the finished product once I start using fun colors. What I'll notate now is that in totality, Students 1, 2, and 3 have spoken thrice, whereas Student 2 has spoken four times. That's one portion of the point system. Students earn points for each time they share. I also award a point to the student whose question has been chosen, so they can start the day with points before the discussion even begins. This also aids students in various types of participation; they can talk frequently, or just one or two times. The points are evaluative of what they add to the conversation, not just how often they share, which is done through the awarding of bonus points. Bonus points are given for such instances as using cited textual evidence, by making connections outside of class ("we're learning about X in Social Studies and it relates by _____"), and

by using a person's name specifically and recapping their point using *They Say/I Say* sentence frames ("I agree with _____ when they said _____"). This also stresses to students the idea of quality over quantity. Sure, they could talk five times during the discussion, or they could talk twice, and each time use evidence and build on their peer's idea and maybe make a connection and still earn plenty of marks. It's all about how they are contributing to the discussion. Afterward, I always hang up the circle drawings on our discussion wall, so the students can check in with themselves. Some try to get a lot of points; some just want to see if they are improving. A few of my sweet little ones in the past have checked to see who didn't talk much, so they can make it a point to call on that person next time. I put little colored hash marks next to the student's names to denote this (see fig. 3).

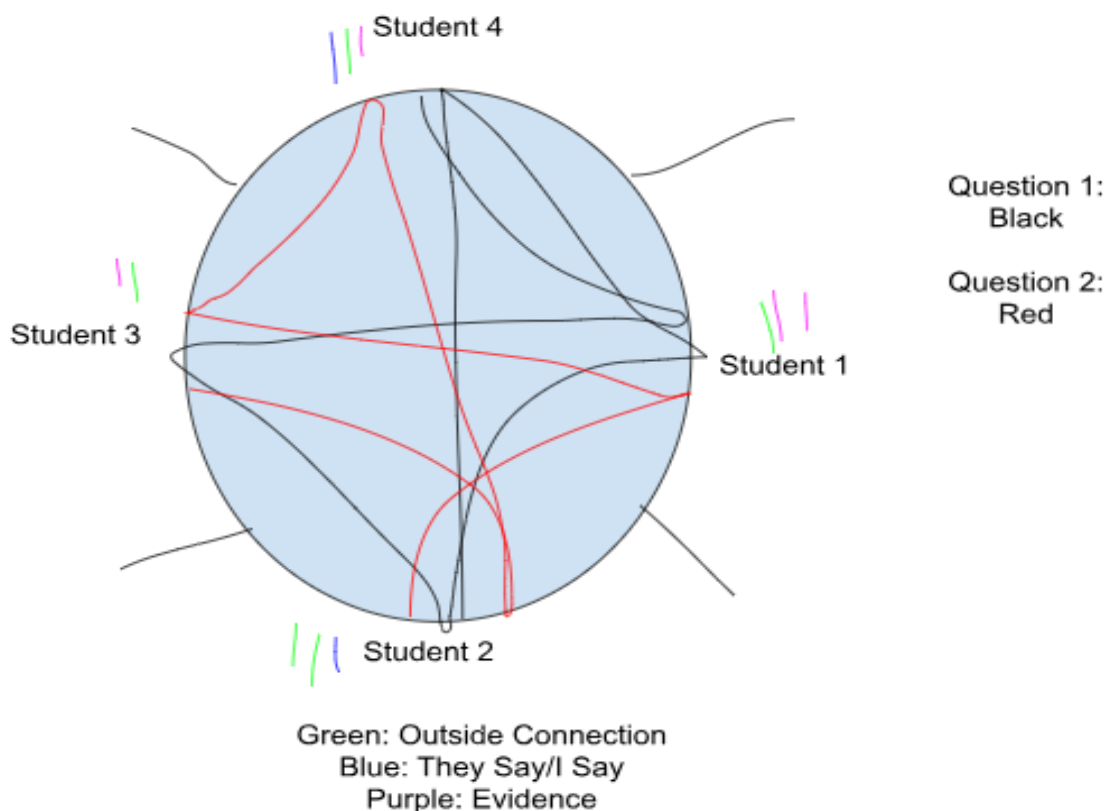


Fig. 3. Tracking circle documenting class discussion of two questions and bonus questions.

I like to think that this system of discussion truly allows for students to be a part of an aesthetic discussion, as they are living through the text in their analysis as opposed to answering multiple-choice questions or something of the like through an efferent stance, coined by Louise Rosenblatt, wherein students, focus solely on the information in a text. Overall, it is a fantastic activity that truly puts the kids in the driver's seat of connecting to their reading and leading open discussions with each other, and at the end creates a tangible, clear map of student voices and contributions to reflect upon and grow with as the class progresses.

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MORGAN TAYLOR is an Instructional Technology Facilitator for Hamilton Township School District who believes in the power of technology to enhance and support student learning & the education profession. She can be reached at mpt2136@tc.columbia.edu