

TABLE OF CONTENTS



Acknowledgements	ii
Meet the Authors	iii
Preface	vii
1. Two Models of Teaching and Overview	1
If Good Teaching is a Dialogue	1
Afterword	5
What's Next: An Overview of This Book.....	5
2. Theory Behind The Socratic Method and Literature Circles	7
Differences Between Passive and Active Learning	7
Seminal Thoughts from Master Teachers.....	8
3. The Socratic Method Of Teaching	11
Overview of the Socratic Method of Teaching the Socratic Paradox.....	11
The Socratic Method	12
Techniques of Active and Close Reading	13
Three Kinds of Questions	15
<i>The Road Not Taken</i> – Lesson Plan 1: Three Kinds of Questions	21
Qualities of Good Prepared Discussion Questions	25
<i>The Road Not Taken</i> – Lesson Plan 2: Qualities of Good Discussion Questions.....	27
On Writing Basic Questions of Interpretation.....	32
Spontaneous Follow-Up Questions	34
<i>The Road Not Taken</i> – Lesson Plan 3: Spontaneous Follow-Up Questions	36
4. Socratic Seminars on Novels and Short Stories	43
Preparing Students to Participate in Socratic Seminars	43
Preparing Students for a Socratic Seminar – Lesson Plan 4	45
Stauffer's Directed Reading-Thinking Activity	50
<i>The Zebra Storyteller</i> – Lesson Plan 5: Directed Reading-Thinking Activity.....	51
What Is the Value of Reading and Studying Literature?	56
What Is the Value of Reading Literature? – Lesson Plan 6	56
Socratic Seminar – Lesson Plan 7: <i>The Pigman</i> :	58
<i>Good Country People</i> – Lesson Plan 8.....	69

An Alternative Basic Question.....	71
<i>Tomorrow and Tomorrow and So Forth</i> – Lesson Plan 9	74
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i> – Lesson Plan 10.....	77
<i>The Metamorphosis</i> – Lesson Plan 11	95
<i>Ordinary People</i> – Lesson Plan 12.....	98
<i>The Stone Boy</i> – Lesson Plan 13.....	107
<i>Harrison Bergeron</i> – Lesson Plan 14.....	117
5. Socratic Seminars on Film Criticism	121
Guidelines for Writing About Movies Based on Novels or Short Stories.....	122
<i>Barn Burning</i> – Lesson Plan 15.....	125
<i>Two Soldiers</i> – Lesson Plan 16	134
<i>The Jilting of Granny Weatherall</i> – Lesson Plan 17	140
<i>Of Mice and Men</i> – Lesson Plan 18.....	144
<i>Hamlet</i> – Lesson Plan 19.....	153
<i>Macbeth</i> – Lesson Plan 20.....	157
<i>Finding Forrester</i> – Lesson Plan 21	159
6. The What, Why and How of Literature Circles	163
Twelve Principles of Literature Circles	163
The Function of Role Sheets in Discussion	166
Preparing Students to Participate in Literary Circles – Lesson Plan 22	168
Assessment of Literature Circles.....	176
References	179

© Hawker Brownlow Education

TWO MODELS OF TEACHING AND OVERVIEW

1

IF GOOD TEACHING IS A DIALOGUE, WHY DOES THE LITTLE RED SCHOOLHOUSE METHOD CONTINUE TO DOMINATE?

Robert Benchley once remarked that “There are two kinds of people, those who classify things and those who don’t.” Since I belong to the first group, I tend to classify teachers according to those who still employ the little red schoolhouse model of learning by lecturing and those who, daily, engage their students in active learning. I do so not only because most of my former teachers assumed that they were the most important part of the learning process but also because the lecture method dominates among too many teachers even today. In contrast, the so-called Socratic teacher knows that the student is the most important part of the learning process.

Take my high school literature teacher, Mr Prosser. He began most lessons by stating the objective – “By the end of this class you will be able to identify the characteristics of the *code hero* in Hemingway” – and then, anticipating the so-what looks on our faces, explained the relevance or importance of this knowledge: “Hemingway’s concept of the *code hero* will give you standards by which to judge your own ideas of heroism.” The class proceeded as a lecture. Mr Prosser knew what a code hero was and he was going to tell us, tell us that he told us and then ask us to tell him what he had told us. Our job as students was to *pay attention*, that is, to be receptive and passive and to take careful, detailed notes. We were not to interrupt his lecture with comments. We were allowed to ask questions for elementary clarification, for example, “What do you mean by pragmatic?” or “Who is James L. Roberts?” or “Why do you call this stuff ‘literary criticism’?” His authority was supreme, his answers all we needed to know on those subjects. After all, he had a master’s degree.

His lessons concluded with an objective test. “I am the tester, and you are the testees,” he would say, and never would we break from those roles. However, “to be fair” – another of his pet phrases – he “entertained” questions before the test. If we had none, Mr Prosser judged his lesson a success. In the end, we were to trust that Mr Prosser knew best even when we did not know what he was talking about. “Someday you will understand, and all will be clear,” he would reassure us.

What I eventually came to understand, thanks to my later contemporary literature professor, Kenelm Basil, was that there was a better way to teach. Mr Basil was a Socratic teacher if ever there was one. He began each lesson not by telling us what we were going to learn (he was not certain that we would learn anything although that was, of course, his fondest hope)

but by posing a major problem about the meaning of the day's assigned reading. He began always with a basic question of interpretation, wrote it on the board and then asked each of us to write down our own initial answers on scrap paper. For example, "According to Vonnegut's story, *Harrison Bergeron*, is the desire to excel as strong as the tendency to be mediocre?" Because he kept his opinions to himself – he was not a participant but a leader – and asked only follow-up questions on our comments, Mr Basil convinced us over time that he really did not have a single correct answer in mind. Indeed, the class soon realised that more than one correct answer was possible because evidence from the story supported both sides of the issue. In short, our teacher began the discussion with a real question, the answer to which he himself was uncertain about.

As students, we had to be active: clarify our answers, test others' answers for supporting evidence, resolve conflicting answers with evidence and listen for more opinions. Learning in Mr Basil's classroom was not about receiving ideas but about wrestling with them. The test of truth was reason and evidence, not teacher authority. The lesson concluded with a resolution activity since, after all, questions are quests for answers. We were asked to review our original responses and then to write a one-page essay stating our comprehensive answer to the basic question. Mr Basil strove not for group consensus or truth by vote, but for individual understandings: "Given the answers that you have just heard in discussion, what now is your solution?"

Liberation at last! I no longer had to sit dutifully silent while someone told me what I could just as easily have read for myself, found in a library or researched on the Internet. I no longer had to parrot the teacher's interpretations. More important, Mr Basil challenged me to think independently and to become responsible for my ideas. The responsibility for learning had been placed in my hands and, along with it, the joy and personal satisfaction of arriving at my own insights. I had learned to live with doubt and to uncover questions that answers hide. In short, I learned how to learn.

Do not misunderstand. Most so-called Socratic teachers do not conduct discussions the way Mr Basil did. Many have not mastered the art of fostering reflective, independent thinking. Such teachers confuse the right to express an opinion with the notion that any opinion can be right. Toleration of any and all ideas becomes the goal, and brainstorming – that pathetic analogy – gets enthroned as the method. As one mindless person put it, "Don't we all know that everything is relative and that there are no absolutes?" Except, of course, his opinion.

Others, the pseudo-Socratic teachers, offer little more than a disguised lecture. These teachers pretend to conduct open discussions but have specific answers in mind. They tip their hands in several ways: by asking leading questions – "How can you honestly think Vonnegut would agree with you?"; by allowing opinions that they agree with to go unchallenged or unsubstantiated; by developing a single line of argument or a single side of an issue; by injecting their opinions into the discussion – "I believe that you have all overlooked important information on page six"; by commenting on student answers – "That's very good, James. I'm so proud of you" or, "Maria, I think you had better reconsider your answer. You are missing something"; and, finally, by attempting to arrive at a group consensus – "I would like to see a show of hands. How many think the desire to excel is as strong as the tendency to be mediocre?"

If what I have said about these would-be Socratic teachers is not true, how else are we to explain these examples of common student and teacher behaviours?

Teacher:

“Whenever I try to have discussion, my students clam up. Only one or two contribute. They just don’t get the point. I *have* to tell them.”

Student:

“My answer is correct, isn’t it Mrs Jones?”

Teacher:

“Discussion is a waste of time. I have to cover the curriculum.”

Student:

“But Mrs Jones, what *is* the right answer?”

Teacher:

“My students’ test scores have to improve. I don’t have time for the luxury of endless discussions. I have 130 students. Get real.”

Student:

“Why do you keep asking questions when you know the answers?”

Teacher:

“Students don’t know how to ask good questions and, anyway, discussions are just too messy.”

Student:

“Just leave me alone and give me my C. I don’t mess up your class.”

Teacher:

“My students cannot be trusted to think for themselves. They keep coming up with silly answers.”

But isn’t that just the point? The lecturing teacher fails to understand that wrong answers are a necessary part of the learning process when real thinking takes place. In contrast, the authentic Socratic teacher recognises and accepts false turns and “silly” answers as inevitable when students have the freedom to be wrong – *and* right. After all, thinking IS difficult and students resist it like a plague. Any teacher will recognise immediately the common cop-outs: “I don’t know” or “Why did you pick me?” or “I wasn’t doing anything” or “Who cares?” or “What difference does it make?” or even “Ask somebody else.” In the end, if thinking was easy, there would be more of it.

The fundamental difference between Mr Prosser and Mr Basil comes down to who is finally responsible for learning. Mr Prosser’s approach implies that the teacher is, while Mr Basil’s suggests that students’ should be. Can anyone convince students they are responsible for their own learning other than students themselves? And isn’t it usually through discussion, dialogue and problem solving – not through lecture – that students come to realise what they *have* and *have not* learned?

Not long ago, I heard James Howard of the Council for Basic Education state on National Public Radio, “Education is what you have left after you have forgotten everything you learned in school.” I wonder what Mr Prosser would make of that statement. I know what Mr Basil would do with it.

(Note: An edited version of this article, “Hail, Socrates”, appeared in *Teacher* magazine (May–June, 1999, pp. 62–63).)

Figure 1.1 compares and contrasts important differences between the two models of teaching discussed in this article.

THE SOCRATIC METHOD OF TEACHING

3

OVERVIEW OF THE SOCRATIC METHOD OF TEACHING THE SOCRATIC PARADOX

“The role of the teacher is to uncover the question that the answer hides.”

– James Baldwin

Let us begin at the source. Like so many students before him and even those today, Socrates’s student Meno is exasperated by his teacher’s refusal to “just tell him” what to do, what truth is and whether or not virtue can be taught. Meno is astounded when Socrates openly admits not only that he does not know whether virtue can be taught, but also that he does not even know what virtue is. “What!?” Meno asks: “Is this the report we are to take home about you?” In his characteristic manner, Socrates challenges his student to rephrase the question, to reflect on it and to arrive at his own answer. In so doing, Socrates helps Meno wrestle with the implications of the problem that he has posed for their discussion. Indeed, Socrates makes a point of asserting his own ignorance: “All I can say is that I have often looked to see if there are any [teachers of virtue, and in spite of all my efforts, I cannot find them ... I do not know what virtue is and, not only that, you may say also, that to the best of my belief, I have never yet met anyone who did know” (Rouse 29). Meno leaves confounded that his teacher, his master and guide, refuses to confirm what Meno believes he already knows.

Nevertheless, as Socrates’ reputation for wisdom continues to grow, another impetuous student, Chaerephon, goes to the oracle of Delphi to ask if any one is wiser than Socrates. She replies that no one is. When Socrates hears the answer he is genuinely puzzled: “I have no wisdom, small or great. What can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men?” (426). But why does Socrates take the oracle’s word at face value? Could the god also have meant that no one was wiser than Socrates because wisdom is not to be found among men? Socrates is even more explicit about his ignorance in the defence of his life at his trial, *The Apology*. After questioning another who claimed to be wise, Socrates concludes, “I am better off than he is – for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows; I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have the slight advantage over him” (327). What we have here is the great paradox of learning: we must first know what we want to know or recognise what we do not know. Is this confusing? Only at first. What Socrates suggests is that the first step to learning is knowing how to ask an honest question – one that you have no answer to or one that you have several answers to but none that entirely satisfy. In short, unless you have questions, you cannot learn. As learning begins, the more you know, the more you [realise that you] do not know. Such is the Socratic paradox.

SOCRATIC SEMINARS ON NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES

4

PREPARING STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN SOCRATIC SEMINARS

The Socratic Seminar is a series of extended discussions focused on a single topic, theme or series of readings that may or may not be related. The seminar is conducted by a teacher, a team of teachers, or lead by students who have been trained in the Socratic Method (Chapter 3). Its usual length is a full class period or a double period, two or three days a week. The four rules of Socratic discussion ought to be reviewed first to be sure that the co-leaders understand the purpose of each rule – particularly the rule about only asking questions. By following four basic rules, leaders and participants implement a foundation for active learning.

1. *No one may participate who has not read the selection before discussion.* The ticket of admission is that everyone has read the selection carefully. For this reason, before discussion the leader(s) begin with a plot-check quiz, that is, a list of factual questions that anyone can readily answer if he or she has done the reading. Anyone who has not done the reading is limited to the role of spectator. *Note:* for less able readers, this rule can be obviated by conducting an oral reading in class (see Stauffer's Directed Reading-Thinking Activity, p. 58).
2. *Participants must support their answers with textual evidence.* Without evidence, discussion soon becomes a matter of sheer conjecture wherein one idea begins to sound as good as another. Without evidence, participants have no way of deciding which answers are better than others and which are wrong. Evidence turns opinion into interpretation. This rule also ensures that everyone has equal access to the same information on which everyone has to base their answers.
3. *Participants may not introduce outside authorities. They can discuss only the assigned reading.* In their *Theory of Literature*, Warren and Welleck get to the heart of the matter:

The natural sensible starting point for work in literary scholarship is interpretations and analysis of the works of literature themselves. After all, only the works themselves justify all our interest in the life of an author, in his social environment and the whole process of literature. But curiously enough, literary history has been so preoccupied with the setting of a work of literature that its attempts at analysis of the works themselves have been slight in comparison with the enormous efforts expended on the study of their background.

Furthermore, students learn to become responsible for their own ideas when they do not try to justify them by appealing to an authority – another book or another person. They must learn to rely on their judgment about the meaning of the text itself.

THE ZEBRA STORYTELLER

– Spencer Holst



(To be read after the first group reading for a second, silent reading and notations)

Once upon a time there was a Siamese cat who pretended to be a lion and spoke inappropriate Zebraic. That language is whinnied by the race of striped horses in Africa.

Here now: An innocent zebra is walking in a jungle and approaching from another direction is the little cat; they meet.

“Hello there!” says the Siamese cat in perfectly pronounced Zebraic. “It certainly is a pleasant day, isn’t it? The sun is shining, the birds are singing; isn’t the world a lovely place to live today?”

The zebra is so astonished at hearing a Siamese cat speaking like a zebra, why – he’s fit to be tied.

So the little cat quickly ties him up, kills him and drags the better parts of the carcass back to his den.

The cat successfully hunted zebras for many months in this manner, dining on filet mignon of zebra every night, and from the better hides he made bow ties and wide belts after the fashion of the decadent princes of the Old Siamese court.

He began boasting to his friends he was a lion, and he gave them as proof the fact that he hunted zebras.

The delicate noses of the zebras told them there was really no lion in the neighbourhood. The zebra deaths caused many to avoid the region. Superstitious, they decided the woods were haunted by the ghost of a lion.

One day the storyteller of the zebras was ambling, and through his mind ran plots for stories to amuse the other zebras, when suddenly his eyes brightened, and he said, “That’s it! I’ll tell a story about a Siamese cat who learns to speak our language! What an idea! That’ll make ’em laugh!”

Just then the Siamese cat appeared before him, and said, “Hello there! Pleasant day today, isn’t it?”

The zebra storyteller wasn’t fit to be tied at hearing a cat speaking his language, because he’d been thinking about that very thing.

He took a good look at the cat, and he didn’t know what, but there was something about his looks he didn’t like, so he kicked him with a hoof and killed him.

That is the function of a storyteller.

Source: Spencer, W. (1993). *The Zebra Storyteller: Collected Stories*. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press.

SAMPLE PREPARED FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS FOR A DR-TA: *THE ZEBRA STORYTELLER*



1.	What is the story going to be about?
2.	What kind of story could you tell about telling stories?
3.	What is a Zebra storyteller?
<p>Once upon a time there was a Siamese cat who pretended to be a lion and spoke inappropriate Zebraic. That language is whinnied by the race of striped horses in Africa.</p>	
4.	Who is the storyteller?
5.	Why would a Siamese cat tell stories to zebras?
6.	What is distinctive or unusual about Siamese cats?
7.	What is “inappropriate” about a cat speaking Zebraic?
<p>Here now: An innocent zebra is walking in a jungle and approaching from another direction is the little cat; they meet. “Hello there!” says the Siamese cat in perfectly pronounced Zebraic. “It certainly is a pleasant day, isn’t it? The sun is shining, the birds are singing; isn’t the world a lovely place to live today?”</p>	
8.	Why does the cat speak Zebraic perfectly, and yet we are told it is “inappropriate”?
9.	Will the Zebra answer the cat’s questions?
10.	How will the Zebra react to the cat’s friendly greeting?
<p>The zebra is so astonished at hearing a Siamese cat speaking like a zebra, why – he’s fit to be tied.</p>	
11.	Why is the zebra so astonished at the cat’s greeting him in zebra?
12.	What does “he’s fit to be tied” mean?
13.	How will the cat respond to the zebra’s amazement?
<p>So the little cat quickly ties him up, kills him and drags the better parts of the carcass back to his den. The cat successfully hunted zebras for many months in this manner, dining on filet mignon of zebra every night, and from the better hides he made bow ties and wide belts after the fashion of the decadent princes of the Old Siamese court.</p>	

THE STONE BOY: MOVIE REVIEW



DIRECTIONS: As you read Siskel's movie review, make notations and then answer these questions in complete sentences in your journal.

Before viewing the movie version:

1.	Why does Siskel think we will be disappointed with the movie version of Gina Berriault's story?
2.	Why does Siskel think that Arnold picked peas after his brother's death?
3.	Based on your reading of the original story, do you agree with Siskel's interpretation of Arnold's behaviour after Eugene's death? If so, why so? If not, why not?
4.	In the original story, why does no one reach out to help Arnold cope with the loss of his brother?
5.	What is Siskel's chief objection to the movie?
6.	In spite of his objections, why does Siskel still recommend the movie?
7.	Explain how, specifically, Siskel's movie review is a model of good writing.

After viewing the movie version:

8.	Unlike the short story, why does the movie concentrate not on Arnold's growing isolation but on the sympathetic relationship between Arnold and his loving grandfather?
9.	Do you agree with Siskel that "the philandering brother" [Uncle Andy] of Arnold's mother [Ruth] and his "put-upon wife" [Lucille] rail at each other for no dramatic purpose? If so, why? If not, why not?
10.	Unlike the movie, does the short story imply that they have lost two sons? If so, why? If not, why not?
11.	List three specific changes that you liked in the movie.
12.	List three specific changes that you disliked in the movie.