Background on Socratic Seminars

Purpose of the seminar:

- To assist students in analyzing "big ideas" in the text
- To examine concepts and values
- To engage students in rigorous reflection on their own reasoning processes

Participants in seminar:

- Focus on thinking critically about the ideas, issues, and values represented in specifically selected texts
- Seek to build understanding of complex ideas through rigorous, thoughtful, reflective dialogue

Seminar texts:

- Are drawn from literature, history, science, math, philosophy, etc.
- May be primary source documents
- May be mathematical problems
- May be works of art, photographs, diagrams, graphs, charts, or music

Students learn to synthesize and evaluate knowledge through:

- Reading closely
- Weighing evidence
- Making connections
- Listening actively
- Exploring differing views
- Reflecting on their own learning
- Constructing meaning and understanding for themselves

Criteria for Quality Socratic Seminar Questions

Effective Questions in General:

- Are often open-ended (having more than one right answer)
- Analyze essential or "big ideas" in the text (including those most important to the participants)
- Examine ideas, concepts, and values
- Focus participants' attention on the text or their relationship to it
- Avoid leading participants
- Ask participants to provide evidence or documentation from the text to substantiate their ideas

Opening Questions:

- Are usually the most open-ended
- Are related specifically to the text
- Identify what participants think are the central ideas of the text

Core Questions:

- Least open-ended
- Often flow directly from participants' comments
- Relate back to the text
- Probe participants' comments (asking them to clarify, justify, or provide evidence)
- Encourage participants to evaluate their own thinking and/or the thinking of others

Closing Questions:

- Focus on how participants' thinking evolved during the seminar
- May re-state opening question
- May help make a personal connection
- Are not designed to elicit a consensus

Socratic Seminar Teacher Moves

Eliciting Responses:

- Jose, you look like you want to say something...
- I see you are nodding/shaking you head; do you agree/disagree?
- What do you think about what ____ just said?

Asking for Clarification:

- I'm not sure I understand. Can you rephrase what you said?
- Can someone give us an example?
- What do you mean when you say...?
- I missed something.

Asking for Elaboration or Justification:

- Could you say more about that?
- Can you give us an example of what you mean?
- Where [in the text] can you find evidence for your statement?
- How do you know?
- Why do you think so?
- Why do you believe this?

Summarizing or Synthesizing:

- It sounds like you're saying...
- I think we're talking about...
- Some of the ideas we've mentioned so far are...
- So, what we're saying is...

Reflecting and Evaluating:

- Has anyone changed his or her thinking as a result of the discussion?
- Have any new questions or ideas emerged as a result of the discussion?
- So, how did we do?
- What did we do well today?
- What do we need to work on next time?

Socratic Seminar

Ground Rules:

Participants listen respectfully to one another by:

- Showing attention with appropriate eye contact (looking at the speaker) and body language (e.g. leaning in)
- Referring to comments made by previous speaker(s)
- Restating, paraphrasing, or summarizing another's argument
- Responding to questions posed by other participants
- Asking for clarification if unclear about another's point
- Not talking over someone else
- Not dominating the discussion

Building Knowledge:

Participants build knowledge by:

- Referring back to another speaker's comment or the text
- Analyzing the central ideas in the conversation or text
- Asking for or providing elaboration, justification, or example(s) for unsupported claims
- Asking for or providing evidence from the text to substantiate ideas
- Making connections to other texts, experiences, events, or situations
- Considering multiple perspectives
- Evaluating the ideas in the text
- Evaluating alternative interpretations of the text or related experiences
- Producing new meaning or understanding

Criteria for Evaluating a Partner in Socratic Seminars

Participants listen respectfully to one another by:
Place a check on the line each time your partner does one of these:

- Looking at the speaker _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
- Body language (leaning in) _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
- Referring to previous speaker(s) _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
- Restating or summarizing other _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
- Responding to questions of others _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
- Asking for clarification if uncertain _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
- Not talking over one someone else _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

Participants build knowledge [about the text] by:
Place a check on the line each time your partner does one of these:

- Referring to the text _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
- Analyzing the BIG ideas in the text _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
- Asking for elaboration or example(s) _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
- Providing an example or explanation _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
- Asking for evidence from the text _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
- Providing evidence from the text _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
- Making connections to other texts _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
- Making connections to an experience _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

For Further Reading and Study of Socratic Seminars

Below are resources that may be helpful in extending your understanding of Socratic Seminars:

Beers, Kylene and Robert E. Probst. (2013) *Notice and Note: Strategies for Close Reading*. Heinemann Publishers: Portsmouth, NH.

Copeland, Matt. (2005). *Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in the Middle and High School*. Stenhouse Publishers: Portland, ME.

Fischer, Douglas, et.al. (2008). *Content Area Conversations: How to Plan Discussion-Based lessons for Diverse Language Learners*. ASCD: Alexandria, VA.

Hillocks, George, (2011). *Teaching Argument Writing Grades 6-12: Supporting Claims with Relevant Evidence and Clear Reasoning*. Heinemann Publishers: Portsmouth, NH.

McBride, Bill. (2008). *If they can Argue Well, They Can Write Well*. Incentive Publishing: Nashville, TN.

Rothstein, Dan and Luz Santana. (2011). *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to ASK Their Own questions*. Harvard Education Press: Cambridge, MA.

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First Reader

By Billy Collins

I can see them standing politely on the wide pages
that I was still learning to turn,
Jane in a blue jumper, Dick with his crayon-brown hair,
playing with a ball or exploring the cosmos
of the backyard, unaware they are the first characters,
the boy and girl who begin fiction.

Beyond the simple illustrations of their neighborhood,
the other protagonists were waiting in a huddle:
frightening Heathcliff, frightened Pip, Nick Adams
carrying a fishing rod, Emma Bovary riding into Rouen.

But I would read about the perfect boy and his sister
even before I would read about Adam and Eve, garden and gate,
and before I heard the name Gutenberg, the type
of their simple talk was moving into my focusing eyes.

It was always Saturday and he and she
were always pointing at something and shouting,
"Look!" pointing at the dog, the bicycle, or at their father
as he pushed a hand mower over the lawn,
waving at aproned mother framed in the kitchen doorway,
pointing toward the sky, pointing at each other.

They wanted us to look but we had looked already
and seen the shaded lawn, the wagon, the postman.
We had seen the dog, walked, watered and fed the animal,
and now it was time to discover the infinite, clicking
permutations of the alphabet's small and capital letters.
Alphabetical ourselves in the rows of classroom desks,
we were forgetting how to look, learning how to read.

Socratic Seminar

Additional Resources: Texts and Questions

"The Story of an Hour" Kate Chopin (1894)

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed." He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will--as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been. When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under the breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial. She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him--sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

"Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhold, imploring for admission. "Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door--you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door."

"Go away. I am not making myself ill." No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

Someone was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of the accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards' quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease--of the joy that kills.

Questions for Chopin's Story of an Hour

Opening:

- Do you agree with the doctors that Mrs. Mallard died "of a joy that kills"?

Core:

- For those who said they disagreed, what killed Mrs. Mallard?
- Was she happily married? How do you know?
- Why might she "weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her?"
- What does Chopin mean by, "She saw...a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely?"
- Why does Chopin say, "There would be no powerful will bending hers in blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature?" Are women guilty of this, too?
- When do you think this story was written? Is it still relevant?

Closing:

- In closing, has anyone changed their point of view on what actually killed Mrs. Mallard?

In March 1776, Abigail Adams wrote this celebrated letter to husband John, who was serving as the Massachusetts representative to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Only weeks before, on March 17, the British had evacuated from Boston, a preliminary sign of the Revolutionary War's eventual success. This letter shows Abigail to be a woman of unusual boldness and insight, as she urges her husband to "remember the ladies" in an age when women were seen as strictly domestic.

Braintree March 31, 1776

I wish you would ever write me a Letter half as long as I write you; and tell me if you may where your Fleet are gone? What sort of defense Virginia can make against our common enemy? Whether it is so situated as to make an able defense? Are not the gentry lords and the common people vassals, are they not like the uncivilized Natives Britain represents us to be? I hope their riflemen who have shown themselves very savage and even blood thirsty; are not a specimen of the generality of the people.

I am willing to allow the colony great merit for having produced a Washington but they have been shamefully duped by a Dunmore.

I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for liberty cannot be equally strong in the breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it is not founded upon that generous and Christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us.

Do not you want to see Boston; I am fearful of the small pox, or I should have been in before this time. I got Mr. Crane to go to our House and see what state it was in. I find it has been occupied by one of the doctors of a regiment, very dirty, but no other damage has been done to it. The few things which were left in it are all gone. Cranch has the key which he never delivered up. I have written to him for it and am determined to get it cleaned as soon as possible and shut it up. I look upon it a new acquisition of property, a property which one month ago I did not value at a single Shilling, and could with pleasure have seen it in flames.

The town in general is left in a better state than we expected, more owing to a precipitate flight than any regard to the inhabitants, though some individuals discovered a sense of honor and justice and have left the rent of the houses in which they were, for the owners and the furniture unhurt, or if damaged sufficient to make it good.

Others have committed abominable ravages. The Mansion House of your President [John Hancock] is safe and the furniture unhurt whilst both the house and furniture of the Solicitor General [Samuel Quincy] have fallen a prey to their own merciless party. Surely the very fiends feel a reverential awe for virtue and patriotism, whilst they detest the parricide and traitor.

I feel very differently at the approach of spring to what I did a month ago. We knew not then whether we could plant or sow with safety, whether when we had told we could reap the fruits of our own industry, whether we could rest in our own cottages, or whether we should not be driven from the sea coasts to seek shelter in the wilderness, but now we feel as if we might sit under our own vine and eat the good of the land.

I feel a gaiety de Coar to which before I was a stranger. I think the sun looks brighter, the birds sing more melodiously, and nature puts on a more cheerful countenance. We feel a temporary peace, and the poor fugitives are returning to their deserted habitations.

Though we felicitate ourselves, we sympathize with those who are trembling least the lot of Boston should be theirs. But they cannot be in similar circumstances unless pusillanimity and cowardice should take possession of them. They have time and warning given them to see the evil and shun it. I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And by the way in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or representation.

That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your sex. Regard us then as beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

April 5

Not having an opportunity of sending this I shall add a few lines more; though not with a heart so gay. I have been attending the sick chamber of our neighbor Trot whose affliction I most sensibly feel but cannot describe, stripped of two lovely children in one week. Gorge the eldest died on Wednesday and Billy the youngest on Friday, with the Canker fever, a terrible disorder so much like the throat distemper, that it differs but little from it. Betsy Cranch has been very bad, but upon the recovery. Becky Peck they do not expect will live out the day. Many grown person[s] are now sick with it, in this [street?] 5. It rages much in other towns. The mumps too are very frequent. Isaac is now confined with it. Our own little flock are yet well. My heart trembles with anxiety for them. God preserve them.

I want to hear much oftener from you than I do. March 8 was the last date of any that I have yet had. You inquire of whether I am making salt peter. I have not yet attempted it, but after soap-making believe I shall make the experiment. I find as much as I can do to manufacture clothing for my family which would else be naked. I know of but one person in this part of the town who has made any, that is Mr. Tertias Bass as he is called who has got very near a hundred weight which has been found to be very good. I have heard of some others in the other parishes. Mr. Reed of Weymouth has been applied to, to go to Andover to the mills which are now at work, and has gone. I have lately seen a small manuscript describing the proportions for the various sorts of powder, fit for cannon, small arms and pistols. If it would be of any service your way I will get it transcribed and send it to you. Every one of your friends send their regards, and all the little ones. Your brothers youngest child lies bad with convulsion fits. Adieu. I need not say how much I am your ever faithful friend.

Butterfield, L.H., editor. Adams Family Correspondence, vol.1: pp. 369-371. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963-1993.

Questions for Abigail's Letters to John

Opening:

- Do you agree with the historian, Daniel Boorstin, that these letters display Abigail Adams' "intelligence and the strength of her democratic ideals?"

Core:

- For those who said they agree, what part(s) of the text convince you that she is concerned with democratic ideals?
- Who is Abigail talking about when she says, "Those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow creatures" of their liberty? Who is depriving whom? How?
- Do you agree that men who would deprive women of liberty cannot feel as strongly about liberty as the women who are deprived of it?
- What does Abigail mean by we "will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation?"
- Why does Abigail think John is not very generous? Do you agree?
- How long did it actually take for women to get the vote/representation?

Closing:

- Has reading Abigail's letters to John changed your thinking about our founding fathers? In what ways?

Socratic Seminar

Additional Resources

Sample Performance Task: How a series of Socratic Seminars can lead to a rich performance task (writing an argument essay)

Sample Performance Assessment Task

The Position of Women in the United States

In 1776, when her husband, John, was working with a group of our founding fathers to draft the United States Constitution, Abigail Adams wrote a letter to her husband, imploring him to "remember the ladies," and spelling out her view of what American political independence should mean for the freedom of American women. In the late 1960's and early 70's, a cigarette commercial on television declared, "You've come a long way, baby!"

But, as we approach the second decade of the 21st century, are women really equal to men? Has their position changed? If so, has it changed in ways that are substantial or superficial? How equal are the sexes in 2013? What kind of changes still need to made?

In a short argument essay of 350-500 words:

- Take a position on this question.
- Gather and analyze your evidence, drawing on the sources with which we have provided you, and/or those you have read in your English and history classes.
- Optional: Conduct your own research and add to those texts for which you already have research.
- Consider what those people with other positions might say. How would you counter their arguments?
- Write a conclusion that makes your reader think about whether there are still important forms of equality women have not yet achieved.

Once you have finished your essay, read it over.

- Did you state your position clearly?
- Did you offer strong evidence for your position?
- Did you make your argument clear by presenting your evidence?'
- Does your conclusion get a reader to think in new ways?

Task developed by Denise Stavis Levine, PhD

OP-ED COLUMNIST

We Offer More Than Ankles, Gentlemen

By MAUREEN DOWD

PRESIDENT OBAMA ran promoting women's issues.

But how about promoting some women?

With the old white boys' club rearing its hoary head in the White House of the first black president, the historian Michael Beschloss recalled the days when the distaff was deemed biologically unsuited for the manly discourse of politics. He tweeted: "1/12/1915, U.S. House refused women voting rights. One Congressman: 'Their ankles are beautiful ... but they are not interested in the state.' "

Now comes a parade of women to plead the case for the value of female perspective in high office: Women reach across the aisle, seek consensus, verbalize and empathize more, manage and listen better. Women are more pragmatic, risk-averse and, unburdened by testosterone, less bellicose.

Unfortunately, these "truisms" haven't held true with many of the top women I've covered in Washington.

Janet Reno was trigger-happy on Waco, and a tragic conflagration ensued. Hillary Clinton's my-way-or-the-highway obduracy doomed her health care initiative; she also voted to authorize the Iraq invasion without even reading the National Intelligence Estimate, and badly mismanaged her 2008 campaign. Condi Rice avidly sold W.'s bogus war in Iraq. One of Susan Rice's most memorable moments was when she flipped the finger at Richard Holbrooke during a State Department meeting.

Maybe these women in the first wave to the top had to be more-macho-than-thou to succeed. And maybe women don't always bring a completely different or superior skill set to the table. And maybe none of that matters.

We're equal partners in life and governance now, and we merit equal representation, good traits and bad, warts and all.

It's passing strange that Obama, carried to a second term by women, blacks and Latinos, chooses to give away the plummiest Cabinet and White House jobs to white dudes.

If there's one thing white men have never had a problem with in this clubby, white marble enclave of Washington, it's getting pulled up the ladder by other men. (New York magazine claims that of late, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah has a better record of appointing top women than Obama does.)

Last week, The New York Times ran a startling photo, released by the White House, of the president in the Oval Office surrounded by 10 male advisers (nine white and one black). Valerie Jarrett was there, but was obscured by a white guy (though a bit of leg and "beautiful ankle" did show).

Obama has brought in a lot of women, including two he appointed to the Supreme Court, but it is more than an "optics" problem, to use the irritating cliché of the moment. Word from the White House is that the president himself is irritated, and demanding answers about the faces his staff is pushing forward. Unfortunately, he has only a bunch of white guys to offer an explanation of why the picture looks like a bunch of white guys.

Right from the start, the president who pledged "Change We Can Believe In" has been so cautious about change that there have been periodic eruptions from women and minorities.

Maybe Obama thinks he's such a huge change for the nation to digest that everything else must look like the Eisenhower administration, with Michelle obligingly playing Laura Petrie. But it's Barry tripping over the ottoman.

In more "He's Like Ike" moments, the president spends his free time golfing with white male junior aides. The mood got sour early in the first term when senior female aides had a dinner to gripe directly to Obama about lack of access and getting elbowed out of big policy debates.

Some women around Obama who say that he never empowers women to take charge of anything are privately gratified at the latest kerfuffle, hoping it will shut down the West Wing man cave. It's particularly galling because the president won re-election — and a record number of women ascended to Congress — on the strength of high-toned denunciations of the oldfangled Mitt Romney and the Republican kamikaze raid on women.

"We don't have to order up some binders to find qualified, talented, driven young women" to excel in all fields, the president said on the trail, vowing to unfurl the future for "our daughters."

It may be because the president knows what a matriarchal world he himself lives in that he assumes we understand that the most trusted people in his life have been female — his wife, his daughters, his mother, his grandmother, his mother-in-law, his closest aide, Valerie.

But this isn't about how he feels, or what his comfort zone is, or who's in his line of sight. It's about what he projects to the world — not to mention to his own daughters.

Obama is an insular man who is not as dependent on his staff as some other presidents. With no particular vision for his staff, he surrounds himself with guys who then hire their guy friends.

Most people who work in the top tier of campaigns are men; most people who work for Obama now were on his campaigns; ergo, most people in his inner circle are men. Pretty soon, nobody's thinking it through and going out of the way to reflect a world where daughters have the same opportunities as sons.

And then the avatars of modernity hit the front page of The Times, looking just as backward as the pasty, patriarchal Republicans they mocked.