

# The Features of Socratic Seminars

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## Abstract

In this paper a model of what is intended in Socratic seminars is presented. It is based on a literature summary of analogous traditions in Sweden, USA and Germany. The Socratic seminar is a group activity intended to increase critical thinking, self responsibility and self-reliance- all seen as necessary qualities in a democracy. A fairly simple methodology is utilized to improve the complex interplay of dialogical and intellectual skills.

**Keywords:** Critical thinking, democracy, dialogue, interaction, Socratic, virtue

*“The main thing would not be to win, not even to be right; the main thing would be to reach clarity as far as possible. This was what we should help each other with, and we would of course be sure to reach this goal closer by listening to each other rather than through endlessly listening to ourselves.”*  
Oscar Olsson (1921) p. 181 (my translation)

## 1. Introduction

Plato’s three analogies of the Socratic educator: gadfly, midwife, and stingray are essential to understand the Socratic idea of education (Matthews, 1999). The Socratic gadfly stings the Athenian State to awaken it: the educator is given a societal mission to improve the community by educating all how to discover knowledge by investigation. The midwife helps deliver others’ ideas: The analogy tells us that there is no use in trying to teach “true” propositions to another person. The educator should promote learning by *elenctic*<sup>1</sup> questioning, interactive cooperation, and teach ways to improve as human beings. The self stinging stingray stings the student AND the educator to perplexity by asking questions with no definite answer: There are always new things to learn in a life long quest of curiosity, both to the student and the teacher. Perplexity, *aporia*<sup>2</sup>, teaches a thinking disposition rather than a methodology.

In the tradition of Swedish Popular Education, *Folkbildning*, a method using the Socratic dialogue in education was promoted by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century educators Hans Larsson, Oscar Olsson, Ellen Key and Alf Ahlberg. The tradition combined personal *bildning*<sup>3</sup> with intellectual and scientific studies, carried out as a group activity (Gustavsson, 1991). The ultimate purpose was enhance necessary qualities in a functioning democracy: critical thinking, self responsibility and self-reliance. The method is practiced with students as “Sokratiska samtal” (Lindström, 2000, Pihlgren, 2006). Almost identical methods are found in American education: “The Paideia Seminar” (Adler, 1984, Roberts & Billings, 1999), “Great Books” (Junior Great Books, 1992); and in Germany: “Das Sokratische Gespräch” (Nelson, 1965).

## 2. Intention and method

In this paper a model of what is intended in Socratic seminars is presented. This model is based on a summary of literature in three analogous traditions: Swedish Popular education and “Sokratiska samtal;”, “The Paideia Seminar”, “Great Books”; and “Das Sokratische Gespräch”. The traditions, although almost identical in their methods, goals and theoretical assumptions,

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1 Elenchus”, *ελεγχος*, to examine, refute, or put to shame, Socrates’ dialogic method of questioning.

2 *Aporia*, puzzle, problem, difficulty, perplexity.

3 The Swedish *bildning* is equivalent to *Bildung* in German, *dannelse* in Danish, *obrazjenie* in Russian and *Paideia* in Greek. English texts use either general or liberal education or culture. *Bildning* is used in this text.

have had no (or little) knowledge of each other. An overall description has not been attempted before. After comparing the literature from the three traditions, the elements of each were merged into a general description of the Socratic seminar, resulting in a model (figure 2). Practitioners of the traditions were invited to discuss the results of this merger and revisions were made accordingly. The work is done to prepare for a study of video-taped seminars with students 4-16 years old.

### **3. Results of the literature review**

One major goal of staging Socratic dialogues is to secure and enhance democracy. Not primarily to secure the parliamentary system, but to prepare all citizens to participate in open, negotiating dialogues. There are positive effects for the individual, such as attaining *bildning* (in itself regarded as something making life worthwhile). *Bildning* will also result in assuming the responsibility as a citizen. It is a process of socialisation becoming an active part of the continuous human history, to have a chance to participate in “the Great Conversation” of mankind (Hutchins 1952). This “conversation” includes the ideas, problems and mysteries that have puzzled and occupied human beings since the beginning of human time. The ideas are seen as recurrent, but the mission is not to “teach” a right set of values. It is to foster virtues to access “practical wisdom”, a concept inherited from Aristotle: finding ways to act, when confronted with a multiplicity of ideas and incongruent values.

#### **3.1. Learning to think in the Socratic seminar**

To all traditions, learning is interactive, achieved through communication and learning from role models. With practice, habits of mind such as thinking and intellectual/dialogical virtues are formed and internalized. The habits of mind are steps, training to attain virtues. The outcome of habits of mind and virtues is intellectual and moral character/practical wisdom. Learning is considered contextual, a continuous flow of experiences exchanged between individual and context. On the other hand, there is an ongoing internal cognitive process, where the individual investigates and tests the findings made interactively. The interactive process is considered to be triggered by the subjective, personal experience (with the personal pre-judgement as an interpretive background) and then tested and elaborated on in cooperative interaction. Inquiry and learning are seen as a natural, ongoing process, a way of life, both cooperatively and individually. There do not seem to be any predestined (biological) levels in the development of thinking implied.

##### *3.1.1. Intellectual character*

To fostering intellectual character two areas are targeted. One is the understanding of ideas of the different areas of human knowledge such as history, physics, mathematics, art etc. and the other is ability to analyze the underlying values of these ideas, critical thinking skills. In some ways, the intellectual virtues overlap the critical thinking skills, but virtues go beyond the skills. Learning critical thinking skills is learning to use instruments or techniques, but virtue is attained as a habit of mind, a way of living “intellectually”, having intellectual character. The habits anticipated are similar to Karl Popper’s critical problem posing strategy (Magee 1997, Popper 1971). By posing questions and problems, trying to solve these and sorting out less effective or wrong assumptions or pre-judgements, one will get closer to the better solution. The critical problem posing strategy is carried out both within the individual and within the group interplay. It is, however, not an entirely logical and “objective” process. There is an irrational and emotional element in the process where creative intuition plays an active part (Key 1906, Larsson 1904, Lindström, 2000). Since all problems are relative to the individual and to the context in the specific situation there has to be an innovative moment when looking for solutions.

### 3.1.2. Moral character

Moral character cannot be taught, because of its context bound complexity. It's not possible to teach someone how to act in all situations when choices confront a multiplicity of ideas and incongruent values. Particular habits of mind are required, presented as seminar ground rules:

- *Shared inquiry through thoughtful dialogue.* The group cooperates in "group thinking", to come to some understanding (as opposed to debate, where one argument/participant "wins")
- *Listen attentively to what others say*
- *Many answers.* Productive seminars will end in a variety of (logically supported) ideas
- *Be open to reconsider and maybe change your opinion*

The ground-rules are addressed to the individual participant, but concern the cooperative interaction. There is hence a "process" dimension stressing how dialogue is carried out, a set of "dialogical" virtues that can be taught as opposed to moral virtues. The "product" dimension, concerned with how to choose wisely, is not possible to teach. Seminar teaching is focused on promoting what is considered productive conduct in seminar by stressing the "rules", dialogical virtues and by controlling the process from beginning to end, using the steps in the seminar plan. The teacher is urged not to control the "product" dimension, to refer from stating opinions, favouring ideas or manipulating or controlling thoughts raised in seminar.

### 3.1.3. Methodological steps

Preparation starts with individual interpretation of the "text" (except in Sokratische Gespräch). Written texts as well as art work, music, graphs etc are used. A "text" should be rich in ideas, but not moral or edifying. Pre-and post-seminar discussions highlight the dialogic process by setting and evaluating personal and group goals. The seminar normally has three steps:

1. Opening question, eliciting ideas (in "text"), relating them to the participant's understanding
2. Interpretive questioning promoting ("text") analysis, examining the ideas
3. Questions of evaluation where ideas are related to participants' own experience.

## 4. Analysis

The seminar abilities are seen as internalized individually and in the group culture over time, practicing at the same time as learning. The ideas of the dialogical/intellectual relations anticipated are complex:

- The contextual construction presupposes a group- and an individual process going on at the same time and these are considered interdependent.
- There is a twofold cognitive focus, one on promoting dialogical habits of mind and one on promoting intellectual habits of mind, both considered interdependent.
- There is a "process" dimension of the seminar stressing how dialogue is carried out and a "product" dimension, stressing choices and these dimensions are considered interdependent.
- To acquire knowledge both the rational critical problem posing strategy and the intuitive element of creativity are equally important and considered interdependent.

### 4.1. Abilities trained in seminar

The intellectual process seems to presuppose two ways of coping with interpretation in seminar: interpreting cumulatively (cp. Gadamer 1994, Piaget 1971) or interpreting as adjusting thoughts to a new idea, insight or understanding (cp. Vygotsky 1978, Piaget 1971). Both ways start in a pre-judgement, a fore-structure of understanding allowing what is to be interpreted or understood to be grasped in a preliminary fashion. The seminar should make it possible for participants to adjust ideas in favour of the "better argument" (and not to hold on to and defend ones own, less functional ideas). "Texts" are used to facilitate taking a distance from the Self, when discussing the ideas. This might be a psychological explanation. The philosophical tool to go about it is Socratic *elenchus* in the Popper way. The cumulative

refuting interpretation is a systematic and critical analysis of the ideas, sorting out those which do not pass the test. The adjusting part of refuting interpretation is a result of a creative, intuitive process, where new “brave” ideas are found and tested (Lindström, 2000). This is meant to apply both to the individual and to the group, see figure 1.

**Figure 1. Intellectual process in seminar**

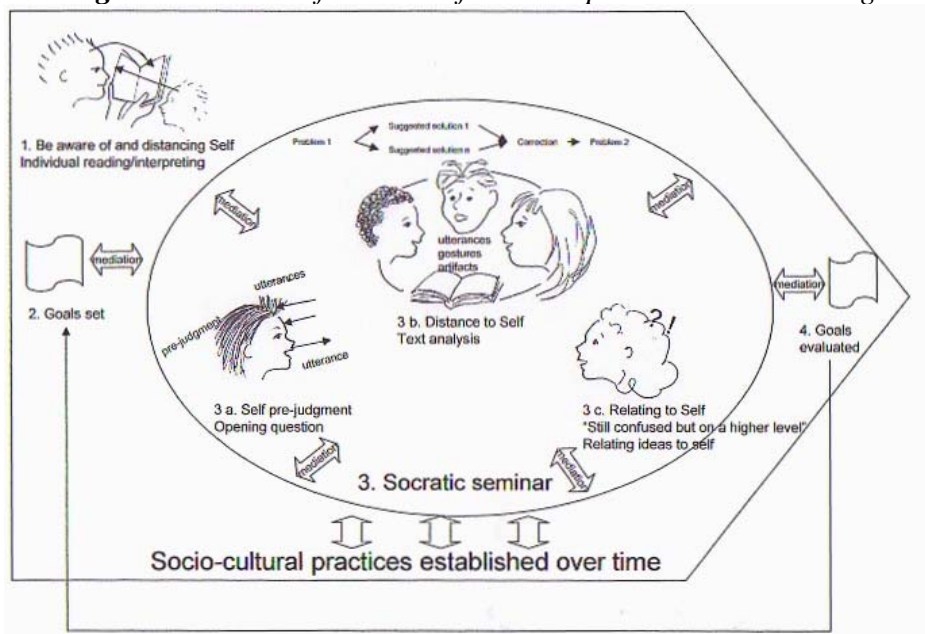
	<b>Intrapersonal thinking process</b>	<b>Interpersonal, contextual thinking process</b>
<b>Cumulative interpretive process</b>	Confirming and deepening OR refuting one’s own idea or understanding	Group working together to find evidence and to confirm OR refute previous ideas or understandings
<b>Creative adjustment interpretive process</b>	Changing one’s own idea or understanding as a result of a new idea found and tested by self or other participant	Group discussion leave previous assumption, idea or understandings and build further dialogue on a new idea being presented and tested by some participant

The interpersonal and intrapersonal processes are considered interdependent: the individual influences the group and vice versa. The group actions will gradually be internalized by the individual: The interpersonal thinking modes will teach the individual a thinking disposition, a habit becoming a virtue and later part of character. This “apprenticeship” seems to suggest the group as a “master”, making use of “multiple zones of development” (Brown 1994, Kumpulainen & Mutanen, 1999). Someone in the group is always a bit further ahead in understanding. The dialogical virtues function as a promoter of this internalization taking place by fostering an open atmosphere. The space created must be safe for taking intellectual risks.

**4.2. The intended functions of the seminar process**

The seminar is a “game” to be played, with specific rules to learn and master. The context is constructed to support this learning: a closed room, everyone in a circle, specific rules. The steps in the seminar plan are constructed to have different functions in promoting the implied complex learning process, see figure 2.

**Figure 2. Intended functions of seminar process when learning**



- 1. Before entering seminar: Individual reading/interpreting:  
*Intended function:* Activate the individual’s pre-judgement, thinking and refuting  
*Intended psychological process:* Taking a distance from Self  
*Intended intellectual process:* Intrapersonal-creative adjustment

2. & 4. Pre- and post-seminar: Personal and group goals set and evaluated:  
*Intended function:* Focus on the “rules” of the seminar, the dialogical virtues  
*Intended psychological process:* Evaluating and improving personal and group behaviour  
*Intended intellectual process:* Intrapersonal and interpersonal-cumulative

3 a. First seminar step: Opening question

*Intended function:* Relate ideas to participant’s present understanding, elicit ideas in the “text”  
*Intended psychological process:* The participant is here accountable to the pre-judgement with what he/she starts before entering into cooperative group thinking  
*Intended intellectual process:* Intrapersonal-cumulative

3 b. Second seminar step: “Text” analysis

*Intended function:* Make it possible to distance from everyday experience by cooperating in group using critical *elenchus*/ Popper’s critical problem posing strategy examining the text  
*Intended psychological process:* Be free to think differently, not personally held accountable  
*Intended intellectual process:* Interpersonal-creative adjustment

3 c. Third seminar step: Relating ideas to self

*Intended function:* To relate the new ideas to participants’ everyday life  
*Intended psychological process:* Personally integrating new knowledge and insight  
*Intended intellectual process:* Interpersonal-cumulative

There is a pair-relation between the functions of the steps. The first step in a pair starts a process; this is developed by the functions from other pairs and is finally consolidated by the last step in the pair. The individual interpreting (1) is related to “text” analysis (3 b), both promoting critical *elenchus*, taking a distance to Self, by interlocution with “text”. The opening question (3 a) starts a process of realizing, challenging and maybe changing points of view that is consolidated when relating the new ideas to self (3 c). The goals set (2) will be consolidated when evaluated (4) and this will lead to new goals set in the next seminar. The goals are set and evaluated outside the seminar circle. The seminar circle is an arena where intellectual/dialogical virtues are trained in action. The process is closely assessed and the outcome is discussed before and after the seminar but not within. Mediation is thereby intended to take place between the steps outside and within the seminar circle. Learning is intended to have impact both on the practice of the following seminars and on general socio-cultural practices over time: the individual’s critical thinking and self-reliance, and on democracy.

#### **4.3. Discussion and questions**

This is a rough picture of what is intended in the Socratic seminar. It is probably not the actual outcome. When participants are “masters” of seminars all the different steps ought to display all intellectual/dialogical moves described if the seminar-training is to meet the goals intended. One might suspect that the working order of seminars will change over time and that the different planning steps more or less will merge. The teacher facilitating will probably have to change from being an active role model to being more passive, as the group learns (the traditions generally promote a passive role). The seminar promotes a complex interplay of dialogical and intellectual skills, taught by assigning different focus to the methodological steps. But is it reasonable to think that students in group voluntarily cooperate to refute the ideas of each other or does the teacher have to be more actively questioning (e.g. in 3 b)?

The underlying pedagogical theory of Socratic seminar presupposes the individual and the group thinking process to be similar. It suggests that the group acts, reacts and thinks as an individual does. The actions carried out in “group thinking” are supposed to function as a role-

model for the individual thinking. But is it reasonable to suppose that a group could have an idea? If so, where is this located if not within the individuals? Is it possible to teach complex things like thinking and democratic dialogue in this fairly simple way? Previous research suggests that it's possible to some extent (cf. Billings & Fitzgerald 2002).

## 5. Conclusion

The ultimate goal of the seminars is individual character, citizens that will master the intended habits of mind to form a democratic society in cooperation with others, as well as personal goods. The independent traditions presented use the same fairly simple methodology to reach complex outcomes and goals. If this is possible to achieve in education, it would certainly be worth a closer study. At this point, I consider one of the most intriguing issues the relation between the individual and the group, suggested by the Socratic seminar traditions. The supposed relationship between individual thinking skills (or virtues) and "group thinking" is worth looking closer at. A focus to start with might be: *How are (are not) the methods and effects of the intended seminar process exposed and generated in group interplay?*

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