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Amanda Hill

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Blank Stares and Bright Balloons: Using Socratic Seminars for Meaningful Class Discussion.

Amanda Hill

“So what do you think Eliot was trying to express in this poem?”

Blank stares.

Wait time, I think. They just need more time to organize their thoughts. Be patient.

I wait.

They wait.

“What is this poem about?”

Blank stares.

My first year of teaching included numerous awkward moments: sometimes the colorful balloons of my well-planned ideas deflated slowly, painfully; other times they just popped. Trying to initiate meaningful class discussion was a bizarre mixture of both, a balloon that squealed out air through a tiny hole as it casually floated over to the heating vent, then suddenly POPPED—and I moved on to another activity.

In the mailroom, one of my colleagues nodded her head in understanding, “I know, my students are *completely* incapable of deep discussion.”

Incapable? You mean it’s not my fault?

“But their writing is so good!” I protested.

“I know . . . (Toss mail into recycle bin) . . .

I know . . . “

My mentor was also empathetic, but far more proactive. “Have you ever tried a Socratic Seminar?”

Ooooooooooooo . . . a Socratic Seminar. Even the name of it sounded like a cure: an unmistakable reference to an infamous teacher, a discussion term for student-centered approaches. I couldn’t wait to try it!

During the 5th century BC, Socrates emerged as a rebellious figure in Athenian society. Unlike his philosophical predecessors, Socrates did not feel the need to arduously contemplate matters of the natural world, “What we needed to know was how to conduct our lives and ourselves” (Magee 20). He felt that individuals could reach this knowledge only through discovering it themselves. Socrates’ conclusions about life and living could make no sense to another person, unless he, too, had reached the same conclusions. His well-known method of teaching this kind of self discovery included asking constant questions of his pupils. After each response, Socrates would question again until, at last, that person had found some pebble of truth. Then he might start questioning again. Most importantly, Socrates did “not impose his own notions on his students. Rather, he encouraged (them) to develop their own conclusions and to draw their own inferences” (Clark and Star 239).

A Socratic Seminar builds on this philosophy and approach. It is meant as a tool for teachers to step back and for students to initiate discussions and guide each other to deeper levels of un-

derstanding. It is NOT meant to aid in the teaching of facts or skills (Canady and Rettig). While each teacher must personalize the format to fit his/her style and schedule, some general rules of structure apply.

Preparation for seminars is a must. As Tom Romano reiterates throughout his book *Writing with Passion*, we cannot expect students to write about a topic they haven't had time to research. Similarly, we cannot expect students to discuss a topic without adequate preparation. Preparation means actively reading a selection of literature (novels, plays, poems, sermons, articles, etc.) or carefully listening to a piece of music, or critically viewing a film. Active reading (or listening or watching) involves students underlining crucial elements of the texts (if materials allow), jotting marginal comments, and taking notes. Their comments can include any response they form regarding the topic: ties to other disciplines, personal anecdotes, emotional reactions, logical disagreements. Moreover, the piece should be chosen carefully and with the purpose of a seminar in mind. It should touch on "not pure science, but the ethics of science; not mathematical computation, but the theory and usefulness of math; not the chapter on the six causes of the Civil War, but a soldier's diary and the Gettysburg Address" (Canady and Rettig). Certainly teachers may select a longer or entire work for the preparation piece, but since the seminar is meant as a way to focus discussion, smaller selections are more appropriate. (I've tried this technique with an entire novel, and while students had prepared well and anticipated the questions, we ended up with a narrow focus and many untouched topics.)

After examining what makes a good question as an activity for forming individual paper topics, my 10th grade students capably create their own seminar questions.

Ideally, students receive the reading assignment as homework or are given time to read in class the day before the seminar. Again, this allows students to digest and consider the information before

they must expound on it. Some teachers suggest offering students the questions for the seminar the night before; I find this particularly useful for the first, "training" seminar, or for younger learners. The actual seminar contains three questions for discussion: opening, core, and closing. The facilitator, who may initially be the teacher but should eventually be a student, begins the seminar with the opening question. Good opening questions, such as "What is _____ about?," invite a wide variety of responses. Core questions narrow the focus of discussions, and closing questions try to offer students connections to their own lives (Canady and Rettig). The seminar ends with a written component, which allows students to articulate a final argument/opinion or examine the effectiveness of the seminar.

I'd like to stress again the importance of personalizing the seminar process. After examining what makes a good question as an activity for forming individual paper topics, my 10th grade students capably create their own seminar questions. My AP students arrive on seminar days armed with questions since I sometimes wait until that day to choose the facilitator. Carefully consider each class's personality while you experiment with different methods.

Unfortunately, like the example at the beginning of this article, opening, core and closing questions hardly eliminate those blank stares. Teachers MUST model appropriate responses for students, just as we would for writing or reading (Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde 82). Furthermore, we need to hold students accountable for their participation. One way to accomplish this is to allow students to create their own rubric. How many points should a seminar be worth? How would you describe a weak, mediocre, or strong answer? Holding an ungraded practice seminar either before or after this discussion allows students to consider how to answer these questions. My students decided that being present and prepared on seminar days was worth one point. They also felt that any responses simply paraphrasing what someone else said were only worth one point. Two point re-

sponses focused, clarified or redirected questions. "Three pointers" synthesized, cited specific examples from the text, or used a clear metaphor for explanation. During seminars, I used a simple chart with my students' names in one column, and empty spaces in the point range columns, then I checked or commented in the appropriate box as students participated. My mentor Annette Smitley also likes students to keep track of and evaluate their own responses. She finds that she and students generally agree about the quality of their input.

By the end of the seminar, students hope to have accumulated the ten points needed for the A. I find that this encourages shy students to participate and limits domination by more verbose individuals. The ten-point written closure also allows for a more private expression of personal opinion. Naturally, I've encountered numerous other considerations. Should devil's advocates identify their purpose? Should the facilitator call on students or leave it open? Should students only be allowed a limited number of responses? I believe a teacher and his/her class must reach these decisions together. Although I like the devil's advocate rule for class harmony, I find simplicity works best, especially with more advanced learners.

Finishing my third year of teaching, I still tinker with the format of this approach, but that is part of its appeal. Ann Dinsmoor Case writes in her essay "Dialogue and Discussion: Effective Groups Practice Both," that "students must risk making mistakes in order to learn how to learn, manipulate information, solve problems, think critically, and work collaboratively. The practice of dialogue and discussion legitimizes learning from others and experimenting with new ideas." My English and psychology students have reached far greater depths in their thinking through seminars in which I didn't say a word, than I ever encountered standing in front of them, waiting not-so-patiently for that balloon to pop.

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About the Author

Amanda Hill, a participant of the Third Coast Writing Project, teaches AP English and psychology at Vicksburg High School.