

South Asia Students For Liberty Presents



SASFL Colloquia: Participants' Guide

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Introduction

An SFL Colloquium is patterned after the way Socrates conducted learning activities in Ancient Greece. All of his students were expected to share their thoughts and opinions regarding the written and spoken word. Students were further required to read, analyze and evaluate assigned materials prior to class discussion. Socrates remained silent to allow true discussion to flow from his students.

Today, in a Socratic Discussion, students are also required to come prepared to discuss the assigned text and share ideas and opinions, using the text or real life experience to back up their answers. They are not permitted to participate in the class unless they are prepared. This method of instruction can be used effectively for any genre or subject, fiction or nonfiction.

Why Socratic seminars?

The aim of Socratic Seminars is to help each of us develop our individual powers of reason and understanding, habits of critical thinking, effective and respectful habits of communication, and intelligent opinions of our own. The goal and standard of a Socratic Seminar is to **think well together**.

Don't be afraid to voice your confusion. That's why we're together. Let others know what you do not understand. Most often, others need to understand the same thing more clearly, too. By voicing your questions, you will help yourself and others.

In everyday conversation it is sometimes thought to be rude to ask too many questions, to ask "Why?," or to ask people to justify why they think

something. This is not so in Socratic Seminars. We participate in Socratic Seminars because we want to get to the roots of our opinions and see which opinions are more justifiable and reasonable than others. This often requires us to try to examine assumptions that we have never been required to justify before.

First steps

In Socratic Seminar, participants share with the leader the responsibility for the quality of the seminar. Good seminars occur when participants study the text closely in advance, listen actively, share their ideas and questions in response to the ideas and questions of others, and search for evidence in the text to support their ideas.

To make the seminar an enjoyable and inspiring experience, some preparation is necessary:

1) Take a printout of the reader and..

- Read the text carefully and for understanding.
- Use highlighters to mark crucial text, and make notes on the margins. Look for places where the author is stating his views, arguing for them, or raising questions.
- Make connections between parts of the text by using your own notes.
- Think about what you have read; try to summarize it in your own words
- Make connections between the ideas in the text and what you know in your life and the lives of the others.

2) Fill in the survey(s)

For every seminar, there will be a short survey both before and after the colloquium. Filling these is crucial to attend and receive a certificate, and surely you don't want to miss the event?

How does it work?

The seminar consists of participants and a chair (facilitator) who guides the discussion.

Rules and expectations

1. Only one person speaks at a time
2. Everyone should have a chance to participate in the discussion; avoid long monologues
3. The facilitator will allow participants to take the floor; if you want to speak, make sure to notify her/him by making a hand sign.
4. People must have the assigned text in their minds and on the table in front of them
5. People should be attentive and responsive (no distractions)
6. Everyone must participate in the debrief at the end to develop an awareness about how to make our future conversations more productive (of how to think better together).
7. People should refer only to things that have been read together or that are common knowledge (avoid using technical jargon or refer to books, concepts, theories, bodies of knowledge, or thinkers that we cannot examine and evaluate together.)

Role of the Facilitator

The role of the Socratic facilitator is not to give information or to promote the "right" opinion or interpretation, but to ask questions, raise objections, and help people to understand the author, the issues, and themselves. The facilitator is supposed to be first among equals, a model of a good learner who can help guide the conversation. The facilitator may take a stand on some issue, but his opinion should not be deferred to uncritically. The same standards of reason must be applied to all participants.

Tips for thinking well together:

1. Ask questions about the text, and to each other
2. Seek first to understand the author and others before agreeing or disagreeing with them
3. Use arguments (reasons and evidence) to support your claims
4. Refer to the text to generate and answer questions

10 Guidelines for a great seminar

1. BE BRIEF

Good conversation more closely resembles a game of hot potato than a relay race. Don't be a 'ball hog.'

2. HELP EACH OTHER - YOU'RE A TEAM

Help your fellow participants. You're a team! Listen to them carefully, ask clarifying questions, give them the benefit of the doubt, try to find support for their positions, and be very careful and constructive when you consider criticizing a point.

3. ASK QUESTIONS

If what you say is born out of curiosity and a desire for understanding, you can't go wrong. Steer clear of grand declarations or speeches. Also there's never a bad time for a quick "Do I understand you to be saying...?" Ask for an explanation if you need it. Getting everyone on the same page is more important than sustaining the conversation's momentum.

4. THINK COSTUMES, NOT FORTRESSES

Be flexible when defending a particular view of a work or portion of a work. It's better for everyone to consider perspectives and ideas like costumes or

masks that we are trying on and can change with ease, instead of treating them like fortresses you defend and attack.

5. DON'T LOSE FOCUS

To keep the various threads of the conversation flowing, address what was recently said. For example, "Adam raises an important question...", "To strengthen Jane's position, look at the third paragraph of section 2", "I don't want to lose the topic Micah just raised, but to take a step back, I don't think we've answered Eileen's question sufficiently - let's look at paragraph 10 of book 3 ..."

6. REFER ONLY TO WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS

In a conversation, it is more respectful and productive to refer only to what is known by everyone so everyone can understand and contribute. Reliably, everyone in a Socratic Seminar will know about the work.

7. QUOTE

Quoting or referencing the work directly to ask questions and make points helps to ground the conversation in the work.

8. DON'T FEAR THE PAUSES

It is pleasant to pause after the opening question for a few minutes to review the text and think about what *could* be said before saying anything.

9. GO WITH THE FLOW

Give up your expectations and attempts to control where you believe the conversation should go next. Embrace a spirit of spontaneity and playfulness.

10. ENJOY YOURSELVES :)

In the end, conversation is supposed to be fun. Remember to have a good time!