

Socratic Seminar

Holy Spirit Preparatory School

A high school education must accomplish a number of distinct goals. For example, all students need to learn the scientific method, develop mathematical skills, and to examine important events in history. Students need to learn another language and read the classics of literature. They also need to speak with confidence and to write with clarity. High school students need to exercise their bodies on the athletic field and their minds in the classroom as they move toward adulthood. The ability to think critically encompasses many of the above skills and remains a hallmark of a liberal arts education. Cardinal Newman, in his classic work *The Idea of a University*, suggested that a “philosophical habit of the mind”—the ability to think critically and to solve problems with prudence—should animate all curriculum decisions.

This ability to think critically can be fostered by a number of means. The practice of writing is inherently logical, requiring students to order their thoughts in a concrete, verifiable manner. Our Writing Across the Curriculum seeks to enhance that ability. Learning and practicing the scientific method (with hypothesis, experiment, and reconsideration) and the study of mathematics also contributes to this faculty. Likewise, the study of Latin sharpens analytic skills in obvious ways.

For centuries, teachers have employed the “Socratic Method” to enhance and refine critical thinking skills. The Socratic Method relies heavily on question and answer, requiring both the teacher and the student to think with care and intelligence about their responses. Also known as the “dialectic approach,” the Socratic Method is a hallmark of graduate education, law schools, and even some undergraduate programs. The Great Books Schools (in Santa Fe and Annapolis) and Thomas Aquinas College in California, use the Socratic Method almost exclusively in their courses.

Yet for most high school students, a steady diet of the Socratic Method would be counterproductive. High School students need to acquire content and basic skills before engaging full-time with more sophisticated learning strategies. We advocate the use of Socratic Seminar in our curriculum in limited but concerted ways. We would offer the Socratic Seminar at the end of a unit or after students have read a series of novels, allowing for a rich discussion and comparison/contrast possibilities. We might offer a Socratic Seminar just before a HSPS Lecture Series on a related topic. The possibilities are really quite impressive.

The educational objective for the Socratic Seminar would be to move the students to higher-level thinking along the lines proposed in Bloom’s Taxonomy. If our students are to move from *analysis* (the ability to break down into component parts) toward *synthesis* (the ability to put those parts back together) and finally *evaluation* (the ability to make and argument while considering the counter-argument in that formulation), they must do so while thinking “on their feet,” so to speak. Thus, the educational benefits offered by the Socratic Seminar are manifold, for both student and teacher.

Conducting a Socratic Seminar takes preparation and experience. The most accomplished facilitators make such seminars seem easy and intellectually fluid, but it requires some practice. Consequently, HSPS will use senior teachers to conduct the seminars, providing an effective model for new teachers while exposing the students to college-level experiences. The events will always take place in a library or dedicated room with an oval table or hollow square in order to make the conversation efficacious and comfortable. Faculty and staff will be invited to observe but not participate in the discussions.

We believe that the Socratic Seminar will be a positive addition to our already fine curriculum. These seminars will require students to process information they have read while comparing their thoughts and conclusions with others, often leading to reevaluation and reconsideration of ideas—an important step in the decision making process.