

Chapter 1

THE BENEFITS OF SOCRATIC CIRCLES

dialogue inspired by barbara kingsolver's "beating time."

Brittany: *Obviously she's upset that Arizona got rid of poetry in all of their classes.*

Jimmy: *What makes you say that?*

Brittany: *Look at the lines and the way she worded things, even in the first stanza—"interdicted . . . evicted . . . squanders." It's like she's just screaming at the governor.*

Stephanie: *I agree. She thinks this is a total mistake, and she's trying to convince others she's right so that maybe people will realize their mistake before it's too late.*

Tyler: *Too late for what?*

Stephanie: *Too late for poetry. If people grew up without learning about poetry, none of us would understand it. It's like a whole art form would be lost forever.*

Jimmy: *It's not like poetry is difficult. I'm sure people could still figure it out even if it wasn't taught in school. I don't understand what she's so mad about.*

Jose: *You're probably right. People probably would still be able to figure out poetry, but I'm not sure they would figure it out as well or if it would mean as much if we didn't learn about it in school. I mean, every time I read a new poem, it gets easier, and what I learn in one poem I can usually use in another poem.*

Stephanie: *You lost me.*

Jose: *Okay. Like right here in the middle of the poem she says, “where the fans overhead / whispered ‘I am, I am’ in iambic pentameter.” If it wasn’t for studying poetry in school, I’d have no idea what iambic pentameter was. And I certainly wouldn’t pick up on the idea that the noise the fan blades make sounds like iambic pentameter.*

Brittany: *Yeah, that makes sense. The more you learn about something, the more you are going to understand it.*

Jose: *I think it’s more than that, though. I think that’s her whole point.*

Stephanie: *What’s her whole point?*

Jose: *She’s saying that if poetry isn’t taught in school, if we don’t learn about all the tricks and devices poets use, then we won’t be able to understand her, we won’t understand all the poetry that’s going on around us all the time.*

Brittany: *I get it. We become like poetry morons who don’t understand or appreciate the beauty of poetry, whether it’s written poetry or natural poetry, like the storm and the rain in the last stanza. Then she has no one to communicate with, no one to share what she writes with, and we all just sit there dumb. That’s what she’s angry about.*

Jose: *Exactly.*

In November 1999, after three long months working and struggling each week to better understand the material of the class and one another, students enrolled in my freshman English class finally got it. A collection of once downcast, uninspired expressions suddenly lighted up with wisdom, understanding, and purpose. Seated in the center of my room in two concentric circles, students appeared to freeze in their places, savoring and enjoying the moment, only their eyes moving as if in a slow waltz from face to face. And at each stop around the circle, as their eyes slowly traveled from peer to peer, something deep within them was surging to the surface, ready to erupt. Only after the first face cracked at the corners of the mouth and the smiles of self-satisfaction, accomplishment, and success became contagious throughout the room, did those student eyes fall to me, their teacher. And at that moment, after three months of my own frustration and soul-searching, I knew something magical had just happened for my students.

The conversation above represents a “lightbulb” moment when suddenly the class curriculum, real-world life skills, and the discovery of personal meaning and relevance all erupted within our classroom. Suddenly what we studied and learned in the classroom, even the intricacies of poetry and iambic pentameter, seemed urgent and important. The result was a group of students with a deep understanding of a selection of text, improved skills in comprehension, vocabulary, listening, speaking,

and critical thinking, and experience in working together to construct meaning, solve problems, and explore life connections. The method for helping students to achieve this learning was the strategy known as Socratic circles.

A BRIEF HISTORY

More than 2,400 years ago, Socrates believed there was a more effective and productive way of teaching students than the lecture. He believed that within each of his students resided an often-untapped reservoir of knowledge and understanding. And by helping students examine their premonitions and beliefs while at the same time accepting the limitations of human thought, Socrates believed students could improve their reasoning skills and ultimately move toward more rational thinking and ideas more easily supported with logic. The methodology he used to accomplish this has come to be known as Socratic questioning.

Modern education appears obsessed with answers—both correct and incorrect. It is questions, however, that drive the human mind in critical thought. Elder and Paul (1998) note, “Questions define tasks, express problems, and delineate issues. Answers, on the other hand, often signal a full stop in thought. Only when an answer generates a further question does thought continue its life as such” (p. 297). Typically, teachers ask questions because we hope the answers will represent a final destination of learning and thought, a kind of educational checklist where either “yes,” this learning has occurred, or “no,” this learning has not occurred. We must push our students through this initial barrier of surface meaning, show them that all thinking involves the asking of questions, and reveal that the asking of one question leads to the asking of further questions. It is the ongoing, honest quest for information and understanding through the act of questioning that embodies the true ideal of democratic education.

Socratic questioning, then, greatly assists us in this endeavor. The purpose here is to use questioning to bring forward already held ideas in the students’ minds, to make them more aware and cognizant of the learning and understanding that has already occurred. Adler (1984) defines this concept as “questioning students about something they have read so as to help them improve their understanding of basic ideas and values” (pp. 17–18). With this goal in sight, the idea of Socratic questioning is incredibly valuable in reviving student minds made numb to critical thought.

Socratic questioning is a systematic process for examining the ideas, questions, and answers that form the basis of human belief. It involves recognizing that all new understanding is linked to prior understanding,

that thought itself is a continuous thread woven through our lives rather than isolated sets of questions and answers. As teachers, we must help students recognize that all thoughts are based on prior thoughts and that current thoughts will build a foundation for future thoughts. We must help students see that all thinking is flawed and incomplete, that all ideas can be further developed and better explained, and that questioning helps us explore these realities. It is by following every statement with a question to further explore the depth of our thinking that we allow our ideas to grow and develop more deeply. In the classroom, this concept is incredibly important, especially in breaking the habits of students preprogrammed to think that all questions have one, and only one, correct answer.

In 1982 Mortimer Adler published *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto* in which he described an extension of the current and most predominant mode of instruction. Adler outlined “a mode of teaching called ‘maieutic’ because it helps the student bring ideas to birth” (p. 29). He suggested that it is not enough to simply lecture to our students and hope they acquire the skills that educators deem necessary for them to have. We must teach “by asking questions, by leading discussions, by helping students to raise their minds up from a state of understanding or appreciating less to a state of understanding or appreciating more” (Adler 1982, p. 29). Adler went on to propose that the method to achieve this goal was to engage students’ minds “in the study of individual works of merit, whether they be literary or otherwise, accompanied by a discussion of the ideas, the values, and the forms embodied in such products of human art” (p. 29).

Adler himself derived this idea from the annals of history, his own experience, and the experiences of colleagues in the world of education. The Great Books movement, originally developed between 1910 and 1940 by Alexander Meiklejohn at Amherst College, John Erskine at Columbia University, Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan at the University of Virginia, and Adler and Robert Hutchins at the University of Chicago, began incorporating Socratic inquiry into their curriculum and developed the framework for the current pedagogical practice. The term “Socratic seminar” appears to have first been coined by Scott Buchanan in his work with the St. John’s College New Program (Strong 1996, p. 5), and the idea has continued with organizations such as The Center for Socratic Practice, The Touchstones Project, Junior Great Books, the National Paideia Center, and the Coalition of Essential Schools. Over time, the strategy has grown and been adapted as various educators—Dennis Gray, Lesley Lambright, and Margaret Metzger, among others—began applying it to their own classrooms, curricular content, and the learning of their own students. The version of Socratic circles described in this book is no different; it is a modification and an

extension of the principles and methodology of Socratic seminars started in the 1920s.

UNDERSTANDING SOCRATIC CIRCLES

One of Adler's admirers, Lesley Lambright (1995), defines a Socratic seminar as an "exploratory intellectual conversation centered on a text" (p. 30). However, it is the nature and process of that conversation that differs radically from the typical teacher-led, question-and-answer discussion. A Socratic circle turns the vast majority of the guidance of the conversation and the ownership of the material over to the students. Because of this ownership students are more motivated and involved in the learning that takes place within the classroom, and in my own classes, students report that these Socratic circles create learning that they think is more meaningful and applicable to their lives and futures.

At first some students are apprehensive about this type of self-governance and control in the classroom; often their education experience has been with teachers firmly in control. What alleviates this trepidation in the students' minds is the structure and organization of the strategy itself. Students learn quickly that the process and ground rules of Socratic circles provide the framework for the conversation they will engage in and that they themselves will police the progress made.

Typically, Socratic circles are built upon a foundation of the following components: a short passage of text that students have read critically, and two concentric circles of students, one circle focusing on exploring the meaning expressed in the text and a second circle observing the conversation. After the first circle has examined and discussed the text, the second circle provides feedback on the quality of the dialogue that took place and the individual and group dynamics that facilitated that dialogue. After this period of reflection, the two circles of students change places and roles, and the process repeats itself with new voices and new ideas in each circle. Of course there are many variations to each aspect of Socratic circles, but maintaining the discussion-feedback-reverse pattern is essential. It is the interaction between the inner and outer circles that enables students to control the direction and process of the dialogue taking place.

Where Socratic circles begin to differ from typical classroom discussion is in the fact that students are required to remain silent while filling certain roles. While the inner circle is discussing the text, the members of the outer circle are instructed to imagine they are scientific observers behind a two-way mirror; they are able to see and hear everything going on, but they cannot interact with the inner circle in any way. Likewise, while the outer circle is providing feedback about the quality of discussion that took place, the members of the inner circle must listen in silence.

Socratic circles offer a type of real-world, student-centered learning where the teacher acts only to keep the discussion moving forward, regardless of the discussion's direction. It is the students, not the teacher, who guide and direct the focus of the conversation. As students construct their discussion, they are activating prior knowledge, making connections, and synthesizing new schemata "in a collaborative quest for understanding . . . dedicated to achieving an enlarged understanding of a text, not merely ingesting it" (Gray 1992, pp. 17–18).

SOCRATIC CIRCLES AND LITERATURE CIRCLES

Socratic circles and literature circles share many of the same attributes. With each strategy, students are discussing a work that they have read and experienced and are combining their own ideas with the ideas of their peers to create new learning and understanding. And with both strategies, students assume the responsibility for organizing and discussing the textual material, no matter what format it takes. However, there are also key differences in the strategies. Literature circles typically involve a smaller number of students, and each student completes a specific role within the group to maximize the coverage of the conversation. On the other hand, Socratic circles involve larger groups of students without specific roles and seek to include a more diverse range of opinions and perspectives within the conversation. Perhaps the most obvious difference between literature circles and Socratic circles is the element of student choice in reading material. Whereas several literature circles covering multiple works may be going on in a classroom at any given time, Socratic circles focus the attention of all students within a class on one, typically teacher-selected, piece of text.

Despite these differences, the underlying constructivist philosophy upon which both strategies are built suggests that students are coming together to build meaning and understanding in a collaborative fashion with their peers. In fact, I prefer to intersperse these strategies in my classes and have found the practice to be both a rewarding experience for students and an effective method to enhance their skills within each strategy. Socratic circles offer more teacher guidance and coaching in the process of mutual inquiry and help students develop the habits of thought and analysis that lead to improved literature circles. Likewise, the smaller groups of literature circles help students develop their own voices and practice expressing and sharing their ideas with peers, improving their abilities and making them more comfortable in doing the same in the larger groups of Socratic circles. Many teachers use Socratic circles to teach students the skills needed for effective literature circles, but the strategies complement each other nicely and can enhance the literature instruction of any classroom.

In my classes students often engage in Socratic circles and literature circles simultaneously. Typically, students in my classes choose the novels or other longer works they are reading from a short list that centers on a particular theme or idea. This means that although students have choice in what they read and discuss with peers in their literature circles, we can also engage in whole-class discussion that traces the theme or ideas through each of the books. This is particularly effective when the selection of text for our Socratic circle explores this same theme or idea. Students can draw examples and illustrations from the work being read in their literature circle and share them with the class, helping other students understand and gain exposure to many different books. In this way, students maintain their voices and choices through literature circles and gain practice in applying the knowledge they are gaining to our Socratic circles.

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' ACADEMIC SKILLS

Socratic circles are an excellent means of developing a wide range of academic skills. Beyond capturing the imagination and creativity, Socratic circles can build skills in the areas of reading, listening, reflection, critical thinking, and participation. A benefit of Socratic circles is that they bring all the areas of the curriculum and instruction together into a cohesive whole. No longer must teachers teach a fragmented curriculum where by late October students have already forgotten what they learned in September. With Socratic circles, teachers can integrate their curriculum into a seamless package in which students continuously build and develop a variety of skills.

Critical Thinking

Perhaps what Socratic circles offer students and teachers more than anything is the opportunity to practice and hone their skills in critical thinking. In most classroom discussion, the teacher poses a question to a student and one of three things happens. The student either answers the question with the answer the teacher was hoping for, answers the question with an answer the teacher was not looking for, or simply responds with "I don't know." And typically the teacher responds in one of three ways: praise, disapproval, or encouraging the student to try again. In all three cases, the latent curriculum of this process teaches students that critical thinking is an ability that some students possess and some do not. Socratic questioning helps to correct this problem. If, after each student response to a question, the teacher follows up with another question that further explores the perspective of the answer, the agenda underlying the answer,

or the application of concepts that produced the answer, students quickly see critical thought as an ongoing, developing skill rather than some secretive society to which some students belong and others do not.

Let me explain this idea in another way. In recent history we have changed the way we instruct students to write; we have moved from simply *assigning* writing to *teaching* writing, focusing on the process rather than just the product. We have our students brainstorm and engage in prewriting to generate ideas. We have them draft their ideas and then revise and edit to improve the quality of the expression of those ideas. We encourage our students to believe that good writing develops from hard work in drafting, revising, and redrafting, that good writing simply does not magically appear. Critical thinking is no different than writing. Both are processes that challenge us to revise and improve our ideas for the benefit of our own understanding and the understanding of others. And in both cases, it is the process of Socratic questioning that helps us revise and improve the quality of our ideas.

Critical thinking must be viewed as a process, just as we approach writing. We teach our students that no piece of writing is ever “finished,” that there is always something that could be improved or expanded upon that would make our writing more complete, more substantial, more effective. Our thinking is no different. At the end of the day, our writing, our thinking, and our lives are merely “rough drafts,” works in progress to which a new day will bring new experiences and new improvements; we must simply open ourselves to the possibilities. We help our students practice the writing process almost daily, but rarely do we devote as much time or attention to teaching the process of critical thinking. As Elder and Paul (1998) suggest, “The goal of critical thinking is to establish a disciplined ‘executive’ level of thinking, a powerful inner voice of reason, to monitor, assess, and reconstitute—in a more rational direction—our thinking, feeling, and action” (p. 300). Socratic questioning and Socratic circles are ways teachers can encourage students to view critical thinking as a lifelong, life-actualizing process.

In my classes, students begin to see this type of thinking evolve within their own minds through our participation in Socratic circles. One student, Pablo, reveals how he applies this type of thinking to his life outside the classroom:

I have learned how to think in an entirely new way. Now, whenever I am doing something, or perhaps even watching TV, I think about why certain phrases are significant and why the writer uses them. I even think if they might symbolize something else. I do not dislike this new form of thinking; in fact it is helpful.

Clyde reflects on his growth in critical thinking because of Socratic circles and compares it with the learning he does in most of his other classes. His reflections reveal his emerging understanding that critical thinking and learning itself are ongoing processes rather than collections of learning products.

Sometimes I feel like education is more about facts and memorizing than anything else. However, is that really learning? I think developing your skills of absorbing, processing, and expressing those ideas and facts is more important and more beneficial. I enjoy learning facts and concepts, but what is even more enjoyable is the theories and ideas I can discuss, think and reason about with others.

At the heart of Clyde's comments is the idea that through more engaged dialogue with classmates centered on the concepts and knowledge his class is exploring, learning becomes a more valuable endeavor that taps student interest and enjoyment.

Creativity

Creativity is another area greatly improved through Socratic circles. Lambricht (1995) points out that students “are more creative when they are engaged in a group, listening to the thinking of others, watching the play of one idea bouncing off another, while being encouraged to dig below the surface of thought and feeling. Transactions spark the imagination” (p. 33). The active nature and the creativity of the analysis and support of arguments within a Socratic circle encourage students to be creative themselves. It is the “interrogative or discussion method of [Socratic circles that] stimulate the imagination and intellect by awakening the creative and inquisitive powers. In no other way can children's understanding of what they know be improved” (Adler 1982, p. 29). The stimulation of all the various types of thinking and learning allows students to grow and develop into complete, holistic individuals. Carol explains,

I have to admit that when we first started Socratic circles I thought to myself, “What in the world am I supposed to get out of this?” I didn't see the point, and honestly I didn't believe in them. I just thought it was something we did so you didn't have to teach. Slowly, though, I began to realize how often I thought about Socratic circles outside of class and how often I was inspired to write about what we discussed. Not essays, but just write. And when I look back now, I see how they've helped me grow as a person, how they've made me someone I'm proud of.

Because their creativity is stimulated, students are able to find mediums to express themselves and unique ways to display the products of their own ideas and thinking. In my own practice, I have witnessed this phenomenon on several occasions. I am always amazed at how the dialogue within a Socratic circle moves students to engage in further study and thought on their own. Many times students return to class the day after their dialogue to share some further idea they have discovered, whether by their own thought or by research. Some students even go so far as to produce some body of work inspired by our discussion. Whether a piece of writing, a piece of artwork, interpretive dance, music, or some other means, students find ways to filter their critical thinking through their own creative channels and produce new work that reveals the connections to the central ideas and material we have been studying.

Critical Reading

Metzger (1998) suggests “[a]s citizens, parents, and reading adults, we worry about our children’s inadequate reading skills. Although many students can decode, most are superficial readers, comprehending only surface information” (p. 240). Incorporating reading strategies and activities into our classrooms that move students beyond basic reading comprehension and into higher-order thinking is critical to our curricula. Arnold, Hart, and Campbell (1988) observed that after they implemented Socratic circles in their classrooms, their students were “gaining deeper understanding of literature and heightened interest in reading and writing. They are learning to think critically and to respect the opinions of their peers” (p. 48).

In my own classes I have witnessed students who never expressed much interest in or placed value on interpreting literature suddenly finding meaning and relevance in the process. Several of my students who described themselves as “noncollege bound” found that, for the first time in their schooling careers, interpreting literature and other text was something that was not handed down to them from experts, but a living, breathing process that was created spontaneously through intellectual discourse. Mandy comments on this reality and explains how the idea of reading has changed for both her and her peers.

In Socratic circles you have to think in a different way. You can’t just read the text and automatically see a deeper meaning. You have to think about what it could mean and relate the text to other works or experiences you are familiar with, which isn’t a skill we use often.

I have witnessed my students applying to standardized testing some of these same skills of critical reading, developed in the course of Socratic

circles. When handed a passage to read and questions to answer at the end, many of my students use many of the same techniques we use to analyze a Socratic circle selection of text from a critical reading perspective: they identify new vocabulary words, underline key phrases, note repetition of words, phrases, and structure, and jot down questions that help them to better explore meaning. Robert, another student who self-identifies as “noncollege bound,” echoes Mandy’s comments and explains how his reading and learning have improved.

Socratic circles have given me the ability to look farther into a text I am reading, and I can comprehend better with what I read also. I feel I can learn much easier because I take more things into consideration.

Developing a Lifelong Love of Reading

Equally important as developing skills in reading critically is developing an interest and a passion for the activity of reading itself, ideally, developing students into lifelong readers and learners. Davey, a student with special needs in my classroom who suffers from problems with concentration and attention, writes,

After our Socratic Circles, I have found myself reading more than I ever have before. I’ve actually started reading every day, which is odd because I rarely ever read before and I didn’t care to. Socratic circles have made me want to better myself.

The poor reading skills of our nation’s youth is a disturbing reality. Socratic circles enable students to work collaboratively to improve their reading skills. Through the repeated readings and the thorough analysis of the material, students learn to take their time while reading and explore possible multiple meanings and interpretations.

Speaking

As teachers of the language arts, we all encourage our students to participate in class discussions. Some of us even assign a portion of the student’s overall grade to participation. We find ways to motivate student contributions through praise and the affirmation of ideas, and at times, we require student comments by progressing down class rosters or drawing names from a hat. Regardless, there are always some students who contribute and participate in class discussions at a minimal level, some only when required to, and some not even then. Although Socratic circles cannot change this reality, they can improve it.

Because of the collaborative nature of these conversations, students learn that all contributions, even the ones that appear tangential or erroneous on the surface, can help the group develop their ideas and move toward their discovery of meaning. Students then are held accountable to their peers, rather than the teacher, for sharing ideas and contributing to the group. When faced with this reality, many students develop a stronger voice in the classroom and are more willing to participate. Carol was one such student. At the beginning of the school year, she was a quiet, shy young woman who spoke in class only when asked or when spoken to, and she was equally quiet in the hallways and lunchroom with her peers.

I've learned through Socratic circles that I can't be timid about saying my thoughts and feelings. I think early on I hurt my groups by not saying anything because maybe my ideas could have been the spark that aided in finding meaning. By the end, though, I started sharing my ideas, and that allowed more of us to get into the discussion.

Many students also report that developing these skills changes the way they view school and their own learning. Once initial skills in speaking are developed, students are able to expand into persuasive speaking and supporting their ideas with textual evidence. John, a student with aspirations of becoming a trial lawyer, shares his appreciation for the growth he has seen in his persuasive speaking abilities.

By having these Socratic circles I have learned to say what I feel and use evidence to defend my position. Before I would just say what I thought and let it dangle, like raw meat in front of a pack of wild dogs. People would tear my thoughts to shreds because in my mind I had nothing to back those ideas up. Now I am able to assertively state what I think and prove to anyone that my ideas can be applied to the subject and learned from.

Socratic circles encourage students to pull themselves from the silence of the classroom's shadows and become more active and vocal learning participants. They not only allow students to become more comfortable with speaking in classroom discussions, but help them develop skills in speaking persuasively and supporting their ideas with references to textual evidence.

Listening

As Adler (1983) says, "Listening, like reading, is primarily an activity of the mind, not of the ear or the eye. When the mind is not actively involved

in the process, it should be called hearing, not listening; seeing, not reading” (pp. 85–86). The structure of Socratic circles is such that students learn quickly to improve their learning so that what they hear with their ears allows them to listen with their minds. During the feedback sessions, students are quick to point out when students are not listening to one another. They see and understand how detrimental poor listening skills can be to the quality of discussion and act quickly to encourage a solution to the problem.

Kent comments on this truth and reveals how high-quality listening can greatly influence the quality of dialogue and learning in the classroom.

In Socratic circles you learn to be patient and to listen to the thoughts, feelings, and ideas of others when you're both on the outside and inside circle. Through listening, you hear multiple theories and opinions over the meaning of certain lines and the overall meaning the author is trying to convey. By listening, your thoughts and opinions might change, depending on what reasons others give for a certain topic.

It is through listening that students are encouraged to contemplate differing opinions and points of view that sometimes challenge their own deeply held beliefs. Once students learn to open their minds to the views of others, they begin to realize that their own ideas can be expanded. It is not that their opinions are being replaced with the opinions of others, but by accepting that other points of view are possible, students begin to form a context of opinion in which their individual views fit. This serves students in both an academic and social sense. Sally, who began my class as a rather obstinate and opinionated student, reflects on her personal and social growth in the area of listening.

Before we started Socratic circles, I was probably the most stubborn person to talk to. I was not a good listener. Because of being “forced” to understand others’ viewpoints, I have greatly improved that part of my character.

To become active discussion participants, students must first learn to listen to one another’s ideas. Without being able to listen carefully and attentively, they will never gain the social skills necessary to become effective members of a democratic discussion.

Writing Skills

In my classes, students who have engaged in Socratic circles are able to think more expansively about the philosophical underpinnings of their

selected topics and are able to produce writing that is more insightful, relevant, and thought-provoking than their peers who have not benefited from exposure to Socratic circles. Michaela reflects on how dialogue with her classmates allows her to use higher-order thinking skills and helps her expand her ideas.

Having a chance to take a piece of text, analyze it in my own way, and then discuss this text with a group hits on all of the critical skills needed to write analytical essays. Without Socratic circles, it would be very difficult for me to write an essay of any quality.

Daniel echoes these same ideas and describes the dialogue created in Socratic circles as a valuable brainstorming or prewriting strategy that helps him explore his topic and structure his ideas.

Socratic circles help me to expand upon my ideas and pinpoint specifically what I want to say. They help me to organize my ideas in a more thoughtful way.

In addition to developing the content of their writing, students also report that their participation in Socratic circles helps them examine more closely the craft of writing and explore specific techniques authors use to convey meaning. Because students are discussing these techniques with peers and with little or no influence from the teacher, they appear more willing to take chances on implementing those techniques in their writing. I've witnessed students in their own writing patterning specific sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, extended metaphors, parallelism, and other elements after selections of text they have discussed in Socratic circles much more willingly than when we discuss the same strategies as a whole class.

Beyond being more confident with their ideas and with incorporating new techniques into their writing, students are also much more comfortable with writing as a process and a learning endeavor and with their own abilities as writers. Because my students are allowed to generate ideas with peers in a collaborative dialogue, they think that the ideas they generate are more relevant, meaningful, and uniquely their own.

Critical Reflection

As students are building on reading, writing, discussion, and critical thinking skills, they are also growing in other important areas vital to future success. One of these areas is the capacity for reflective thinking. Reflective thinking involves mulling over past experiences, assessing one's

own performance, and establishing goals for future performance. Socratic circles teach students to evaluate the quality of discussion not only in others but also in themselves. It is the critical reflection skills encouraged through feedback sessions that allow students to make comparisons and establish goals for their own discussions. Susan writes,

By looking back over our Socratic circles and listening to others, we received constructive criticism that helps us discuss and understand at a higher level. By taking time to reflect, we gain more, giving ourselves a chance to do better in the future.

Likewise, reflective thinking allows students to become more aware of the processes of their own growth and learning; students are more cognizant of the workings of their own minds and are able to advocate for their own learning needs. Reflective thinking also helps draw all these various skills and curricula into a cohesive, unified whole linking learning to personal experience and to each student's future.

Adler (1982) suggests that Socratic circles teach “participants how to analyze their own minds as well as the thought of others, which is to say it engages students in disciplined conversation about ideas and values” (p. 30). This reflective thinking helps to improve student performance not only in Socratic circles, but in other academic areas as well. Through the experience of reflecting, assessing, and establishing goals, students develop confidence in both their abilities and their learning.

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' SOCIAL SKILLS

Not only are Socratic circles an ideal method to draw in various areas of the curricula and meet a wide variety of academic needs, but they also help build social skills that students will find useful in making personal and career decisions for the rest of their lives.

Team-Building Skills

As our society becomes more and more technologically advanced and our jobs move closer and closer to dealing with ideas and people and farther from dealing with raw materials, we are finding ourselves tackling work-related problems as members of teams rather than as individuals. However, the majority of people enter the workforce with very little knowledge and very little experience working as an equal member of a team. As Lambright (1995) says, Socratic circles “are team building situations. Through mutual inquiry in a cooperative setting, leaders and learners alike apply knowledge, making reasoned connections within

themselves, with other group members, and with the text” (p. 34). In this way, students learn to voice their opinions and ideas in a positive, respectful, and cooperative manner. And because all participants (students and discussion leaders alike) come into the Socratic circle with a wide range of personal knowledge about the text, each participant becomes an equal partner in the group’s quest for understanding. As Bruce writes,

As we began to discuss our ideas in Socratic circle after Socratic circle, I realized that sharing my own thoughts was not about the personal pursuit of glory, but about working with others to find one epiphany after another.

It is this equity in personal experience that enables each participant to be viewed as a potential contributor. There are no preconceived roles, no preconceived assumptions about who will uncover the truth for the group. Students therefore come to each Socratic circle with a fresh start. They are able to practice working collaboratively on a problem from a common starting point.

Conflict Resolution

Another social skill that continues to be increasingly important in today’s rapidly changing world is conflict resolution. Our students face a great deal of interpersonal challenges both in- and outside of school. Through Socratic circles, students have the opportunity to practice these skills in a controlled environment. Tredway (1995) points out that a Socratic circle “is an important occasion for students to confront such conflicts and actively work out solutions” (p. 28). As Jerry, a freshman, echoes,

Socratic circles taught us how to solve problems, to improve our writing and our critical thinking skills. But more than anything, they taught us how to deal with people and how to handle times when not everyone agreed.

The process of Socratic circles helps build respect and understanding for students and their ideas and teaches participants to listen and accept multiple points of view. “This process by no means guarantees instantaneous respect for others, nor does it eliminate the conflict that is all too common in schools these days. It does, however, guide students to develop respectful, tactful, and kinder attitudes and behaviors” (Tredway 1995, p. 27). In fact, the benefits of Socratic circles in a middle school in Tennessee appear to have spread beyond the circles themselves: “[T]he

conflict resolution expertise demonstrated by [participants] was significantly higher than would normally be expected from a middle school population” (Polite and Adams 1997, p. 265). However, simple conflict resolution is only the tip of the iceberg. Students preferring nonconfrontational resolutions to their disagreements is wonderful, but what is also needed is tolerance and acceptance of multiple views. Polite and Adams (1997) continue to explain that in their research “approximately 25% of all the students interviewed reported working to achieve win-win outcomes” (p. 265).

Jessica, a student with an impressive ability to offer deep insight in compact units of language, suggests, “Socratic circles are not only a way to understand text, but they are a way to understand people.” It is this kind of conflict resolution that we need to be encouraging in our classrooms, and Socratic circles offer a tremendous opportunity to do so.

Community-Building Skills

In addition to learning how to approach a problem in a collaborative manner, Socratic circles encourage students to be accepting of people, opinions, and ideas that are different from their own. Socratic circles have been effective with a wide variety of students representing high and low ability, and a full range of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In fact, Socratic circles that offer demographic variety have been successful in breaking down stereotypes and cliques of students. A freshman student writes of appreciating that diversity:

In high school, it seems like so many things get in the way of people really knowing one another’s thoughts and opinions. It’s refreshing to have a diverse group of students come together and share their significant ideas in a civil manner. Socratic circles provide a secure and calm place to express real opinions and intelligence.

It is the open, honest sharing of personal opinion and experience that allows students to view all people as sources of discovery. As Tredway (1996) suggests, Socratic circles “draw in students who are often less participatory and allow the synthesis of knowledge, ideas and personal meaning to take place in a structured and creative way” (p. 18).

In my own classroom I have witnessed the power that engaging in Socratic circles can have for a group of students. The frequency of classroom disruptions, misbehavior, and uncooperative attitudes appears to decrease. Socratic circles encourage a sense of community and family that helps make the overall classroom experience more rewarding for students and teachers alike. Through Socratic circles students begin to see each

other as viable, important individuals capable of improving the quality of thinking and experience of all involved, regardless of race or background.

CONCLUSION

For centuries now, we have proceeded with the idea that knowledgeable teachers should stand before their classrooms and deliver information to a collectively stoic group of passive learners. But as our nation and our culture continue to grow and change at exponential rates and as our jobs, our families, our lives, and our dreams become more and more diverse, perhaps it is time we shift our styles and theories of education to facilitate meeting a broader range of needs. More than fifteen years ago, Dennis Gray (1989) argued for this very idea:

If employers, college officials, parents, and a self-styled “Education President of the United States” genuinely want high school students who can think, read, write, and continue to learn, no time could possibly be more propitious for rousing the schools from their intellectual coma through the introduction of seminars. (p. 23)

However, few changes are visible in the expansion of Socratic circles in public education, and, unfortunately, we are no more adaptive today than we were in 1989.

All of the top-down reform movements in education are overlooking one very important reality. Honest change comes from within. Our nation is lacking the fundamental skills necessary to adapt in a constantly changing world. But changing our overall educational system will offer little improvement for this problem. Change needs to occur at the classroom level. “Fundamental reform requires internal change and personal effort because it is doomed to fail if mandated by outside authorities. It must come from inside ourselves for it to change attitudes and make lasting impact” (Lambright 1995, p. 30). Answers to our problems and our concerns are at our fingertips, but we as classroom teachers must take the initiative and make those changes happen. The reasons for these changes are clear:

[E]ducators and students must change internally. We must think critically, creatively, differently. We must listen carefully and think out loud. We must take responsibility for what we say, work in a team setting, and come to terms with diverse, ambiguous meanings. We must work to distinguish between dialogue and discussion, to hone the art of critical thinking while practicing true communication and gaining intellectual empowerment. We must change the traditional image of the teacher as

an all-knowing authority and the student as a blank slate. (Lambright 1995, p. 34)

Those images, those ideas, those practices must change within our classrooms, for no other entity is strong enough to get the job done.

For that change to have a chance, we must temper our more didactic styles of teaching with a more maieutic form. We must empower our students in Socratic dialogue and offer them opportunities to practice the skills and processes they will rely upon throughout the remainder of their lives. If we honestly seek to produce self-directed learners and holistic individuals, we must change our classrooms and embrace strategies such as the Socratic circle.

Perhaps these ideas are best expressed by Miranda:

Through our Socratic circles and the opportunity to express my views, I have gained more self-confidence and realized that not everyone thinks they are better than me. I have learned that perhaps society is not at such a loss to have our generation; everyone is capable of having a thoughtful and civilized conversation. And that is a great awakening for me.

