What does *Socratic* mean?

*Socratic* comes from the name Socrates. Socrates (ca. 470-399 B.C.) was a Classical Greek philosopher who developed a Theory of Knowledge.

What is a Socratic Seminar?

A Socratic Seminar is a way to make meaning of information by having a structured discussion about a specific text. In a Socratic Seminar, participants seek deeper understanding of complex ideas in the text through rigorous, thoughtful dialogue, rather than by memorizing bits of information. It is not a debate; it is a discussion.

**The Text:** Socratic Seminar texts are chosen for their richness in ideas, issues, and values and their ability to stimulate extended, thoughtful dialogue. A seminar text can be drawn from readings in literature, history, science, math, health, and philosophy or from works of art or music. A good text raises important questions for which there are no right or wrong answers in the participants' minds. At the end of a successful Socratic Seminar, participants often leave with more questions than they brought with them.

**The Question:** A Socratic Seminar opens with a question either posed by the leader or solicited from participants as they acquire more experience in seminars. An opening question has no right answer. Instead it reflects a genuine curiosity on the part of the questioner. A good opening question leads participants to the text as they speculate, evaluate, define, and clarify the issues involved. Responses to the opening question generate new questions from the leader and participants, leading to new responses. In this way, the questioning and discussion in a Socratic Seminar evolves on the spot rather than being pre-determined by the leader.

**The Leader:** In a Socratic Seminar, the leader plays a dual role as leader and participant. The seminar leader consciously demonstrates habits of mind that lead to a thoughtful exploration of the ideas in the text by keeping the discussion focused on the text, asking follow-up questions, helping participants clarify their positions when arguments become confused, and involving reluctant participants while giving everyone equal time.

As a seminar participant, the leader actively engages in the group's exploration of the text. To do this effectively, the leader must know the text well enough to anticipate varied interpretations and recognize important possibilities in each. The leader must also be patient enough to allow participants' understandings to evolve and be willing to help participants explore non-traditional insights and unexpected interpretations.
Assuming this dual role of leader and participant is easier if the opening question is one which truly interests the leader as well as the participants.

The Participants: In a Socratic Seminar, participants are equally responsible for the quality of the discussion. 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. Eventually, when participants realize that the leader is not looking for right answers but is encouraging them to think out loud and to exchange ideas openly, they discover the excitement of exploring important issues through shared inquiry. This excitement creates willing participants, eager to examine ideas in a rigorous, thoughtful manner.

Guidelines for Participants in a Socratic Seminar
1. Refer to the text when needed during the discussion. A seminar is not a test of memory. You are not "learning a subject." Your goal is to understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in the text.
2. It’s OK to "pass" occasionally when asked to contribute.
3. Do not participate if you are not prepared.
4. Do not stay confused; ask for clarification.
5. Stick to the point currently under discussion; make notes about ideas you want to come back to.
6. Don’t raise hands; take turns speaking.
7. Listen carefully.
8. Speak up so that all can hear you.
9. Talk to each other, not just to the leader or teacher.
10. Discuss ideas rather than each other’s opinions.
11. You are responsible for the seminar, even if you don’t know it or admit it.

Dialogue is characterized by

- suspending judgment
- examining our own work without defensiveness
- exposing our reasoning and looking for limits to it
- communicating our underlying assumptions
- exploring viewpoints more broadly and deeply
- being open to disconfirming data
- approaching someone who sees a problem differently not as an adversary, but as a colleague in common pursuit of better solution.

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