

RETHINKING OPINIONS IS A LEARNABLE SKILL

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

Teachers know that one effective strategy to engage students' thinking about a new topic is to warm up by surfacing their preconceptions and misconceptions about it. No matter how young they are, students arrive in classrooms with ideas about how the world works, and helping them to explore or rethink their opinions is an important part of forming new knowledge and skills.

One popular technique is to enlist students in creating a "K-W-L" chart before they begin studying a new topic or learning a new skill. Often, this is a whole-class activity. The teacher draws a large three-column chart and asks students what they already know, listing their contributions in the "K" column with minimal judgment or correction. The next column, "W," is for what students want to know about a topic. It can also be a useful place to rephrase misconceptions in the form of a question: for example, "Do our seasons change because of Earth's orbit?" or "Did Homer write the *Iliad*?" The final column, "L," is for later in the unit of study, when students can reflect together on what they have learned about the topic, correcting their prior misconceptions along the way.

A more complex technique for getting students to rethink their opinions is the Socratic seminar, an inquiry-based model of discussion. Formats of the Socratic seminar vary, but all focus on the essential characteristics of inquiry, making space for all voices and listening actively to others' ideas before responding.

For teachers of English language arts like myself, a key text on the Socratic seminar model is "Teaching Reading: Beyond the Plot" by Margaret Metzger, published in the journal *Phi Delta Kappan* many years ago. Metzger, a high school English teacher, described the evolution of the method from her study of the Paideia Approach and the work of Mortimer Adler and Dennis Gray. Metzger's Socratic seminar uses a "fishbowl" method for students to discuss literary or informational texts; she often used the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance as a training exercise. She arranged student desks in two concentric circles, with half of students in the inner circle to discuss the text, while the other half sat in the outer circle as silent but active observers.

I was lucky enough to visit Metzger's high school classroom to observe the method in action. Before the discussion began, she distributed index cards to all students in the outer circle. Each card bore instructions to observe and give feedback on one aspect of the discussion, so that the social dynamics of active listening, building upon



one another's ideas, and willingness to reconsider one's opinions were pinpointed, valued, and analyzed in the post-discussion segment of the class.

In my own experience, the Socratic seminar has been the most effective way to draw all voices into the conversation, such that students who have sat silently in other discussions feel encouraged by their peers to contribute their thoughts and ideas. Teachers can actively coach students toward full inclusion of all voices by guiding the outer circle with questions that prompt them to observe the number of times each student speaks, their eye contact, and other prosocial behaviors, all of which demonstrate that rethinking opinions is a learnable skill.



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