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ALLOWING STUDENTS TO THINK FOR THEMSELVES:
CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH SOCRATIC CIRCLES

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative teacher-action research study explored the experiences of twelfth grade college preparatory students who participated in six Socratic circle discussions relating to literature in the Anglo-Saxon and Medieval periods of British literature. By allowing them to converse about texts in a highly student-centered and collaborative environment, the study aimed to promote their use of critical thinking skills.

Through the use of Socratic circles, participants in the study demonstrated critical thinking skills including the analysis of textual details, questioning of ideas, connections to outside topics, consideration of multiple perspectives, and evaluation and synthesis of ideas. Further, because students became active participants in their own learning processes, they demonstrated a sense of ownership, accountability, and motivation.
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RESEARCHER STANCE

My story begins in eleventh grade high school English class, or perhaps much earlier than that--maybe when I learned to read or even when I picked up my first book. From the time I learned how, I had always loved to read. That simple joy I found in books soon grew into much more than that, as I became the type of elementary school student who would win book reading contests hands down and, later, the type of high school student who could not wait for third block English to talk about the previous night’s reading assignment. It was in that eleventh grade year of high school, in that stuffy third floor classroom in the English hallway, that I realized for certain what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. It was somewhere between the passionate story of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* and Emerson’s cries for nonconformity in *Self Reliance* that I realized that my love of reading and talking about books had become a passion—a passion that I wanted to share with students of my own someday.

My twelfth grade year of high school, as well as my education and literature classes throughout four years of college, only continued to reaffirm my desire to be an English teacher. After graduation from college, the dream of my own classroom soon became a reality. In my mind, I pictured myself creating a learning environment that would foster that same love of reading and literature discussion that I had. Firsthand, I knew the emotions that result from connecting to a protagonist and I knew the satisfaction that results from tackling a difficult
text. I knew that reading was an avenue to becoming a more mature thinker and well-rounded person. With these thoughts in mind, I looked forward to giving my students these opportunities for growth through reading, and I could not wait to initiate those discussions that I knew and loved in my own classes throughout school.

As my first year in my own classroom began, I quickly realized that my vision of motivated students engaging in intellectual conversations about a text was not a reality. Not only were too many students unwilling and unable to have meaningful discussions about the material, but many of them did not even want to read in the first place. Sure, I had been prepared for the occasional reluctant reader, but I was not ready for classes of students in which the majority had no desire to actively engage with a text. Quite different from my own experiences in English classes, here were students who had become accustomed to sitting passively as the teacher covered material, engaging just enough to know what was required for the upcoming test or quiz. They looked to me for worksheets and study guides, and they had little interest in considering what they thought about a text. While my love of reading and discussing books came naturally, it was not the same case for my students.

As that first year continued, I gradually found success in motivating my students to read through a variety of strategies. What proved to be more of a challenge, though, was getting them to talk about that reading with their peers.
From my own experience, I knew that they would gain so much more if they
would only engage in discussions, since they would need to consider multiple
perspectives and support their ideas. I knew that their learning would be deepened
and become much more meaningful, so I made it a goal to facilitate effective
discussions in my classroom.

While these early classroom discussions were not complete failures, there were
some general weaknesses that I was still unable to overcome. First, some students
inevitably dominated the discussions while others remained completely
uninvolved. Additionally, I would still end up at the center of the discussions, as
almost all of the questions originated with me. Students responded to me, but they
did not respond to each other—more of a question-and-answer session than a
discussion. And when they did answer questions, there was too little evidence of
deep critical thinking. Students would state their ideas but rarely back them up
with evidence, or they would not actively listen to what their peers had to say.
They were not asking their own questions or making clear connections from the
text to the outside world. All in all, the discussions were mainly on the knowledge
and comprehension levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, and I was doing the majority of
the analytical thinking as I struggled to keep the conversation moving forward.

I had continued this struggle into my second year of teaching when I had the
opportunity to enact an intervention for a pilot teacher research study. Knowing
that the challenge of getting students to read critically and actively discuss texts
was a problem I needed to solve, I began to brainstorm possible interventions and sought support from my fellow teachers. A colleague of mine, who is also the school’s literacy coach, casually mentioned a strategy known as the Socratic circle. Not knowing anything about this strategy, I investigated further and learned that the Socratic circle is a student-centered discussion about a piece of text. In this approach to class discussions, the teacher acts only as the initiator and facilitator, while the students are responsible for carrying on a conversation. Suddenly it dawned on me: if I wanted students to talk more, then I needed to talk less. It seemed so simple, but I had my concerns. First, would I be able to give up that much control in my classroom? Second, were my students even capable of leading their own discussion? And lastly, would a student-centered discussion result in any meaningful learning or critical thinking?

As I conducted my pilot study, I found answers to those initial questions. Yes, if I give up some control during discussions, students will talk more and are, in fact, able both to lead a discussion and to listen and respond to each other. Finally, the student-centered learning environment led to significant learning gains for my students. More often than during other class activities, students asked their own questions and considered what they thought about a text. Students were also more likely during a Socratic circle to make connections between the text and their own experiences, as well as the outside world. While I found these answers and others, I finished the study with more questions and a desire to explore in more depth the
effects of the Socratic circle method. In the pilot study, I witnessed students asking questions and making connections, but what else, I wondered, is involved in their critical thinking? How do I know if my students are indeed thinking critically about what they have read? Would the critical thinking skills transfer to other class activities? I knew that, with a longer and more detailed study, I would be able to learn even more about my teaching practices and my students’ learning experiences. Now, with my emerging confidence as a Socratic circle facilitator, I was ready to examine closely the role of the Socratic circle in preparing my students for college level studies by providing an opportunity to become a critical and sophisticated readers, speakers, and thinkers. With critical thinking as my new focus, I decided to answer this question: What are the observed and reported experiences of twelfth grade, college preparatory students when they engage in student-centered discussion in the form of Socratic circles? What are the effects on critical thinking skills?
LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the central goals of English educators is to develop students into critical readers and thinkers capable of engaging in genuine intellectual discourse about a work of literature (Copeland, 2005; Gilmore, 2006; Marshall, Klages, & Fehlman, 1990; Metzger, 1998). Tredway (1995) asserts that “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. 298). However, all too often, the discussion approach in the English classroom takes the form of a teacher-centered activity in which the teacher is doing the majority of the questioning and, sometimes, the answering; in these classrooms, many students realize that deep critical thinking is not necessary since a student or the teacher will ultimately provide the “right” answer. As Copeland (2005) explains, those students’ critical thinking skills are out of use because they have learned that “answers …represent a final destination of learning and thought” (p. 7). If students have learned to approach literature in search of single, “correct” answers, Elder and Paul (1998) assert that teachers must find a way to bring students’ natural curiosity and thoughtfulness back to life. The Socratic circle, which brings Socrates’ theory of learning and approach to education into the 21st century, is identified by researchers to be a possible solution to the lack of critical thinking among today’s students (Adler, 1977; Arnold, Hart, & Campbell, 2002; Copeland, 2005; Elder &
Historical Foundations
The potential benefits of the Socratic circle strategy, including the development of critical thinking skills, date back to Socrates’ theory of learning approximately 2,500 years ago. It was his approach to thinking and reasoning that inspires and justifies the Socratic circle method of discussion in the classroom.

Socrates’ Theory of Learning
Socrates’ theory of learning is clearly evident in Plato’s dialogues. In their overview of the Socratic approach to learning, Tweed and Lehman (2002) note that, in the dialogues, “Socrates tended to question his own and others’ beliefs, evaluated others’ knowledge, esteemed self-generated knowledge, began teaching by implanting doubt, and sought knowledge for which he had good reasons” (p. 90). Clearly, Socrates believed in promoting learning through engaging in discourse centered around relevant and complex topics. It is through this type of active process that one has the ability to explore questions, evaluate possibilities, and synthesize original ideas, thereby developing critical thinking skills.

In his analysis of the Platonic dialogues, Mintz (2010) similarly recognizes that the heart of Socrates’ theory of learning is exhibited in his frequent use of the proverb chalepa ta kala, meaning ‘fine things are difficult’ (p. 289). By examining Socrates’ use of this proverb in various situations, Mintz
concludes that Socrates valued the role of difficulty in meaningful learning. Mintz agrees with Socrates’ belief in the importance of struggling with difficult and complex ideas throughout the learning process, but he supposes that modern schools may not adequately provide students with this type of opportunity. Taking Socrates’ theory of learning into the 21st century with the Socratic circle, though, may offer a solution. Copeland (2005) credits the Socratic circle with setting students on an “ongoing, honest quest for information and understanding” that may not always be easy but will always be worth it in terms of the critical thinking skills gained (p. 7).

The Pursuit of Truth

Socrates’ ultimate purpose in reasoning through complex ideas using discourse was to arrive at some level of personal truth or understanding (Boghossian, 2006). Gordon (2007) explains that “Socrates loved to wrestle with big questions and problems and devoted his time to dialogue and the life of the mind” because he was “relentless in his search for truth” (p. 43). However dedicated he was to coming closer to the truth, though, he declares in the Apology that “real wisdom is the property of God [who] would say to us ‘the wisest of you is he who has realized…that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless’” (as cited in Hogan, 2005, p. 197). Socrates’ theory of learning seems to suggest, then, that human understanding and knowledge has its limitations, and humans are incapable of arriving at some absolute truth.
**The Role of the Question**

If the idea of an ultimate truth is not possible, then Socrates’ focus existed in the process of thinking and reasoning. As Gordon (2007) points out, it is the exploration of endless questions that will allow a person to learn and grow mentally; in other words, it is the “critical questioning attitude” that Socrates embodied (Seker and Komur, 2008, p. 390). In the classroom, then, through the Socratic circle strategy, a teacher, “instead of providing direct answers… stimulates students’ minds by continually probing into the subject with thought-stimulating questions” (Yang, Newby, & Bill, 2005, p. 164). The work of Socrates and researchers who have been inspired by his endless pursuit of understanding suggest that, at the heart of all learning, lies the question (Mitchell, 2006). While answers are a stopping point on a train of thought, successive questions lead to a deeper understanding (Elder & Paul, 1998). True, meaningful learning, then, can only result when the focus is taken from “correct” answers and placed on students’ abilities to explore and ask probing questions.

**The Socratic Circle**

The modern Socratic circle reflects Socrates’ theory of learning because it places students on their own pursuit of truth through questioning (Copeland, 2005). Lambright (1995) offers perhaps the simplest definition of this research-based best practice by describing Socratic circles, or seminars, as “exploratory
intellectual conversations centered on a text” (p. 30). After independently reading and analyzing a piece of text, students come together in the classroom to engage in a student-directed discussion about the material. As Metzger (1998) explains, the discussion is exploratory in nature because students work through various questions, ideas, and interpretations in an effort to come to a collective understanding about the issues inherent in the text. Copeland (2005) clarifies the exact characteristics of this activity, though, by explaining that the Socratic circle is quite different from the traditional form of discussion in the classroom in both how it works and what it has to offer students.

Overview of the Procedure

In Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in Middle and High School, Copeland (2005) provides teachers with step-by-step instructions for implementing Socratic circles in the classroom. Far from a casual conversation among students, the Socratic circle is actually quite structured and even “ritualistic” (Copeland, p. 27). After independently reading and annotating a piece of text selected by the teacher, students are divided into two concentric circles, termed the inner and outer circles. In response to an initiating question provided by the teacher, students in the inner circle are responsible for conversing with each other for approximately ten minutes about their thoughts on the reading. Meanwhile, students sitting in the outer circle observe the discussion and record notes about the quality of the conversation. At the conclusion of the discussion,
the outer circle provides constructive feedback to the inner circle before switching roles and repeating the process. While the general pattern should remain consistent, Copeland explains that there are many variations in time limits, type of feedback, and content that teachers can utilize to best suit the needs of their students.

The Teacher’s Role

The procedure for the Socratic circle portrays students actively engaged in reading, discussing, and assessing, while the teacher acts merely as the facilitator. However, it is important not to underestimate the role of the teacher throughout this process. Copeland (2005) states that, “effective Socratic circles do not happen overnight; there is no magic inoculation to suddenly make students think, act, and perform at this level” (p. 28). For this reason, there are a variety of things teachers must do in order for the Socratic circle to be beneficial to students. In fact, after a year-long study on the effects of Socratic seminars in one teacher’s classroom, Billings and Roberts (2006) concluded that “deliberate planning, careful practice, and thoughtful assessment” on the part of the teacher were crucial to the success of the method. Throughout this study, the researchers collected data through student surveys and interviews, teacher interviews, and observational notes on the discussions themselves. Over the course of that school year, data suggested that, as the teacher gained expertise in pre-planning and post-assessment, the seminars themselves became more productive and beneficial to students. The results of this
study, specifically the direct relationship between the teacher’s efforts and the students’ success, point to the importance of the teacher’s role as an effective facilitator when implementing Socratic circles in the classroom.

As the facilitator of Socratic circles, the teacher’s responsibilities involve introducing students to the process, creating a healthy classroom climate, selecting the text, planning initiating questions for the discussion, monitoring the inner circle, intervening when necessary, organizing feedback from the outer circle, and creating post-seminar activities to provide feedback and extend student learning (Copeland, 2005). Each of these steps is critical in allowing the teacher to act as an effective facilitator who is able to provide students with meaningful learning opportunities. Most importantly, Copeland and Chorzempa and Lapidus (2009) remind teachers that, unless it is absolutely necessary, teachers must refrain from entering into the conversation. Although these researchers understand that this step is perhaps the most difficult for many teachers, they believe it is the key in allowing students to develop their critical thinking skills.

The Students’ Role

Acting as the facilitator, the teacher is responsible for the pre-seminar and post-seminar activities, as well as the implementation of the step-by-step process during the discussion itself. All other responsibilities during the discussion, then, remain in the hands of the students. Gray (1989) asserts that, “seminars demand rigorous thinking by all the participants,” and that in preparing for a seminar,
students should “read any text as [they] would read a love letter” (p. 18-19). This comparison means that students are responsible for completing a close reading of the text, spending a significant amount of time thinking about relevant issues, significant details, and personal reactions. Students’ preparation is essential to their successful participation in the Socratic seminar, as their next responsibility is to discuss the material with peers while in the inner circle and evaluate the discussion while in the outer circle (Copeland, 2005).

**Student Questioning**

As students engage in discourse during the Socratic circle, it becomes mostly their responsibility to ask questions that will further the group’s exploration of the material. Many researchers comment on the unfortunate lack of student questioning in the classroom and the value of student-directed inquiry in learning and thinking (Copeland, 2005; Dillon, 1988; Elder & Paul, 1998). Dillon, in an observational study, addressed this very problem, noting that “those who ask questions—teachers, texts, tests—are not seeking knowledge [and] those who would seek knowledge—students—do not ask questions” (p. 197). Oftentimes, it is the teacher who asks most of the questions while students learn that success comes with knowing the right answers. Cazden (2001) notes that this traditional IRE pattern of discourse begins with an initiating question from the teacher, continues with a student’s response, and concludes with a brief evaluation from the teacher. In this type of discourse, the teacher’s responsibility is to ask
questions, while the student’s responsibility is simply to answer those questions in hope of being praised for knowing the correct response (Cazden, 2001). Students can become so accustomed to this discourse pattern in the classroom that their own questions are either absent or fact-based.

Copeland reminds teachers that the classroom “should not always concern itself with students knowing the right answers; sometimes it should concern itself with students asking the right questions” (p. 3). This researcher, then, calls for a new approach to education—one in which the value is placed on exploration and questioning, rather than knowing the answers. Elder and Paul further justify the value of student questioning in the classroom by asserting that “questions define tasks, express problems, and delineate issues [while] answers, on the other hand, often signal a full stop in thought” (p. 297). Elder and Paul go on to assert that levels of deep thinking are directly related to a student’s ability to ask deep, reflective questions (p. 298). Therefore, teachers must find ways, such as the Socratic circle, to allow students to use their own questions to guide their learning.

**Socratic Questioning**

In order to promote student questioning during Socratic circles, it is the responsibility of teachers to “stimulate their thinking with questions that lead them to further questions” so that teachers can “resuscitate minds that are largely dead when [they] receive them” (Elder & Paul, 1998, p. 299). Since students may
not be accustomed to asking questions throughout the learning process, this type of meaningful questioning can be modeled in the classroom before and during Socratic circles to prompt further thought on the part of the students. Several researchers turn to the Socratic questioning method as an effective way to promote meaningful questioning behaviors and critical thinking in students (Gose, 2009; Hew & Cheung, 2008; Overholser, 1992; Seker & Komur, 2008; Yang, Newby, & Bill, 2005). Seker & Komur generally explain that Socrates “embraced a critical questioning attitude [and] established the importance of asking deep questions that probe profoundly into thinking before ideas are accepted as worthy of belief” (p. 390). Overholser elaborates on this definition by adding that Socratic questioning does not call for “factual information,” but rather forces students to “reason through difficult problems” (p. 78). As a result, these researchers agree that this type of probing questioning method models the type of questioning behaviors desired in students.

During the Socratic circle itself, teachers can use Socratic questioning for the initiating question. Copeland (2005) explains that “a good initiating question has several characteristics, among them specificity, being based in opinion, being focused on the meaning the writer is attempting to convey, and having the potential to elicit multiple answers that may conflict with each other” (p. 61). It is exactly this type of question that will promote meaningful discourse, as well as teach students the value of asking questions as part of the learning process.
Researchers agree that, in order to stimulate students’ critical thinking skills, teachers must pose an effective question that will lead to an ongoing discussion, proving the idea that critical thinking is a process. Gilmore (2006) calls it a “controversial question” (p. 21), Tredway (1995) a “compelling question” (p. 26), Elder and Paul (1998) a “deep question” (p. 298), Overholser (1992) a “probing, evaluative question” (p. 78), and Copeland (2005) an “open-ended question” (p. 62). However, all agree that the initiating question in a Socratic circle must link to the central meaning of the text, be open to multiple interpretations, and stimulate student interest and prior knowledge.

Summary of Benefits

The general structure and role responsibilities involved in the Socratic circle only scratch the surface of what the experience offers to students. There are many more research-based best practices inherent in the method, but these far-reaching benefits identified by researchers in the field can be summarized as follows:

…in seminars teachers reap gratifying rewards: students who learn to think, read, listen, speak, and write better, escape for teachers and students from dependence on the mindless recitation of information into the pleasures of genuine intellectual discourse about ideas; the satisfactions for teachers of deepening their own understanding of important ideas in
our culture and of broadening the horizons of their own general education.

(Gray, 1989, p.18)

Copeland (2005), Lambright (1995), and Tredway (1995) agree with Gray in that all recognize the power of the Socratic circle to engage students in meaningful learning opportunities that have the potential to transform them into more sophisticated thinkers and more well-rounded individuals.

Critical Thinking

Copeland (2005) recognizes that, among all of the benefits to students, Socratic circles most significantly impact students’ critical thinking abilities. While critical thinking is a term often used by educators when describing goals for students, it is a term defined in many ways by different researchers. Dewey (1933) offers a key definition of critical thinking, explaining that it is the “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 118). Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey, and Alexander (2009) define critical thinking as “literacy that goes beyond the simple decoding of text or basic determination of meaning” (p. 741). Schellens, Keer, Weaver, and Valcke (2009) define it “as the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing and/or, evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication” (p. 78). Finally, the American Philosophical Association (1990)
settled on this definition after a multi-year project: “Critical thinking is a process of purposeful, self-regulatory judgment, which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inferences, as well as the explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based” (as cited in Seker and Kosmur, 2008, p. 391).

What these definitions have in common is the idea of going beyond the initial levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, namely knowledge and comprehension (Bloom, et al., 1956). To think critically, one must engage in higher order thinking about a text by making connections, drawing conclusions, and evaluating what is there—it goes beyond the literal material on the page. Another important part of critical thinking defined by these researchers is the ability to support any conclusions made. In other words, students must not only make some analytical or evaluative conclusions, but they must also be able to provide a justification for their ideas. Therefore, the process of critical thinking is a sophisticated mental exercise.

Given that critical thinking is an advanced cognitive activity, it must be supported by teachers’ instructional efforts. Miri, David, & Uri (2007) conducted a study to determine whether or not teaching for the development of critical thinking skills would have an impact on students’ cognitive development. The 177 rural high school students in Israel were divided into three groups, with one group specifically taught in a way to increase higher order thinking skills and the
other groups taught traditionally. The researchers concluded that, in fact, teachers can successfully promote critical thinking skills through various teaching methods, including making real-world connections, asking open-ended questions, and creating an inquiry based environment.

Critical Thinking through Socratic Circles

The Socratic circle has elements that represent the three successful instructional strategies identified by these researchers. Each Socratic circle begins with an open-ended initiating question; students have the opportunity to make real-world connections when sharing their thoughts on the text; and, in general, the Socratic circle is an inquiry-based process since students are attempting to come to some sort of understanding about the material. It can be presumed, then, that the Socratic circle also has the potential to increase students’ critical thinking skills. In a wide-ranging effort on the part of a group of North Carolina schools to increase critical thinking, Arnold, Hart, and Campbell (2002) implemented Socratic seminars for two and a half hours weekly. They concluded that students of all levels and reading abilities involved in this new approach to education were developing strong critical thinking skills. Similarly, in a study on the relationship between Socratic seminars and critical thinking, Polite and Adams (1997) concluded that Socratic seminars do, in fact, increase students’ cognitive development. Lambright (1995) and Copeland (2005) agree that the structure of a Socratic circle gives students an open opportunity to think, question, and explore
the material on their level, thereby developing critical thinking skills in the process.

Theoretical Support

Another way to understand the potential benefits of the Socratic circle strategy is to examine the education theories that are a part of the process. These educational theories, including cognitive and social constructivism, student centered learning, and active learning, inform various elements of the Socratic circle practice.

Constructivism

Boghossian (2006) offers a general definition of constructivism by explaining that “students are active participants in the learning process by seeking to find meaning in their experiences [and]… learners construct or find meaning in their subjective experiences, and this result becomes knowledge” (p. 714). Constructivism, in other words, is the process of students constructing their own understanding based on their personal and collaborative experiences. Constructivists believe that meaningful learning can only take place when students are given the opportunity to explore actively, to think deeply, and to collaborate freely in an effort to build meaning and understanding (Wang, Woo, & Zhao, 2009). The Socratic circle is constructivist in nature because it ties into Piaget’s (1953) theory of cognitive constructivism, as well as Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social constructivism.
Cognitive Constructivism

Piaget’s (1953) theory of cognitive constructivism offers an explanation as to how individuals gradually build an understanding of the world around them. Wang, et al. (2009) clearly explain that “cognitive constructivists believe students construct knowledge individually based on their prior experience and newly acquired information” (p. 96-97). While the Socratic circle discussion itself is social in nature, students’ pre- and post-seminar activities promote the individual construction of knowledge. First, as students read the selected text in preparation for the Socratic circle, they make meaning based on what they already know. The annotation of the text for the Socratic circle encourages students to ask questions, make connections to past experiences, and identify relevant issues (Copeland, 2005). As students prepare for the Socratic circle, then, they are actively and individually constructing meaning for themselves.

Following the actual Socratic circle discussion, the final activity is the reflective stage. Both Copeland (2005) and Billings and Roberts (2006) stress the importance of individual reflection on the part of the student. Copeland suggests having students complete some form of a follow-up writing activity in which they reflect on how their understanding of the text may have changed or grown. In this step, as Piaget (1953) believed, students construct knowledge through the process of “assimilation and accommodation” (Powell and Kalina, 2009, p. 242). In the reflective stage, students must individually come to terms with the new
information presented during the Socratic circle and use it to arrive at some level of personal understanding.

*Social Constructivism*

While the pre- and post-seminar activities for a Socratic circle represent cognitive constructivism because learning is constructed on a personal level, the Socratic circle itself is a social activity. Vygotsky (1978) believed that learning is a “culturally embedded and socially mediated process in which discourse plays a primary role in the creation and acquisition of shared meaning making” (as cited in Murphy, et al., 2009, p. 741). Since students are expected to consider multiple perspectives in the context of the discussion, the Socratic circle is primarily a social constructivist activity. As Copeland (2005) explains, this activity is constructivist because it involves “students…coming together to build meaning and understanding in a collaborative fashion with their peers” (p. 10). In the Socratic circle, students are able to share their ideas and questions with their peers, rather than a teacher. Engaging in collaboration with others who are on a similar cognitive level allows students to build efficiently on their developmental-appropriate areas of understanding or misunderstanding. In their study on the use of Socratic circles in math classes, Tanner & Casados (1998) agree that this constructivist social interaction centered around a text allows students to better internalize the new information, resulting in a more meaningful and powerful learning opportunity.
In addition to being built upon the theories of constructivism, the Socratic circle is also supported by theories on student centered learning. Maclellan (2008) explains that “the central idea of student-centered learning is that students determine in large measure what, how and when to think” and they “take responsibility for the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of their learning” (p. 411). Looking at it from a slightly different angle, McCombs and Whisler (1997) define it as learning that “draw[s] on the learner’s unique perspectives, talents, capacities, and experiences” (p. xi, as cited in Paris & Combs, 2006, p. 573). The definitions of these researchers, taken together, suggest that there are essentially two pieces of student centered learning. First, in a student-centered classroom, students are actively engaged in the learning process, and they are responsible for constructing their own understanding and making discoveries, rather than absorbing information given by the teacher. The second part is that the instruction must be molded to fit with students’ prior knowledge, personal ideas, and individual experiences so that learners’ best interests are at the “center” of the instructional plan. The Socratic circle exhibits each of these elements in that the strategy promotes student-directed conversation, appeals to student interest and experience, and allows students to express their creativity.
Student Directed Conversation

Davis (1992) conducted a study that explored the role of student talk in allowing students to become active, sophisticated members of the academic community. The study took place in a remedial English class at a community college in New Jersey. There were 110 students participating in the study, who were generally quiet and seemingly unmotivated. As the teacher made conscious efforts to reduce the amount of teacher talk, the effects on students were observed through tape recorded conversations, student surveys, and student writing. The results indicate that, in general, discussion improved. Students controlled the majority of the conversation, and, as time went on, they felt more comfortable expressing their opinions and presenting questions to the rest of the group.

Perhaps the most important finding came about when a student exclaimed early in the study, “‘I ain’t no teacher,’” which prompted Davis to further explore the role of authority in the classroom (p. 8). Davis concluded that successful discussion requires students to “assume an authority that conflicts with their roles as students” (p. 9). If students are unaccustomed to taking on a leading role in the classroom, it may take time for them to embrace student-centered discussion. However, it was the frequent exposure to this type of classroom talk that eventually developed students’ abilities to think critically and express ideas openly. The results of this study suggest that the student-centered nature of the Socratic circle may initially be difficult for students to accept; however, the
results also speak to the eventual cognitive and social benefits of student-centered discussion.

Copeland (2005) further defines the student-centered nature of the activity by explaining that it “turn[s] partial classroom control, classroom direction, and classroom governance over to students by creating a truly equitable learning community where the weight and value of student voices and teacher voices are indistinguishable from each other” (p. 3). The Socratic circle is student-centered in that it is a student-led form of discussion about a particular piece of text. As students are seated in an inner and outer circle, the students in the inner circle explore their individual ideas and questions about the text while the students in the outer circle evaluate the quality of dialogue. Since students’ prior knowledge and understanding serve as a starting point for the discussion, and since the teacher acts only as a facilitator for the activity, all students’ voices have room to be heard and valued. Likewise, Hew and Cheung (2008) and Overholser (1992) recognize the benefit of the Socratic method in promoting increased levels of student talk as opposed to teacher talk.

*Appealing to Student Interest and Experience*

Student-centered discussion, in order to be most successful, must be made relevant to students’ personal lives and past experiences (Adler, 1977; Chorzempa and Lapidus, 2009; Copeland, 2005; Ellis, Goodyear, Prosser, & O’Hara, 2006; Gray, 1989; Marshall, Klages, & Fehlman, 1990; Polite & Adams, 1997). The
Socratic seminar accomplishes this goal through the selection of the text and the open opportunity for students to make connections to previous experiences. In his suggestions for education reform, Adler (1977) asserts that, for a seminar, “teachers should never assign things to be read that do not interest them or catch their minds” (p. 298). Likewise, Chorzempa (2009) suggests that teachers look for texts with “identifiable themes or issues that [are] familiar and relevant” to students (p. 56). These researchers agree that the level of personal relevance will further motivate students to explore the material actively, therefore increasing their levels of deep, reflective thinking.

In fact, Polite and Adams (1997) conducted a study investigating the relationship between Socratic seminars and students’ critical thinking skills. The great majority of students at the small, urban middle school reported that they were most engaged in those seminars that focused on real-life issues and topics that were relevant to their experiences. As concluded through observations and interviews, it was this type of seminar that received the most positive reactions from students, since it gave them the opportunity to express their opinions and share their stories.

Similarly, Ellis, et al. (2006) studied how students best learned through online and face-to-face discussions. The study took place in an undergraduate psychology course, in which students engaged in weekly discussions in and out of the classroom. Data were collected through surveys, interviews, and observations.
The researchers examined the characteristics that made some discussions more effective than others. One finding indicated that face-to-face discussions resulted in the most meaningful learning when students were given the opportunity to relate the topic to personal experiences and individual opinions.

**Allowing Students to Express Creativity**

As students are engaged the Socratic seminar, not only do they have the ability to make connections to personal experiences, but there is also great opportunity for the creativity involved in critical thinking to come forth. Adler (1982) states that a seminar approach in the classroom “stimulates the imagination and intellect by awakening the creative and inquisitive powers” (p. 29). The Socratic seminar encourages students go further than simply answering a question and moving on; it calls for original ideas, personal connections, and creative problem solving. Copeland (2005) believes that “the active nature and the creativity of analysis and support of arguments within a Socratic circle encourage students to be creative themselves” (p. 13). By encouraging students to look at issues in new ways and find creative solutions to the initiating question, Socratic circles stimulate imagination, creativity, and ultimately, critical thought. Lambright (1995) agrees, explaining that “students are more creative when they are engaged in a group, listening to the thinking of others, [and] watching the play of one idea bouncing off another,” and it is these “transactions [that] spark the imagination” (p. 33). Tredway (1995) believes that this creative approach to a text
can ultimately change the climate of the classroom for the better because students are motivated by the opportunity to use their creativity in the process of gaining an understanding of a text. Most importantly, though, the use of creative thought moves students into “the high end of the thinking/reasoning process” in the Socratic circle setting (Tredway, 1995, p. 29).

Copeland (2005) explains that students’ creative thinking skills continue to be in use, even after the discussion itself, because the “Socratic circle moves students to engage in further study and thought on their own…. [and] students find ways to filter their critical thinking through their own creative channels” (p. 14). While there are several mediums that could be used, one of the most beneficial ways to allow students to continue their critical thought processes about a text is to give them the opportunity to write. In creating a written piece after the Socratic circle discussion takes place, students must consider, individually, not only the ideas presented but also how those ideas could be taken even further. Copeland (2005) asserts that writing encourages students to continue to use their higher-order thinking skills, which leads to the production of written pieces that are “more insightful, relevant, and thought-provoking” in comparison to those of students who have not participated in the Socratic circle (p. 18).

Active Learning

In addition to constructivism and student-centered learning, the third theoretical underpinning for the Socratic circle process is active learning. Bonwell
and Eison (1991) define active learning as when “students [are] doing things and thinking about the things they are doing” (p. 2). Given that the Socratic circle is a student-centered activity, students become active participants in the classroom. Additionally, the Socratic circle offers an opportunity for post-seminar reflection, which allows students to be actively involved in their individual learning process. Lambright (1995) agrees, stating that Socratic seminars encourage active learning because they are “playful, powerful, engaging, and performance-based” (p. 33). Taking it one step further, Overholser (1992) believes that the Socratic seminar prevents students from being passive members of the class. Rather, they are a part of an active learning atmosphere in which they are developing thinking and social skills. Two facets of the Socratic circle process that encourage active learning are the opportunities to collaborate and to reflect.

**Allowing Students to Collaborate**

Once students have been given an initiating question and have engaged in the discussion itself, collaboration among students in the group is critical for success. Overholser (1992) explains that by engaging in communication and collaboration with peers in their initial stages of development as critical thinkers, students will develop into more mature thinkers possessing “the honesty to express one’s opinion, the reasonableness to admit areas of ignorance, and the courage to learn more about these unknown areas… [which will] encourage the active and critical evaluation of their beliefs” (p. 77). This stage is where students
present their ideas and, as Gray (1989) phrases it, “join participants in a collaborative quest for understanding, in a mutual testing of each other’s responses to a text” (p. 18). Billings and Roberts (2006) explain that the Socratic circle is “‘collaborative’ because its relative success or failure depends on how well students listen and respond to each other’s statements” (p. 5). This step encourages students to work together towards a common goal, while also promoting an active learning environment. One of Copeland’s (2005) students explains that “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” (p. 16). In order to speak effectively within a Socratic circle, therefore, students must constantly remain active participants in order to put their ideas into words clearly and logically. The idea of accountability to peers discussed by Copeland (2005) is relevant here, too; the responsibility to contribute actively by expressing ideas clearly and with support lies completely in the hands of the student. This accountability can potentially be comforting and encouraging, though, since students are communicating to peers, not superiors.

During a Socratic seminar, students’ collaborative skills need to be constantly in use not only to express their ideas, but to listen to others’ ideas as well. According to Kauchak and Eggen (2003), “discussions can provide the intellectual grist that allows students to examine their own beliefs [and through]
… listening to the different opinions of their classmates, students can evaluate the adequacy of their own beliefs while comparing them to the beliefs of others” (p. 310). While interacting with peers in a setting like a Socratic circle, students are actively evaluating and re-evaluating their own beliefs in light of other beliefs, ideas, and questions presented by others. Copeland (2005) refers to this constructive process as “listen[ing] with their minds” (p. 17). It is through this dialogue that students can hone their collaborative skills in an effort to construct a meaningful understanding of the issue at the center of a Socratic circle discussion. Tredway (1995) summarizes it when she explains that “as students consider different—and often conflicting—ideas, they ‘make meaning,’ that is, they think deeply and critically about concepts…refine their critical thinking skills and deepen the collective understanding of the material they discuss” (p. 26).

*Providing Opportunities for Reflection*

The other step in the Socratic circle process that encourages active learning is the reflective stage. After a study in metacognition, Desautel (2009) concluded that there is immense “value of instruction in oral and written self-reflection, coupled with academic and personal goal setting, as a means to enrich students’ self-awareness as learners” (p. 2016). While the value of metacognition in the learning process is clear, a study conducted by Polite and Adams (1996) confirmed that the Socratic seminar increases students’ ability to engage in metacognitive thought. Their results indicated that almost all students
demonstrated metacognition at some point in the study, since the Socratic circle method offers great opportunities for self-reflection. Copeland (2005) explains that after a Socratic circle discussion, students can reflect by evaluating “the quality of discussion not only in others but also in themselves” in an effort to “make comparisons and establish goals for their own discussions” (p. 19). Evaluating effectiveness, making comparisons, and setting goals for improvement are higher-order thinking skills that students will practice as they develop into more sophisticated, critical thinkers who are active participants in their learning process.

Elder and Paul (1998) believe that, during the Socratic circle process, “all assertions [are] connecting points to further thoughts; … all thoughts [are] …in need of development; [and] … any thought can only exist fully in a network of connected thoughts” (p. 299). As students critically reflect on the discussion itself and their participation in it, they can analyze the development of ideas by closely examining how and why those connections occurred. On a more personal level, though, students will reflect on how their own ideas changed throughout the course of the discussion. Copeland (2005) explains that they will become “more cognizant of the workings of their own minds;” in other words, students will practice metacognition (p. 19). As Snowman and Biehler (2003) explain, metacognition, or the awareness of how we learn, “plays an important role in learning” and students’ development into critical thinkers (p. 274). Only when
students are actively aware of their own thought processes and the learning that occurs can they seek to improve it by moving into higher levels of critical thought.

Foundations in Discussion as a Teaching Method

In addition to its historical and theoretical foundations, the Socratic circle also has a foundation in the use of discussion as a teaching method. Research indicates general support for the use of discussion in the classroom, especially non-traditional discourse patterns and dialogic discourse.

Learning through Discussion

Compared to the traditional lecture method, the experience of actively discussing material in the classroom has been supported by many researchers as a more effective means of improving students’ cognitive and social development, as well as students’ abilities to engage in higher-order thinking (Adler 1982; Arlin, 1990; Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2008; Ellis, Goodyear, Prosser, & O’Hara, 2006; Omatseye, 2007). In the Paideia Proposal, which demands a new approach to education that would most fully educate students, Adler asserts that, in order to “rais[e] the mind up from a lesser or weaker understanding to a stronger and fuller one…discussion…must prevail” (p. 53). Adler identifies discussion as a way for teachers to promote critical thinking in students through the asking of questions, instead of the dispensing of information. This groundbreaking proposal is
partially based on the Socratic form of instruction, which Adler recognizes as an effective means of developing students into sophisticated thinkers. In order to push students beyond traditional education, Adler believes in the value of the Socratic method of discussion in helping “student[s] bring ideas to birth [and] rais[ing] their minds up from a state of understanding or appreciating less to a state of understanding or appreciating more” (p. 29). It is through the use of the question on the parts of both teacher and student, as well as the opportunity for active inquiry, that Adler believes will positively transform the educational system.

Omatseye clearly defines the discussion method supported by Adler as “a teaching strategy in which the teacher brings students face to face as they engage in verbal interchange of ideas” (p. 88). As students are engaged in the sharing of ideas with one another, they have the opportunity to think critically, but more importantly, to appreciate the process of learning as opposed to the transmission of information from teacher to student (Omatseye, p. 88).

Even students themselves recognize the benefits of classroom discussion, as is indicated in a study conducted by Ellis, et al. (2006). These researchers explored students’ reactions to different forms of discussion, and they cited general student responses explaining the benefits of this teaching method, including “challenging ideas, developing ideas, acquiring ideas, and checking ideas” (p. 249).
While discussion can promote cognitive development, research also shows that it can improve students’ communication skills, another central goal of English educators. A study conducted by Dallimore, et al. (2008) provides support for the ability of discussion to improve student achievement by concluding that “preparation for and participation in class discussion can be linked to…improved oral and written communication-skill development” (p. 167). In that same study, most students also reported that the extent of their learning was directly related to their level of participation in class discussions (p. 166). In addition to advancing students’ academic achievement, discussion also has the potential to build effective teacher-student relationships. Arlin (1990) explains that, “by using conversation to ‘construct’ meaning about topics of study, teachers can figure out students’ thinking and adapt instruction to their needs” (p. 82). Clearly, discussion, which is the defining feature of the Socratic circle, plays an important role in the classroom, for both students’ achievement and teachers’ ability to help them achieve success.

*Promoting Non-traditional Discourse Patterns*

The most effective form of discussion, though, does not follow the traditional IRE—teacher initiation, student response, teacher evaluation—pattern (Cazden, 2001; Chorzempa, 2009; McNeill & Pimentel, 2009; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990). What Nystrand and Gamoran describe as “high-quality classroom discourse” are those non-traditional discussions that are “very
conversational” and in which the teacher is “flexible” (p. 11). In this type of
discussion, students have more of an opportunity to think critically and explore
topics in an effort to come to an understanding of the material, rather than simply
restating information to the teacher. McNeill and Pimentel summarize the issue
effectively by asserting that, “if the goal is to engage students in a more open
form of instruction with greater student involvement, a different type of discourse
needs to be supported in classroom discussion” (p. 204).

This “open” discussion method is supported by other researchers as well,
who believe that the open forum style of discussion provides students with greater
opportunities to share and defend their positions, as well as freely explore the
issues at hand (Chorzempa, 2009; McNeill & Pimentel, 2009). The nature of the
Socratic circle provides exactly this type of open forum for students to interact,
explore, and question in a small group setting. Johannessen, Larry, and Kahn
(1982) conducted a study that provides further support for the nature of the
Socratic circle, as they concluded that student participation was more extensive
when students interacted openly in a small group, as opposed to the whole class.
Since the Socratic circle uses the small group setting, individual students can
benefit by having more of an opportunity to have their voices heard.

Creating Dialogic Discourse

While the Socratic circle is supported by such basic best practices as
discussion and non-traditional discourse patterns, the method also engages
students in what is known as dialogic discourse. Taking an open-ended discussion a step further, in dialogic discourse, students select which ideas to discuss and create an understanding of those ideas through collaboration, while the teacher does not exert authority over the form or content of the discussion itself (Billings & Roberts, 2006). While Socratic circles begin with a teacher-selected text and possibly a teacher’s initiating question, the remainder of the discussion is led by students. Students have the opportunity to interact in an effort to create meaning, with the teacher acting only as facilitator. Lambright (1995) defines dialogic discourse as “a free exploration—a diving beneath—a window to one’s own thinking…in which transformation can take place and learning is active” (p. 33). Lambright’s definition perfectly captures the sense of curiosity, exploration, and collaboration that the Socratic seminar is meant to promote. Through meaningful dialogue, students actively construct meaning as they “make public their perspectives on issues arising from the text, consider alternate perspectives proposed by peers, and attempt to reconcile conflicts among opposing points of view” (Murphy, et al, 2009, p. 741). These types of interactions between students during a Socratic seminar require a high level of deep, reflective, and critical thinking.

Summary
Socrates believed that the question was at the heart of all meaningful learning because it prompted deep, complex thinking and the endless pursuit of
truth (Boghossian, 2006; Gordon, 2007; Hogan 2005; Mintz, 2010; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). His insights into the role of meaningful, inquiry-based discourse in learning have important implications for today’s students as educators strive to develop their critical thinking skills (Copeland, 2005; Elder & Paul, 1998; Gray, 1989; Lambright, 1995; Tredway, 1995). Inspired by Socrates’ theory of learning, Adler (1982) declared in *The Paideia Proposal* that teachers must focus on educating the whole student by providing opportunities for sophisticated, critical thought. Since this proposal, teachers have begun to explore the ways in which Socrates’ method enhances the learning experiences of students in modern classrooms (Copeland, 2005; Gray, 1989; Lambright, 1995; Metzger, 1998; Mitchell, 2006; Overholser, 1992; Tredway, 1995; Yang, Newby, & Bill, 2005). Researchers have found that the Socratic circle, with its multi-faceted theoretical foundation, has the potential to transform the classroom into an active, student-centered environment in which students have the opportunity to construct their learning (Boghossian, 2006; Copeland, 2005; Desautel, 2009; Mitchell, 2006; Polite & Adams, 1997). It is in this type of environment that students can rediscover their natural curiosity, form questioning and inquiring minds, and develop the critical thinking skills necessary for success in the classroom and the future (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Copeland, 2005; Elder & Paul, 1998; Lambright, 1995; Tredway, 1995; Yang, Newby, & Bill, 2005).
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Goals

Throughout the course of this teacher action research study, my primary goal was to increase students’ critical thinking skills. As a teacher of students in their senior year of high school, I knew that critical thinking was a skill they would need not only in my classroom, but also in the future as they moved on to higher education. I recognized early in the year that the students in my class had varying levels of experience in terms of thinking deeply and analytically about the texts we read. However, I also recognized that all students could benefit from receiving ample opportunities to develop, or at least refine, their critical thinking skills.

With this central goal in mind, I believed that classroom discussion would open the door to the levels and types of critical thinking I wanted for my students. While traditional discussion holds some place in most English classrooms, I wanted to explore the experiences of students participating in non-traditional, student-centered discussion. I believed that if I acted merely as the facilitator, students would step forward as the leaders of the conversation and therefore engage in deeper and more meaningful thought processes. In order to begin my exploration into the use of student-centered discussion in the English classroom, I selected the Socratic circle as the specific type of intervention I would use. Based on its purely student-centered nature, I believed that this form of discussion would
provide all students with the opportunity to engage in and observe varying levels and types of critical thinking.

After researching student-centered discussion and the use of the Socratic circle specifically, as well as conducting a short pilot study, I planned to conduct a full-fledged study in which I would periodically implement this instructional activity in my classroom. As I facilitated several Socratic circles, each unique in topic, I studied how different students in my classroom responded to the strategy, as well as which types of Socratic circles led to different forms of critical thinking.

Setting and Participants

My study took place in a school district located in the northeastern United States. As a whole, the district has one high school, two middle schools, and seven elementary schools, with a total student population of approximately 8,000. I teach eleventh and twelfth grade English at the high school, which has a student population of about 2,800. The student body at the high school is composed of approximately 86% Caucasian, 5% Asian, 5% Hispanic, and 4% Black students.

The specific class I observed for the study contained twenty-nine students, including seventeen males and twelve females. Seven of the students have IEP’s, three of which are gifted IEP’s. Of those students with IEP’s, two have Section 504 plans. All students within this class agreed to serve as research participants.
Procedures

Before beginning the study, I submitted a full proposal to the chairman of the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) and received approval to proceed (Appendix A). Once approved, I obtained consent from my building principal (Appendix B) and sent home parent consent forms (Appendix C).

The study was conducted for a period of twelve weeks (see Figure 1), during which students studied three main units: a writing unit focused on the college application essay; the Anglo-Saxon period, with Beowulf as the central text; and the Medieval period, including a study of “Le Morte d’ Arthur” and The Canterbury Tales. Throughout the beginning weeks of the study, students were not yet introduced to the Socratic circle strategy. Rather, that time was used to collect baseline data and create a classroom culture well-suited for the Socratic circle strategy. In the first two weeks, I introduced the study in general, as well as sent home and received parent consent forms back for all students in the class. Additionally, students completed an initial survey (Appendix D) that allowed me to gather information about their prior experiences with reading and classroom discussion. During the second and third weeks of the study, students completed a writing unit that I designed in way to be highly student-centered. As preparation for the nature of the Socratic circle, this unit gave students many opportunities to build classroom relationships, direct their own learning, and collaborate with peers towards a common goal.
| Week 1   | Introducing the Study and Gaining Consent  
|          | Getting to Know Students               |
| Week 2   | Completing the Initial Survey  
|          | Introducing the College Application Essay Unit  
|          | Forming Peer Support Groups             |
| Week 3   | Writing the College Application Essay with Peer Support  
|          | Creating a Classroom Culture for Socratic Circles  
|          | Introducing the Socratic Circle Strategy |
| Week 4   | *Socratic Circle #1: Heroism*  
|          | Beginning the Anglo-Saxon Period & *Beowulf*  |
| Week 5   | Continuing *Beowulf*  
|          | *Socratic Circle #2: John Gardner’s Grendel*  |
| Week 6   | Finishing *Beowulf*  
|          | *Socratic Circle #3: Beowulf the Movie v. Text*  |
| Week 7   | Concluding the Anglo-Saxon Period       |
| Week 8   | Beginning the Medieval Period  
|          | *Socratic Circle #4: “Le Morte d’Arthur”*  |
| Week 9   | Introducing *The Canterbury Tales*  
|          | Reading and Studying the *Prologue*       |
| Week 10  | *Socratic Circle #5: “The Pardoner’s Tale”*  |
| Week 11  | *Socratic Circle #6: “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”*  |
| Week 12  | Completing Final Reflections & Final Surveys  
|          | Conducting Focus Group Interviews       |

*Figure 1. Study timeline.*
Once baseline data were collected and efforts were made to create a safe and comfortable classroom environment, I introduced students to the Socratic circle strategy. At the beginning of week four, students participated in their first discussion on the abstract topic of heroism, which served as an introduction to the Anglo-Saxon period. As we continued reading and studying *Beowulf* for the next two weeks, students participated in two more Socratic circles focused on an excerpt of John Gardner’s *Grendel* and the film version of *Beowulf*. By week eight, we had concluded the Anglo-Saxon period and started studying the Medieval period. The fourth Socratic circle was focused on an excerpt of “Le Morte d’ Arthur,” and the final two allowed students to explore “The Pardoner’s Tale” and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale.”

Each time students participated in a Socratic circle, they completed a pre-discussion homework assignment which usually involved a reading and annotating of the text. If students completed this assignment, they were granted entrance into the activity, which lasted for the full duration of the 42-minute period. While members of the inner circle, students participated in the conversation as I recorded detailed notes; while members of the outer circle, students completed a short feedback form (Appendix E) that asked them to identify specific strengths and weaknesses of students’ performances. Following each Socratic circle discussion, students completed short reflections (Appendix F) that required them to evaluate their performance and the performance of the group.
as a whole. Between the implementation of the six Socratic circle discussions, I conducted many short informal interviews with individual students, as well as with the class as a whole. These conversations--combined with data from the discussions, outer circle feedback forms, and reflections--allowed me to gain the insight I needed to tailor future Socratic circle topics to their needs.

In addition to these frequent informal interviews throughout the entire data collection process, I conducted several focus group interviews during the final week (Appendix G). Each group was composed of similar students who emerged as key participants due to their different experiences throughout the study. My questions attempted to gain a deeper and clearer understanding of students’ experiences in and reactions to the Socratic circle. Finally, during the last week, all students completed a final written reflection (Appendix H) and a final survey (Appendix I) which allowed students to summarize their experiences throughout the study.

Data Gathering Methods

Participant Observations

Hendricks (2009) believes that observational data are a critical source of information in a study because they “help determine why an intervention was successful or unsuccessful” (p. 90). Bogdan and Biklen (2006) agree that observational data are of primary importance in a teacher action research study. From the beginning of my study, then, I engaged in consistent and regular
observations of my students, both during and in between Socratic circle
discussions. As I conducted these participant observations, I made sure to record
brief ‘field notes’ that contained what I saw and heard in my classroom. As Ely,
Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) and Hendricks (2009) suggest, it is difficult to
compose detailed notes during a participant observation. Therefore, these brief
field notes were critical in allowing me to create more detailed observational
memos later on. At the end of each school day, immediately after each
observation, while the day’s events were fresh in my mind, I expanded on my
field notes to create a thorough narrative account of what I observed. The
narratives I created provided detailed description, while keeping my thoughts and
feelings separate from the events I observed (Ely, et al., 1997). In order to keep
clear this distinction, I placed brackets around my interpretations of the data I
collected as I wrote my narrative accounts.

Using my brief field notes and my detailed narrative accounts, I also
utilized checklists to represent concisely what I witnessed during my participant
observations of each Socratic circle discussion (Appendix J). Hendricks (2009)
explains that a “useful checklist should include those behaviors that are deemed to
be important in relation to the intervention or the desired effects of the
intervention” (p. 94). Since my primary focus was on critical thinking, my
checklist contained various types of critical thinking skills. For each student, then,
I recorded whether or not that skill was exhibited during the discussion. These
checklists allowed me to see, quickly and easily, which types of critical thinking were most prevalent for different students and different Socratic circle topics.

Since I was working with a large class, it became necessary to focus my observations on particular students who would best help me answer my research questions (Hendricks, 2009). As the study progressed, my observations became more focused on key students who represented different types of participants, including those of various ability levels, as well as those students who responded well or did not respond well to the intervention. Throughout the study, I also conducted short shadow observations of certain key participants (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005). These shadow observations allowed me to focus on a single student’s experiences, including what he or she said and did. These focused observations offered great insight into these students’ experiences and feelings.

*Student Surveys and Questionnaires*

In addition to observational data, I also collected inquiry data at critical points in the study. According to Hendricks (2009), “inquiry data are used to gather information from participants about their knowledge, values, beliefs, past experiences, feelings, opinions, attitudes or perceptions” (p. 97). One form of inquiry data I collected was in the form of a student survey (Appendix D). Before introducing Socratic circles to students, I wanted to collect baseline data that would provide a point of comparison at the end of my study. As Hendricks (2009)
suggests, this initial survey contained questions that were aligned with my
research questions. Students responded in various ways about topics including
reading, discussion, and critical thinking.

For comparative purposes, a final survey containing similar topics was
given to students at the conclusion of the study (Appendix I). The final survey,
however, focused more on students’ experiences specifically during Socratic
circle discussions. By allowing students to share with me their thoughts and
perceptions at the beginning and end of the study, I was able to better understand
their experiences regarding my research questions. For both the initial survey and
final survey, I was aware that students might be tempted to respond in ways to
satisfy me (Hendricks, 2009). As a result, I made sure to emphasize the
importance of their honesty and to remind them that their responses would not be
used as a basis for evaluation.

Student Interviews

At the conclusion of my study, a second form of inquiry data I collected
was in the form of student interviews (Appendix G). While the student surveys
and questionnaires allowed me to collect data from all students, the interviews I
conducted allowed me to gain a more in-depth understanding of the experiences
of key participants in my study. Specifically, I wanted to give students the
opportunity to voice and elaborate on their thoughts, feelings, and experiences
from the beginning of the study to the end, after they had participated in several Socratic circles. I followed Hendrick’s (2009) advice when I planned “semi-structured,” “focus group” interviews (p. 99 and 101). The interviews were “semi-structured” in that I had specific questions to which I wanted responses; however, I also allowed participants to share other information of interest or importance to them. Often, this additional information allowed me to better understand students’ responses to my questions. I decided to conduct focus group interviews because Hendricks (2009) suggests that they “can result in much richer data than that collected in individual interviews” because students can respond not only to me, but also to each other (p. 101). Since I was able to ask students to elaborate on the responses and hear students casually discuss with one another their experiences, these interviews allowed to me collect detailed and valuable data to answer my research questions.

I also followed the advice of MacLean and Mohr (1999), who remind me that, while interviews “shed light on [my] research as a whole,” participants might “try to please [me] by saying what they think [I] want to hear” (p. 45). As a result, I made sure to explain to interviewees the importance of their honesty and my appreciation for any concerns or reservations they might have.
Student Artifacts

The final type of data I collected throughout the study was in the form of student work. As Hendricks (2009) explains, student artifacts allow teacher researchers “to decide whether an intervention has had an impact” on “student achievement” (p. 90). The primary type of work students completed during the study took the form of their contributions to the Socratic circles themselves. The comments and questions shared by students during the discussions were a primary data source because they allowed me to determine what, if any, forms of critical thinking were taking place. Another way I determined the presence of critical thinking was through the use of student self-assessments, which allow students to “evaluate their own work or their progress towards a certain goal” (Hendricks, 2009, p. 84). It was also crucial for me to encourage honest evaluation on the part of my students (Hendricks, 2009). After each Socratic circle, students completed a combined academic and behavioral self-assessment in the form of a rating scale (Appendix K). For each item on a list of critical thinking types, students indicated how often they engaged in each while preparing for and participating in that specific Socratic circle. This data collection tool was useful in helping me to understand students’ use of critical thinking skills in spite of verbal contributions during the discussion.

A second form of self-assessment students completed was in the form of a brief reflection after each Socratic circle (Appendix F). For each reflection,
students responded to five central prompts about their general reactions, the group’s performance and growth, individual performance and growth, and individual thought process. At the conclusion of the study, students also completed a final reflection that allowed them to evaluate their overall performance throughout the study. Finally, students engaged in peer review during each Socratic circle, which allowed them to evaluate each others’ performances in an effort to improve the next time (Hendricks, 2009, p. 85). While observing the discussion, students completed a feedback form, which required them to identify specific students who did something well, as well as a general goal for the class as a whole (Appendix E).

Trustworthiness Statement

In order to ensure that the results of this study were trustworthy and valid, I followed a series of ethical guidelines. Before beginning the study, I obtained approval and written permission from Moravian College’s Human Subjects Internal Review Board (Appendix A). The principal of my school also provided written permission for me to conduct the study (Appendix B). Further, I provided parents with an informed consent letter (Appendix C), explaining that I would only use data from those students who had permission to be participants. The letter also explained that students could withdraw from the study at any time for any reason and without penalty. Additionally, the letter reassured participants that
their personal information would be protected by pseudonyms, and all materials and data would be kept in a secure location until it would be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Once the participants had given their consent and the study began, I remained open to unexpected research findings and was always sure to consider multiple points of view when interpreting data. There were several specific strategies that allowed me to do this. First, I utilized peer debriefing and presentations to key audiences, in which I discussed the study with my colleagues and fellow teacher researchers (Hendricks, 2009). In these conversations, I had the opportunity to share my interpretations of data and then receive alternate viewpoints or lenses through which to draw conclusions. They were also able to provide feedback on the soundness of my research study design and methods. Next, throughout the study, I engaged in persistent and prolonged observations during which I recorded data accurately and in detail (Hendricks, 2009). The lengthy data collection process ensured that my results were as accurate as possible, as did my efforts to keep a detailed field log of all observations I made. During data collection, I was sure to use triangulation to corroborate my findings, thereby ensuring their validity (Hendricks, 2009). My results were based on commonalities between data sources including student artifacts, observational data, and inquiry data.
Next, as I began to interpret my data, I used member checks (Ely, et al., 1991). Member checks allowed me to share my interpretations with students, the actual participants, who were then able to support or refute my ideas. Another way to ensure the validity of my results was to analyze negative cases (Hendricks, 2009; Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005). In the study, these were results that seemed to contradict other sources of data. To ignore these would have been unethical, so it was important for me to analyze these cases to better understand my results. Finally, I engaged in continuous, ongoing reflective planning throughout the study (Hendricks, 2009). In order to be ethical, I constantly reflected and made changes to the study in order to best suit the needs of my students. Also, as the study progressed, it became necessary to alter the study design in order to be able to collect as much useful data as possible. Finally, when sharing the study with larger audiences, I was sure to provide thick descriptions of the setting and the study (Hendricks, 2009). These detailed descriptions of the setting, participants, and methods allow the audience to accurately determine whether or not the results of the study can be generalized to their own classrooms.
THIS YEAR’S STORY

My Students—A Preview

Garrett: Well, he [Arthur] is still a hero because he doesn’t give up even though he might die.
Carl: So just because he is prepared to die, that makes him a hero?
Randy: I don’t think so. That’s part of his job. It’s his responsibility. In this time period, that would have been the expectation.
Zack: But we all agreed that Beowulf was a hero. And being ready for death was one of the things that made him heroic.
Brian: It was part of the Anglo-Saxon heroic code.
Neil: Yeah, and Arthur didn’t have the physical advantages that Beowulf did.
Paul: True. It’s like Arthur is more human than Beowulf.

Figure 2. Socratic Circle Preview.

This excerpt from a Socratic circle discussion past the mid-point in my study reveals students making and supporting assertions, asking questions, considering historical context, and connecting to other texts. It shows students listening and responding to one another in an effort to formulate a shared understanding of the issues at the heart of a piece of literature. While examining this performance by students gives insight into their potential while participating in this student-centered form of discussion, what is perhaps more intriguing is the journey they took to get there. From the first day of school on, I learned so much about who my students were as readers, thinkers, and speakers. I witnessed their strengths and weaknesses, their successes and failures, and I saw firsthand how a class made up of students of varying abilities and personalities responded to the Socratic circle. While the journey to the type of conversation shared above was a
rewarding one for me and many of my students, it was not without its stumbling blocks. However, each day—whether a success or not—was a learning experience for me as I strived to provide meaningful opportunities for critical thinking in my classroom.

The First Day—Vision v. Reality

The first day of school always fills me with feelings of anxiety as I question who my students will be, what they will be like, and how the year will go. However, the first day of this school year presented a new concern as I thought about beginning the data collection process with a group of new students whom I knew nothing about. Prior to that first day, I had envisioned my soon-to-be study participants conversing with one another, smiling, collaborating, and engaging in sophisticated literary analysis. I looked forward to reporting their successes and feeling proud of the critical thinking skills they had attained.

As the first school day neared its end, though, and my ninth period seniors began walking through the classroom door, that vision quickly dissipated. As they entered, they stopped to look at the seating chart and then quietly took their assigned seats. My emphatic greetings were returned with only brief nods and an uneasy “hi” or two. They looked less than enthused. While their lack of energy was understandable in a British literature class at the end of the first school day after a long summer, I could not help but wonder if these students—seemingly quiet, shy, and lethargic—would make my vision a reality.
What I quickly realized was that my vision was not going to come true right away, in a couple of days, or even in a matter of weeks. It was going to be quite a journey to get there, and I began to consider what steps would be necessary to make it happen. How would I motivate them to engage in conversations with each other? To read actively? To be leaders? How would I build a classroom culture that would be well-suited to the highly interactive Socratic circle? How would I make them feel safe, comfortable, and confident? What else would it take to get them where I wanted them to be? These and other questions filled my mind as I looked at the students who would be joining me on this quest for the next several weeks. I knew that there was no turning back, and I began to wonder about all that we would learn from one another and where we would be at the conclusion of the study.

**Getting to Know my Students—The Initial Survey**

Knowing that I would soon ask students to take responsibility for their own learning through Socratic circles, I recognized the importance of giving them a feeling of ownership from the beginning. I was also curious about their prior experiences with reading and discussion, since those would likely influence how students responded to the Socratic circle strategy. For these reasons, students completed a two-part survey that asked about their experiences with reading and classroom discussion.
When I administered the survey, I encouraged students to be honest and detailed. Most students spent between ten and fifteen minutes, and, to my surprise, they all worked silently. I was sure they would begin chatting with each other as they made their way through the survey, as it had become clear that many students in the class knew each other, but they all focused on the task at hand. While they may not have been excited, the class took hold of the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions with me.

**As readers.** Successful participation in a Socratic circle requires a close, critical reading and thoughtful consideration of the text. The reading portion of the survey, which attempted to assess students’ use of critical thinking and active reading skills, produced some interesting results. First, out of twenty-nine total research participants twenty-four indicated that they either disliked reading altogether or only liked reading texts they chose. Additionally, in response to the open-ended question, “What is your step-by-step process as you read a text?” only three students mentioned specific strategies, including visualizing, predicting, and taking notes. Figure 3 shows that the great majority of students’ responses to this question indicated a lack of active reading—the number one response being, simply, “read.”

While most students gave themselves little credit for critical thinking and active reading on this part of the survey, their responses elsewhere tell a different story. Following the open-ended question, I asked students to rate how often they
engaged in a variety of active reading strategies, many of which require critical thinking. As can be seen in Table 1, many students indicated that they read actively by using some strategies either sometimes or frequently: rereading, asking questions, reflecting on personal opinions, making personal connections, making connections to the world, and reflecting on changes in thinking. Still, though, some active reading strategies were clearly not used by many students in the class: taking notes, considering the author’s purpose, analyzing textual details, considering multiple perspectives, and making connections to other works of literature.

Unsure of what to make of these conflicting results within the same survey, I conducted a participant check the following day. I presented the conflict to the class, and in speaking with them about it, I discovered that many students did not consider things like questioning and making connections part of a reading “process.” However, the general consensus in the class seemed to be that “sometimes” meant “once in a while,” which was different from my initial interpretation of the term. This meant that the results were not as conflicting as I
initially thought—most students did not actively engage with a text on a regular basis. In speaking with them about it, students indicated that, while they used those strategies “here and there,” they were not a regular practice by any means.

These results were concerning to me because I feared that, without a close reading of the text the night before, the Socratic circle discussions would fall flat. As a result, I realized I needed to show them how these strategies could help them think critically about a text and therefore enrich the discussion. I wondered if I could “force” them to consider implementing these reading strategies in advance of the first discussion in the hope that they would become regular practice.

Nevertheless, this section of the initial survey showed me that, even as seniors in high school, these students lacked a recognizable active reading process—and the
next part of the survey seemed to provide a reason for the lack of engagement in reading.

As speakers. The second part of the survey attempted to assess students’ preconceived notions about discussion in the classroom. Constructed from actual student responses, the poem in Figure 4 serves to summarize what turned out to be very traditional views and experiences.

During a class discussion about a text, the teacher...

Asks, “Did you understand what you read?”

We respond, “Yes, everything.”

Guides
Directs
Leads
Starts
Restarts
Describes
Introduces
Explains

Asks a lot of questions

We answer...or at least try to.

TALKS

AND TALKS

AND TALKS ABOUT KEY POINTS

...too much sometimes!

We sit...and listen.

Figure 4. Initial Survey—Student Views of Discussion.

These survey results showed me that students in my class had become accustomed to teacher-led, traditional discussions. Elsewhere in the survey,
twenty-four out of twenty-nine students indicated that they believed the primary goal of “discussion” was to learn the “answers” or the “meaning” of the text. Combined with the results of the reading survey, this information suggested to me that most students had learned to take on passive roles in the classroom—why read a text closely and analytically if the teacher will give the answers the next day? Why ask questions and inquire further if all that is needed are the “facts” for the test?

Most importantly, the results of the initial survey demonstrated to me that I would need to talk with students about my goals for the Socratic circles. At that point, I knew it would be necessary to discuss with them the potential value in the exploration of a topic without a focus on “right” or “wrong” answers-- and, not to mention, the notion of a discussion being led by students and not the teacher. After examining the results of the survey, I reflected in my field log about my concerns for the future. Would it be possible for students accustomed to traditional learning experiences to transition smoothly into the non-traditional format of the Socratic circle? Would they even want to take on an active role—or might they actually prefer the easier route? And, if they accepted a more active role, how successful would they be?

Establishing a Class Culture for Socratic Circles—Peer Support Groups

Having learned that many students were not accustomed to the level of leadership and collaboration involved in the Socratic circle, I structured our first
unit of study in a way that would allow for high levels of interaction. Before beginning the literature units, my seniors were to complete their college application essay as a graded writing assignment for class. In order to give students a sense of ownership and put them in a position of working collaboratively towards a common goal, I set up what I called “peer support groups.” For a full week, students progressed through stages of the writing process alongside the peers in their support group. Using various activities, students had many diverse opportunities to view each others’ work, offer feedback, and hear multiple perspectives about their ideas for the essay.

**Benefits of the unit—Getting ready for Socratic circles.** My hope was that students would get to know one another personally, as well as become accustomed to listening, responding, questioning, and sharing new ideas—all activities that would take place during a successful Socratic circle discussion. I also hoped that, as they directed the support group activities, students would make the transition into more of an active role in the classroom. Based on what I witnessed, I believed my efforts were successful for most students on both fronts. At the end of that week, there was a stronger feeling of camaraderie in the class than there had been on the first couple of days. And many students found new opportunities to take on a leadership role during class.

**Stand-out students-- Possible key participants.** Also noteworthy is how quickly students of particular interest to my research emerged during that week.
For different reasons, several students stood out as we progressed through the writing unit. Aaron, a high-functioning student with autism, appeared uncomfortable in the social setting. I utilized his initial survey and my field log notes to create a first person narrative from Aaron’s perspective (Figure 5).

Ugh. I don’t know anyone in this class. Maybe moving to CP wasn’t a good idea after all—who am I supposed to work with? Maybe I’ll just work by myself. If I stare at my paper, maybe Ms. Doklan won’t notice and let me go. I’m a good writer, and I don’t need anyone’s feedback, anyway.

...Great—here she comes. Now I’ll have to work with these two guys who I don’t even know. I would tell them what I think of their writing, but I don’t like having my opinion put down. That’s so embarrassing. It’s like I’m being shunned. It always happens in classes. I’d rather keep my ideas to myself than feel that way. I’ll just get through the period without saying much.

...Finally! The period is over. How uncomfortable. And now I’m nervous about tomorrow. Do I have to work with them again? Why can’t I just work by myself and save myself the embarrassment?

Figure 5. Aaron: A First Person Narrative.

It quickly became clear that Aaron was a student who, as he admitted, did not like working with other students in the class because it made him extremely uncomfortable. Due to the highly social and collaborative nature of the Socratic circle, I feared that he would simply refuse to participate—and feel miserable the
entire time. Additionally, I was concerned that the Socratic circles might potentially hinder his learning, with feelings of embarrassment and discomfort preventing him from focusing on his work.

Catherine, a student with an IEP for speech difficulties, emerged as another concern for me in advance of our first Socratic circle. During our writing unit, she consistently appeared hesitant to join her group, as well as hesitant to participate in the small and large group setting. Admitting on her initial survey that she felt “nervous,” “uneasy,” “tired,” “bored,” “uninterested,” “unsure,” “zoned-out,” and “distracted” during class discussions, I was concerned that she, too, would not flourish in the Socratic circle setting. Would her difficulties with speaking prevent her from engaging with her peers during the Socratic circle? And would that prove to be an impediment to her learning? (Figure 6).

I don’t understand how everyone in this group is so outspoken! I have plenty to say, but I can’t get a word in! They talk so fast-- no one ever gives me a chance. I hate that it takes me so much longer than EVERYONE to figure out what I’m going to say. I wonder how long we have to do these peer support groups… Is the period over yet?

*Figure 6. Catherine: A First Person Narrative.*

On the other end of the spectrum heading into our first discussion were Brian, Paul, and Neil. I realized very early on that these students were more academically advanced than the others. In speaking with them, I learned that
Brian had previously been placed in Honors level English, and Paul and Neil had taken other higher level courses. Constructed from Brian’s initial survey, his verbal comments during class, and my observations, Figure 7 portrays his experiences during a peer revision activity.

**Hah! Wow. This is really bad. She even spelled ‘business’ wrong! And she clearly doesn’t know what a semicolon is for. This is going to take a while.**

…it was definitely a good idea to move down to CP English this year. I knew that it would be easy — this way, I have a lot more time for my AP classes…

If this is what CP level writing looks like, I’m good to go. This essay is so easy. I don’t see why everyone is having trouble figuring out how to approach it. At least I don’t have to worry about it — my grades will be enough to get accepted.

*Figure 7. Brian: A First Person Narrative.*

For Brian, as well as Paul and Neil, I had different concerns as I looked towards beginning Socratic circles. First, would they dominate the discussion, preventing anyone else from having a say? Might their highly critical natures and obvious academic ability intimidate struggling students in the class? Would students feel comfortable asking questions or making assertions in front of them? I knew that I would need to make sure that students are aware that the Socratic circle is a discussion, not a debate, and that everyone must have a fair opportunity to speak. I tried to envision Aaron, Catherine, Brian, Paul, and Neil in a Socratic circle discussion—and I feared that neither side would benefit.
As we prepared for our first Socratic circle, a few other students stood out because of their strong personalities, including Zack, Randy, Susan, Adam, and Scott. These five students, even within the first week of school, demonstrated their senses of humor, willingness to share opinions openly, and enjoyment gained from debating others. These students consistently kept class light-hearted and entertaining, but how would their strong personalities fit into the Socratic circle discussions? Would they get the group off-task, or would they make others feel comfortable participating? Would they dominate the discussion, or use their natural leadership abilities to welcome others into the conversation?

As I prepared to introduce the study to students, I could not help but ponder how these students’ abilities and personalities would translate into the Socratic circle experience. I wanted so strongly for the circles to be a success—and for all students to enjoy them and grow from them; however, I admitted to myself at that point that my high hopes might not be realistic. Here was a class full of diverse learners, and one strategy probably was not going to suit everyone in the same way.

**Introducing the Study—Would They Buy In?**

For one of our early year team-building activities, all of the students and I brought in three objects that represented ourselves or held special importance to us in some way. While many of them had seemingly lost interest as we went around the room and shared, many heads perked up when it was my turn. I pulled
out my three objects: a paintbrush, a picture of my puppies, and the book *Teacher Researchers at Work*. I talked about buying a house and my painting projects over the summer, I spoke about my two Jack Russells, and I saved the book for last. I didn’t want to bore them with the details, but I briefly explained that I, too, was a student. I said that I was in the graduate program at Moravian working towards my Master’s degree, and that the culmination of my work there was to conduct a research study. Right there, from the glazed-over looks in their eyes, I knew I was losing them. They were a bunch of teenagers—“conducting a research study” doesn’t sound like anything very exciting. I knew I had to change the way I was explaining it. “Basically,” I said, “I get to try out something new with you guys, and all of you get to tell me what you think about it.” I went on to clarify that teachers have probably tried out new things with them before, and they have probably gotten the chance to give their opinions, and this wouldn’t seem much different to them. “But,” I explained, “Your experiences and your opinions are going to have a major influence on how the year progresses and what my classroom will be like in years to come.” I concluded by telling them that I was so excited for them to be a part of this, and that I really looked forward to working with them and learning from them.

When the students left, and the final bell of the day rang, I couldn’t help but worry that I hadn’t said enough or maybe that I said too much—or that they just didn’t care. They did not have much of a reaction at all, it seemed.
Introducing students to the Socratic circle. Before our first Socratic circle discussion, I provided students with a handout (Appendix L) to introduce them to the strategy. I asked that they read it that night, hoping that it would give them the opportunity to digest all of the new information. The following day, I highlighted some key things including the overall goals and the process. After explaining how it works, I told them a little bit about the topic of the first circle. All students were quiet, though. Were they interested? Had they even read the handout? As much as I tried to convey my excitement about the activity, it did not seem to be contagious. There were no reassuring nods, no smiles, and no questions. Students’ written reflections on the first Socratic circle, though, as well as my observations, shed light on what was running through their minds as they sat there quietly (Figure 8).

Gearing Up—The First Socratic Circle

After learning from the initial survey that students were unaccustomed to a student-centered style of discussion, I wanted the topic of the first Socratic circle to be something that would provide students with a sense of confidence. We were about to begin our Anglo-Saxon unit, throughout which a major focus would be the Anglo-Saxon heroic code as exemplified in Beowulf. To minimize intimidation and pressure, while allowing students to familiarize themselves with the structure of a Socratic circle, I selected an article offering a modern definition of heroism. My thinking was that the article would provide an effective
“The Socratic circle is a form of student-centered, in-class discussion that is focused on a particular piece of text that you have spent time reading and analyzing.”

Brian: We read a lot of the same things last year in Honors, so I should do well with this.
Adam: Awesome. I can argue with Randy.
Randy: I can play devil’s advocate!
Scott: That means I actually have to read?

“However, the nature and process of a Socratic circle differs radically from the typical, teacher-led, question-and-answer discussion that you’re used to. It is you, the student—not me, the teacher—who guides and directs the focus of the conversation. I will only intervene when absolutely necessary—you must rely on yourselves to keep the discussion moving forward.”

Mitchell: This is going to be terrible. I’m horrible at speaking in front of a bunch of people.
Ashley: Sounds intimidating. I’m not used to anything like that.
Carl: Sounds awkward.
Jackie T.: VERY awkward. And weird.
Brad: So basically there will be a lot of awkward silences?

“In a Socratic circle, you will work cooperatively with your peers to construct meaning from what you have read and will avoid focusing on a ‘correct’ interpretation of the text.”

Catherine: But how will we get ready for the midterm, then? And what if I can’t find a place to talk?
Aaron: Awesome! So I get to be creative? Maybe I can relate it to poems I write...

“Socratic dialogue is an exploration, a quest for understanding, that has no definite beginning or end. It is not about answers and solutions; it is about accepting multiple perspectives on a certain topic and reexamining your own experiences and opinions in light of those perspectives.”

Zack: Nice! No set structure.
Amanda: Sounds like an interesting way to have a discussion.
Karen: Yeah right. As if anyone is even going to talk.

Figure 8. Layered Story—Initial Impressions of the Socratic Circle.
introduction to the unit by allowing students to draw on prior knowledge and experiences. Additionally, I believed that the open-ended nature of the topic would lend itself naturally to a discussion that promoted the consideration of multiple perspectives rather than ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. For these reasons, I hoped that students would feel comfortable participating, become familiar with how a Socratic circle worked, engage in critical thinking, and ultimately, feel proud of a successful first Socratic circle.

The First Socratic Circle—Here We Go!

The scene: A Monday afternoon in Room 581. There are fifteen desks arranged in a small circle in the center of the room. Inside the circle of desks are several blankets spread out, as well as a few scattered pillows. The room is empty except for Ms. D., who sits in one of the desks facing the classroom door, nervously watching the clock as the beginning of ninth period approaches.

One student, Garrett, slowly comes through the door, pausing to look at the classroom set up.

MS. D. (nervous, but eager to get started): Hi Garrett! What are you thinking… inner or outer circle first today?

GARRETT (hesitating, looking back and forth from the desks to the floor): Outer. That way I get to watch how it works first.

(Apparently, most others agree, as the next few students take seats in the outer circle.)

MS. D. (hopeful): Who will be brave and take a seat in the inner circle?
(One student, Amanda, upon hearing this, gets up from her desk in the outer circle and moves to take a seat on one of the pillows. She and Ms. D. exchange a nod and a smile. Another student, Catherine, follows Amanda and takes a seat next to her in the inner circle.)

MS. D. (proud, surprised by Catherine’s initiative): Good for you, girls!

VANESSA (loudly, as she grabs one of the last desks in the outer circle): I don’t want to be watched!

(There is hushed conversation and nervous chatter in the room. The outer circle quickly fills up, leaving only the inner circle open for the rest of the students. As more students come in, Ms. D. watches quietly as the kids already there direct peers who are arriving to the inner circle, laughing—like it’s a punishment. As everyone settles in, the room falls silent, and many of the kids look to Ms. D.)

MS. D. (excited, appearing confident despite inner anxiety): Ok! Are we ready? (Students reply with nervous laughter, but that’s all.) Now, try to keep in mind what we talked about yesterday. This is about sharing our ideas, listening to each other and learning from each other—not right or wrong answers. And remember, we’re having a conversation—not a debate. (Passing out the outer circle feedback form) Outer circle: As you listen, use this form to note particular people who do something well. And get ready to share it. Inner circle—have your notes out so you can refer to them if you need them. (Taking a deep breath before speaking.) Ok, here is your initiating question: This writer shares his own interpretation of heroism. What do you think of his definitions and examples?

(There is a moment of silence as the students look away from Ms. D., towards each other instead. There is palpable tension.)

ZACK (loudly, breaking the silence): I think he’s wrong!

(There are laughs and sighs of relief throughout the room. Ms. D. smiles proudly, glad that someone stepped up and set the first Socratic circle in motion. Relaxing in her desk, she watches as students enter uncharted territory.)

Figure 9. Drama—Starting the First Socratic Circle.

I realized at this moment during our first Socratic circle that, while I was initially focused on observing the effects of the strategy on students’ critical
thinking skills, there were going to be many other significant aspects of students’ experiences—namely, confidence, leadership, and collaboration. I realized that, while critical thinking was certainly a goal, there were many things that needed to happen before they could get there. I considered that, for a student like Catherine, simply gaining the confidence to enter the inner circle first was an accomplishment in itself. And I thought about how, for all of the students who chose the outer circle, developing confidence and leadership skills might be a stepping stone towards the destination of critical thinking.

Gearing up for this discussion and presenting students with their first initiating question required a great deal of preparation and effort, both on my part and the part of my students. And as I watched the first dialogue develop, there were some highlights and key moments that offered great insight into the experiences of my students. I share these in Figure 10.

ZACK: I think he’s wrong!

JAKE: I agree. I felt like he thought anyone could be a hero. Like you could be your own hero. And I don’t think that’s true.

*(Jackie and Carl continue the conversation about whether or not people can be their own heroes.)*

CARL *(voice shaking, looking down at notes)*: I mean, I guess you can do something heroic in your life—that—I don’t know…

*(Although he’s making a good point, his voice loses confidence and he trails off. Ms. D.’s face shows her desire to interrupt and say, “Wait! Good point! Tell me more!” but she holds back.)*
AMANDA (after several more comments): Everyone has their own personal definition of heroism, and that’s okay.  
(This statement seems to sum it up. And there is a pause. Some students look to Ms. D., who remains patient. Soon, an unexpected participant joins in.)

CATHERINE (after a moment, starting a new train of thought): Well, I think that heroism is doing something out of the ordinary.  
(Silence! The comment is left dangling—awkward silence. Again, a few students look to Ms. D., who, again, waits.)

ZACK: Yeah, that makes sense. And the author doesn’t really make that point. He just names a bunch of, like, random examples. Some of which are just ordinary.  
(Catherine shows a quick smile before looking down to her paper once again. The conversation continues, as students explore what acts can be considered “ordinary” versus “extraordinary,” citing examples such as soldiers and firefighters. Soon, that train of thought has reached an end. Again, silence. And, again, another unexpected participant.)

AARON (after a moment, looking down, but speaking loudly): I don’t know. I think we look for heroes in the wrong places sometimes. Like in movies. Like Batman or Superman.  
(This comment immediately sparks more conversation, as students begin bringing up more examples of superheroes from film. Some students believe they are “true” heroes: others do not.)

AARON (louder, looking up, with more confidence now): I agree with that. They’re not heroes. They’re daredevils. And just being a daredevil doesn’t make you a hero because you could be doing it for the wrong reason.

(After exploring the role of motivation in heroism, the first inner circle comes to a close. Ms. D. steps in to facilitate the next step—outer circle feedback. Students cite several examples of students who they thought made good points and supported them, students who built on others’ ideas, and students who made connections to today’s world.)

ADAM: I liked how Aaron connected the issue of heroism to the movie industry. It put it into terms we could all relate to.
BRIAN: I liked how Aaron came prepared with a list of potential topics because we need that during Socratic circles.
(Aaron nods as they speak, giving only a slight confident smile. The outer circle continues to provide feedback, citing strong points made, as well as pointing out
weaknesses including non-participation by some and the few ‘awkward’ silences. Then, Ms. D. instructs students to switch places.)

MS. D. (feeling proud, confident, willing to take a slight risk): Ok, is there anyone who would like to begin the second round? Anyone with a question or comment that would make a good starting point?

VANESSA (loudly, confidently, raising her hand): Like the first inner circle pointed out, the author thinks that we can all be heroes. Do any of you think that you are a hero? Or maybe that you’ve been a hero at some point?

JOHN (quickly): Yeah, I think I have heroic qualities. Like I’ve done things even though I was scared or whatever. And I’ve helped people who needed it.
(Vanessa, Jake, Brian, and Paul continue this train of thought, citing many personal examples—and noting that their examples extend what the author shared.)

BRIAN (confidently, with an inquisitive look): Well, if we are all heroes in some way, then doesn’t that devalue heroism?
JOHN (again, quickly—with confidence): I don’t think so. It doesn’t matter how many people act heroically. Some may be more heroic than others, but what matters is that people step up.
(The conversation continues, quickly and naturally—almost with no awkward silences—as students explore Brian’s question. Randy, Neil, and Brian continue to offer critiques of the author’s views, as does Samantha. Jake connects the issue to the story “Mystery of Heroism” by Stephen Crane. Randy makes modern connections to today’s veterans and soldiers. Soon, the group has surpassed the ten-minute limit, and Ms. D. struggles to find a place to stop the conversation in order to allow time for feedback. After the feedback phase, Ms. D. informally chats with students before the bell rings to hear their immediate reactions.)

ZACK: I really like how this topic let us just say what we think.
JARED: I’m already thinking about what I need to do for the next Socratic circle—take more notes!
PAUL: I didn’t know what to expect, but it went really well.
AARON: I think heroism was a really good topic for the first Socratic circle because we all, you know, had to be heroes today.
MS. D. (smiling, surprised): What do you mean?
AARON (quietly, thoughtfully, taking his time to put it into words): Well, it took bravery and guts to sit in the inner circle and talk. So we all had to be heroes today, me especially.

(The bell rings. Students exit, and Ms. D. remains, thinking about all that had just transpired.)

Figure 10. Drama—The First Socratic Circle Continues.

Reflections on the first Socratic circle—Many surprises! As much as I had tried to look forward to the first Socratic circle discussion with an open mind, I could not help but enter it with certain predispositions and expectations: Brian, Neil, and Paul would dominate the discussion, possibly intimidating other participants. John and Jared would likely sit back and let other students do the work. Aaron and Catherine would be shy and uncomfortable, probably failing to participate at all. Everyone would participate because the topic was so “easy” and “open-ended.” These predictions proved to be incredibly inaccurate, showing me just how much my initial impressions of my students were wrong, and reminding me of the importance of giving all students a chance.

Brian, Neil, and Paul did stand out as leading participants in the discussion, but several students were not afraid to respond to—and even challenge—their ideas. John and Jared, although unengaged and seemingly “lazy” in other class activities, also stood out as participants who contributed several ideas and comments to keep the discussion moving forward. Aaron and Catherine, instead of being uncomfortable, took risks by beginning new trains of thought, presenting their positions, and supporting them. Their performances were the
most surprising to me, as I simply assumed that their prior negative experiences with discussion and their discomfort in social situations would prevent them from participating at all. Finally, although I believed that all students would participate, they didn’t. And although I wanted to focus on all of the successes of the first discussion, I could not ignore the non-participants. Melissa, Ashley, Garrett, and Adrian stood out as students who simply did not contribute to the discussion at all—not even with nods or simple words of agreement or disagreement. Their behavior indicated a lack of engagement in the activity.

The first Socratic circle left me with more questions than I had anticipated: What about the nature of the activity led some students to participate when they don’t normally engage in other class activities? What prevented otherwise outgoing, academically successful students from participating at all? Were these students mentally engaged, even though they weren’t speaking? Did my highest achieving students benefit from the discussion, or were they held back by the other students? How important was the topic in the successes of the circle—and in the weaknesses?

Goals for the next Socratic circle—Moving forward. The first Socratic circle, despite my concerns, was relatively successful. All students came prepared with notes, almost all students participated, they responded to one another, they made connections, and they asked insightful questions. Whether it was the general topic of heroism, the fact that it was the first discussion, or the timing of the
beginning of the year, students generally did well. I knew, though, that I wanted to use the Socratic circle as a vehicle to analyze the texts we read as part of the curriculum. Students had experienced the strategy and were now familiar with the expectations, as well as ways in which to make the conversation flow. For the next Socratic circle, then, I planned to shift to a more literary-based topic that would lend itself well to character analysis. After reading the beginning of *Beowulf* and analyzing the portrayal of the title hero versus the portrayal of the monster, Grendel, I gave students an excerpt from John Gardner’s *Grendel*. This excerpt presented the story of *Beowulf* from Grendel’s perspective, with the major difference being the sympathetic portrayal of the monster. My hope was that this topic would give students the opportunity to continue their conversation about heroism, consider differences in characterization, compare textual details, and evaluate the text based on their personal experiences and knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon period. I realized that this topic would be more of a challenge, and I hoped my students were up to it.

**Our Second Socratic Circle—Stepping it Up**

As students entered the room on the day of the second Socratic circle, they followed much the same pattern as the first. It seemed that students also participated in much the same way that they had the first time—and fortunately, there were many of the same successes and signs of critical thinking (Figure 11).
ASKING INSIGHTFUL QUESTIONS

Paul: Do his intentions make him any less evil?
Catherine: Why do you think Grendel just accepts his fate?
Jared: Grendel still wants friends, so why doesn’t he keep trying?
        There’s more he could do.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Amanda: His situation is just like today, when people get abused. They get abused and then become violent and angry later in life. But you can’t blame them.
Aaron: It’s like in Star Wars. There’s not a clear-cut distinction between good and evil.
Zack: But think if this happened to you. If a monster showed up at your house, you’d be afraid, too!
Vanessa: This is just like every modern day problem. It all comes down to miscommunication. And if people would just communicate, it’d be better.

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS AND MAKING JUDGMENTS

Paul: So in Grendel, it’s not black and white—good and evil. There’s more of a gray area that really isn’t in Beowulf.

COMPARING AND CONTRASTING

Neil: In Beowulf, he’s just pure evil. That’s it. But in Grendel, he’s more complex than that. The Danes forced him into being a monster because he tried to talk to them and they attacked him.
Susan: The Danes are drunk and weak in Beowulf. In Grendel, they’re vicious and fully aware.

CONSIDERING HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Brian: Gardner just makes too much of his character. An element of epics is that you have a simple conflict between good and evil. Beowulf is supposed to be good. Grendel is supposed to be evil.
Adam: Grendel falls to his knees before the men attack him, which makes him a dishonorable hero. An Anglo-Saxon hero would accept the inevitability of death and be ready for violence.

Figure 11. Strengths of Socratic Circle #2.
While I was pleased with the successes and the signs of critical thinking, the complexity of the topic as compared to the first Socratic circle did result in some challenges for students. First, they simply did not seem to enjoy the topic as much. During the first discussion, there were smiles and laughs. Their comments had more passion and excitement behind them. During this discussion, though, that same energy simply wasn’t present. Yes, they were engaging in analytical discussion, but they were not experiencing the same level of enjoyment from it. Additionally, the complexity of the topic itself did lead to some weaknesses in the nature of students’ contributions to the discussion (Figure 12).

| STATING PERSONAL OPINION, BUT OFFERING NO REASONS |
| Amanda: I feel sorry for him. |

| SHARING INACCURATE ANALYSIS |
| Paul: In Grendel, he’s glad [the Danes] are dead. He wants to slaughter them. |

| STATING CONCLUSION, BUT OFFERING NO TEXTUAL SUPPORT |
| Catherine: Grendel is misunderstood. |
| Jared: Grendel feels betrayed. |
| Mitchell: Grendel has a personality. |

| DANGLING COMMENTS—NO RESPONSES |
| Kaeleigh: It’s kind of like revenge. |

Figure 12. Weaknesses of Socratic Circle #2.

One of the most concerning issues that presented itself was the sharing of inaccurate analysis. As the facilitator, I had to decide if I should wait for another
student to correct him, jump into the conversation to help, or wait until later to clarify. In this case, thankfully, the conversation continued without being negatively affected by that single comment. In order to keep students in the leadership position and not disrupt the conversation, I waited until the next day to review that point for students, which quickly and easily resolved the issue. Also, in general, the “flow” of the conversation was not as natural as the first Socratic circle. Students seemed to struggle as they tried to balance their personal reactions, the text of *Beowulf*, the text of *Grendel*, and the ideas being presented. There was a lot to work with in this Socratic circle, and so it required more organization and focus on the part of the students. Despite the students’ and my recognition of the increased difficulty and complexity of the circle, almost all students noted in their reflections that the class either maintained their level of performance from the first Socratic circle or improved upon it. Additionally, students’ reflections indicated that the topic of the Socratic circle forced them to *think* in many different ways. At this point, I arrived at an important realization about determining the “success” or lack of success of a Socratic circle discussion. Although students did not seem to necessarily enjoy this topic as much as the first, and although the conversation was not as natural as the first, students identified many more benefits in terms of their thinking and understanding—which is one of the ultimate goals (Figure 13).
The Third Socratic Circle—“The Best Laid Plans…”

For the third Socratic circle, my goal was to select a topic that would combine the level of enjoyment from the first and the level of textual analysis from the second. Both aspects of their experience were important to me because I

<table>
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<tr>
<th>IT MADE ME THINK</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>It made me THINK...</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>...about the two sides to every story.</td>
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<tr>
<td>...about Grendel’s emotions and motives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>...more open-mindedly.</td>
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<tr>
<th>IT MADE ME WONDER...</th>
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<tr>
<td>...about the implications of judging a person by appearance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>...about the nature of good and evil.</td>
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<tr>
<td>...about new ideas I never would have understood by myself!</td>
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<tr>
<th>IT MADE ME QUESTION...</th>
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<tr>
<td>...is pure evil possible?</td>
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<tr>
<td>...what would I have done in the same situation?</td>
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<tr>
<td>...how does one define a true villain and a true hero?</td>
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<tr>
<th>IT MADE ME CONSIDER...</th>
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<tr>
<td>...outside connections.</td>
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<tr>
<td>...other people’s opinions.</td>
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<td>...the author’s purpose in writing the story.</td>
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<th>IT MADE ME WORK...</th>
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<tr>
<td>...to back up my ideas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>...to look back at details in the text.</td>
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<tr>
<td>...to understand other people’s ideas.</td>
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<th>IT MADE ME ANALYZE...</th>
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<tr>
<td>...the conventions of an epic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...the differences between the two Grendels.</td>
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<tr>
<td>...characters as symbols.</td>
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*Figure 13. “It Made Me Think”—Socratic Circle #2*
wanted students to remain motivated while making meaningful learning gains. At that point in the year, we had just finished reading *Beowulf*. In order to review the epic, as well as push students to extend their understanding of characterization and historical context, I decided to make use of the latest film version of the text. I selected several key scenes from the film that paralleled the sections of the epic we had read as a class. I then planned to ask students not only to compare and contrast the film with the text, but also to consider the implications of the differences. This stage is where I hoped the high levels of critical thinking would come into play. Why would the director make the changes? How do the changes affect our views of the characters? Do the changes still exemplify the Anglo-Saxon heroic code? And considering everything, what are the reasons for the characterization and plot in the original epic? I knew from past years, when I had led a discussion to answer these questions, students had liked the activity. They enjoyed feeling like “experts” on the text, and they excitedly critiqued the film based on their prior knowledge. Additionally, I remembered being proud of their ability to consider these questions and think critically about the differences. My hope for this Socratic circle was that the students themselves would be able to facilitate the conversation while still reaping the benefits I had witnessed in past years.

**Showing the film—Getting ready for Socratic circle #3.** The day before the Socratic circle seemed promising. I showed several film clips, asking students
to record their observations on a handout I provided. At the end of the period, I was pleased with the reactions from students. They seemed engaged, as almost all students had written down many notes. Further, many students had very vocal reactions to the film—there was laughter and anger as students recognized the many inaccuracies of the film. When the clips were over, before the bell rang, many students continued discussing it. Brian, Paul, and Neil were especially vocal about their disappointment with the film and the fear of a sequel. They, as well as other students, agreed that there would be a lot to talk about in the Socratic circle. When the day ended, I was excited that the topic had an impact on many students and that they seemed ready to share their thoughts in the Socratic circle.

**Our third Socratic circle—A step in the wrong direction.** As students entered the room on the day of the Socratic circle discussion, I explained that the first inner circle would focus on Grendel, while the second would focus on Grendel’s mother and the dragon. This distinction seemed to be the determining factor in whether students chose the inner or outer circle first—most opted for the outer, excited to critique the director’s casting decisions. The initiating question for both inner circles was the same: How do the similarities and differences between the text and the film affect our views of the characters? As both discussions developed, though, I quickly realized that my plans were not working out as expected. Besides the obvious comparisons, there was little evidence of deep, critical thinking, as evidenced by the excerpt in Figure 14.
As this Socratic circle discussion came to a close, I had mixed feelings.

First, they clearly enjoyed talking about this topic. Students had many, many

(Students are smiling and laughing throughout. The mood is lighthearted and casual. The conversation moves quickly, as students move from one idea to the next.)

BRIAN (eager): Grendel is so disturbing in the movie.

PAUL (equally eager, excited): Yeah, he looks like rotting corpse.

AMANDA (quickly): And what was with the ear thing?

RANDY: Yeah, I didn’t like that.

MITCHELL (laughing): Yeah, that was so stupid!

SUSAN: …and how he goes through the blue fire.

JACKIE: And why is he naked all the time?

SUSAN (with urgency): And does he shrink in the film, or what?

BRIAN: Yeah.

AARON: And he uses the pulley system.

MITCHELL (smiling): Did you guys ever see Disaster Movie? Where they make fun of it?

Figure 14. “The Best Laid Plans...”—Socratic Circle #3.

ideas to share—and they were laughing and smiling as they talked. It seemed like typical, casual conversation among peers. While it was nice to see them enjoying
the activity, I had my concerns. With the exception of a few comments at most, students’ contributions to the discussion did not demonstrate critical thinking. They were able to make several comparisons between the text and the film, but the analysis did not go deeper than that. Before I even had time to reflect, the outer circle feedback portion at the end of the period helped to explain why we, as a class, seemed to have taken a step back. Using students’ comments from the outer circle feedback form and reflection sheets, I constructed Figure 15 to represent student reactions to this discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Strengths</strong></th>
<th><strong>Weaknesses</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Randy</strong>: “More people have become involved.”</td>
<td><strong>Ashley</strong>: “Too many side conversations.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Brad</strong>: “I have spoken up—not so nervous!”</td>
<td><strong>Brian</strong>: “Off topic...It's great to connect, but nothing more.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Neil</strong>: “It went better, mostly because of how casual the conversation felt.”</td>
<td><strong>Randy</strong>: “…the talking point was too broad to effectively discuss.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Malcolm</strong>: “I talked and I actually didn’t feel weird about it!”</td>
<td><strong>Zack</strong>: “Off topic and erratic.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amanda</strong>: “Comic and funny.”</td>
<td><strong>Scott</strong>: “I learned about the movie.”</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Vanessa**: “Too much to talk about and not enough time.”

*(Figure 15. Socratic Circle #3—From the Students’ Perspectives)*

Suddenly it dawned on me—the problem was the topic. If I wanted to have students delve deeply into the topic and look at larger issues of audience and
characterization, then I needed to create more focus. There were simply so many differences that students spent most of their time summarizing all of them—there was not enough time to take it further into deeper levels of analysis. At this point, I felt disappointed in myself that I had failed to consider this issue. I began to feel as if I had wasted my students’ time and I began to fear for our future Socratic circles—would we continue to regress? How would I turn things around so we would be heading in the right direction?

On the positive side, though, I recognized that—despite its weaknesses—this Socratic circle discussion achieved some important goals. First, participation levels increased, and the flow of the conversation was steadier. Many students described feeling more comfortable and confident, as they were able to talk about a topic they enjoyed. Additionally, students showed signs of taking ownership of the activity. They willingly provided honest feedback—both positive and negative—and were able to set meaningful goals for themselves for future Socratic circles.

**The problem of participation.** While participation levels generally increased, and many students were beginning to feel more comfortable with their peers and more confident speaking in front of them, there were still some negative cases. Since the first Socratic circle, there had been a few students who either did not participate at all or rarely contributed comments. I noticed that in this circle, those quiet students seemed even more reserved than they had been in the past.
Using the thoughts shared in the reflections of Melissa, Ashley, Scott, Adrian, Mark, and Garrett, I constructed the poem in Figure 16 to represent the views of the non-participants.

### Finding a Place

The discussion begins.
Did I read it correctly?
How can I respond to that?
I have no idea what’s going on.
Onto to the next idea...
This is impossible.
Always the same people.
When can I cut in?
I don’t want to interrupt them.
Ah—here's a place!
…and there it goes.
I give up.

*Figure 16. “Finding a Place:” The Problem of Participation.*

By examining the responses of the non-participants, I learned that there were a few main issues preventing students from participating. The first was a lack of preparation. Scott and Ashley admitted that they had not watched the movie closely, had not come prepared with adequate notes, and did not read all of *Beowulf* as they were required to. While this was frustrating to me, I realized that this was one issue I could not completely control. However, it would be a reason
that students would lack the confidence to share their ideas. The second reason that emerged was based on Garrett’s comment that he had difficulty finding a place to “cut in,” revealing to me that he felt like somewhat of an outsider during the discussion. While it had been easy for me to revel in the feeling of developing such a strong sense of camaraderie among students in my class, I realized that there were exceptions—students who lacked a feeling of belonging in our class.

The third and most common reason, shared by Melissa, Adrian, and Mitchell, was the speed of the conversation and the lack of structure. In their reflections they explained that there were moments that they wanted to participate, but because of the lack of teacher-provided structure, students often moved the conversation forward before they had a chance. It became clear at this moment that these students simply needed more time than others to process their thoughts before speaking aloud. But how could I gain their participation without taking away from the open-ended, student-centered nature of the Socratic circle? How could I modify the process in a way that would allow them to participate without stepping out of my role?

After examining student reflections from the third Socratic circle, and engaging in my own reflection about where we were and where we needed to go, I realized that Catherine’s reflection stood out as being quite insightful. Her thoughts on this Socratic circle meshed together the issues of topic and participation, and I knew that hers was one I wanted to remember when planning
for the fourth Socratic circle. I constructed Catherine’s first person narrative from the comments she shared in her reflection (Figure 17).

\begin{boxedquote}
This Socratic circle was difficult. It was hard to find a place to join in. I will never be one of the dominant speakers of the circle, but this one was just harder than the last two times. I never really say a lot. I don’t always have much to say. It’s really just because everyone else says whatever I’m thinking before I have a chance. And people just weren’t as respectful this time. There were people talking while others were talking. There wasn’t a specific topic, and we talked about some unnecessary things. Normally, the Socratic circles make me think deeper about the text, but my circle didn’t get too deep this time. I remember some of the things said being kind of pointless. Nothing made me understand better. It also didn’t make me think too much. I was mainly thinking about what I was going to say. I also spent a lot of time thinking about when I was going to join in. I also thought about how the circle could be talking about more important aspects of the story, and I was disappointed that we couldn’t talk about some of the less pointless topics that I thought of. Hopefully the next one will be better.
\end{boxedquote}

\textit{Figure 17. Catherine: A First Person Narrative Part II}

\textbf{Three Down, Three to Go-- Planning for Socratic Circle #4}

At this point in the study, I had learned that the most important issue while planning was the topic. I wanted to combine the motivation and interest from Socratic circles one and three with the opportunity for literary analysis from Socratic circle two. Further, I wanted a topic that was narrow enough so that students would be able to delve deeper. Since we were moving on to the Medieval Period in British literature, I selected excerpts from “Le Morte d’ Arthur,” the story of the death of King Arthur. My plan was to focus the conversation on the
topic of heroism, since it is a running theme throughout the first two units of study. More importantly, I remembered that it had sparked conversation in the first Socratic circle and would hopefully encourage students to make connections to personal experiences and Beowulf.

My second goal was to remedy the problem of non-participation. For this part of the plan, I presented the issue to the class as a whole and asked for their suggestions. I hoped that taking this small amount of control here would lead to more participation while still maintaining students’ sense of ownership. Students had many ideas. Neil suggested having each person say one comment right at the beginning; however, others argued that it would negatively affect the flow of the conversation. Amanda suggested having a “talking stick” which students would hold while speaking; however, others pointed out that the non-participants simply would not take it. After sharing a few other ideas, Brian suggested that leaders in the circle casually ask for the opinions of the non-participants in a non-threatening way. To add, Vanessa suggested that we split the circles by gender, since the girls might feel more comfortable talking with the girls—and same for the boys. The class was in agreement, and after passing out the text of “Le Morte d’ Arthur,” I reflected on the sense of ownership on the part of the students. Although I was not sure that either plan would work, I wanted to give them the opportunity to set goals and follow through with them. Overall, I looked forward to the next day
with hopeful anticipation that this plan would further strengthen students’ performances in the Socratic circle.

**Socratic Circle #4-- “Le Morte d’ Arthur”**

As students entered the room on the day of the fourth Socratic circle, I noticed a sense of excitement and energy in the students. While there had previously been the uncertainty of placement in the inner or outer circle, students entered the room knowing that they would be in the group of girls or boys. As can be expected, there were many playful competitive comments—the boys insisted they would “do better,” and the girls predicted the same for their group. While competition certainly is not a goal of the Socratic circle, the nature of it here simply served to lighten the mood and motivate students. There was smiling and laughter, and, since the class met during ninth period, I welcomed it and hoped it would continue throughout the discussion. I constructed a dramatization of excerpts from this Socratic circle discussion based on pieces of students’ comments from my field notes (Figure 18).

At the end of our fourth Socratic circle, I reflected on students’ performances and recognized that they had engaged in high levels of critical thinking as they made connections to personal experiences and other texts, utilized background knowledge, asked insightful questions, made and supported
Ms. D. (hopeful, energetic): In what ways is Arthur heroic? Not heroic? How do you view his character?

[The conversation begins with a quick review of the plot of the story. Several students contribute. Soon, they get into the issue offered up for discussion.]

Adam: Okay, so is he a hero or no? I think yes because he fought with his men.

Carl: I agree. [after citing a quote from the text] Look at just the way that he goes and kills the guy.

Brian: Right, he must be strong and brave, I guess, but think about why he’s fighting.

Zack: It started with the omen from the dream, but really it came down to the adder. Superstitions.

Aaron: Yeah. It’s like his paranoia led to the battle.

Paul: True. It’s kind of a stupid reason. Shouldn’t heroes be smart? Adrian, what do you think?

Adrian: Well, I agree with you. I feel like heroes should be intelligent and motivated for the right reasons. They shouldn’t stupidly depend on superstitions to make decisions.

Adam: Okay, so maybe he’s not a hero by today’s standards. But what about during the Medieval period?

[The conversation continues as students contrast today’s standards for heroism with those of the past.]

Brian: Garrett, who do you agree with?

Garrett: Well, he [Arthur] is still a hero because he doesn’t give up even though he might die.

Carl: So just because he is prepared to die, that makes him a hero?

Randy: I don’t think so. That’s part of his job. It’s his responsibility. In this time period, that would have been the expectation.
But we all agreed that Beowulf was a hero. And being ready for death was one of the things that made him heroic.

It was part of the Anglo-Saxon heroic code.

Yeah, and Arthur didn’t have the physical advantages that Beowulf did.

True. It’s like Arthur is more human than Beowulf.

assertions, and examined multiple perspectives on the topic. Further, students had followed through with the plan to engage typical non-participants in the conversation—and it was successful! Melissa was absent on this day from school, but every single student participated on some level. Obviously, every student comment did not demonstrate critical thinking; some students participated simply by clarifying plot or reiterating an idea stated by another participant. However, I was pleased that all students were verbally engaged in the actual conversation. Finally, the conversation flowed naturally, and students did not engage in any off-topic conversation.

Feedback by the outer circle was highly positive and specific. Students had many examples of strong performances to share, and the goals they set demonstrate their improvement overall. Instead of “everyone needs to participate,” it was “hopefully everyone will participate without being called on.”
Instead of “many good ideas were shared,” it was “we should try to elaborate on what someone has said before sharing another idea.” Goals such as these showed that students had grown from the first Socratic circle in that they were pushing themselves and setting higher expectations.

The comments shared by students in their reflections after this Socratic circle demonstrated their increased sense of ownership, as well as the ways in which the topic promoted critical thinking (Figure 19).

**Ownership & critical thinking—What was missing?** As I reflected on the fourth Socratic circle, something continued to bother me. Students had done exactly what I wanted them to do—they followed through with their goals, they participated on some level, they engaged in critical thinking, they responded to one another and built on ideas presented, and they reported all positive things in their reflections. What more could I ask for? However, I could not ignore this nagging feeling that there was still something missing. Since the reflections were not giving me the answer, I decided to ask my students about it and hear what they thought.

When I presented my concern to them, they were initially quiet. Maybe it had all been my imagination? However, it was not long before students began to voice their agreement. They commented that, overall, it was a very successful circle—much better than the last. Everyone felt good about the levels of participation, and they said that the conversation was strong. Samantha, an
PREVIOUS NON-PARTICIPANTS:
Mark: “I thought the Socratic circle went really well. It is a good story to discuss so that made it interesting to talk about. Many people had different opinions on things as well which made it interesting to listen to as well.”

Scott: “I improved because I shared my opinion this time and got involved.”

Garrett: “I am happy that I participated.”

Adrian: “I was surprised at how successful it was compared to past circles. I was also partaking in the discussion.”

SOME EMERGING LEADERS:
Susan: “I think it’s awesome that everyone spoke in the circle, and it was great that everyone kind of fed off each others’ comments.”

Zack: “It seems like this Socratic circle was more involved and more comfortable this time while still being effective and useful.”

Vanessa: “I really enjoyed talking to just girls because I feel that guys think so much differently than we do.”

EXAMPLES OF CRITICAL THINKERS:
Amanda: “It made me cross reference all of the stories I’ve read about Arthur. I was able to use what I know.”

Carl: “It advanced my understanding in the way that it opened my eyes to different ways that Arthur was a hero, and the ways that he was possibly not.”

Zack: “It clarified many points I was confused on. It was helpful to get multiple perspectives.”

Brian: “I think I posed several good questions about characterization and context.”

Vanessa: “I had to think back to the Anglo-Saxon heroism and try to relate it to King Arthur.”

Adam: “I thought way more about the details in the story.”

Figure 19. Socratic Circle #4: Student Reflections.
average student who had not previously captured much of my attention, said, “It went well. It just wasn’t… exciting.” Her comment received many nods of agreement, and after speaking further with students, I began to formulate an answer to my question about what had been missing.

The answer was simple: many students simply felt “tired” of talking about heroism. Starting with our first Socratic circle, and continuing through our reading of Beowulf and the two Socratic circles about it, we had continuously returned to the concept. My initial thinking had been that students would be interested to talk about it because they had been in the past. However, I realized at this point that I needed to keep the topics fresh. Yes, they had taken ownership and were therefore motivated to hold an effective conversation; however, the interest level had decreased. Further, students said that they liked that heroism was an “abstract” topic, but it was not one that was easy for everyone to relate to. Again, my conversation with the students only further reinforced the importance of the topic for a successful Socratic circle discussion.

Listening to the students—Planning for the final two. Knowing that the available time for the study was nearing its end, I immediately began planning for the final two Socratic circles. Looking ahead to our Canterbury Tales unit, I considered the possible topics and settled on two tales: “The Pardoner’s Tale” and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale.” Based on what I had learned from my observations, student reflections, my conversations with students, and my own reflective
thinking, these two stories seemed to meet the criteria to lead to a successful
discussion.

First, the stories were complex enough to allow for deep critical thinking
in the areas of characterization, historical context, author’s (in this case,
narrator’s) purpose, textual connections, and personal connections. However, I
would be able to narrow down the topic enough with my initiating question to
focus on a central issue of interest to students. They had said they enjoyed
discussing the abstract topics, and at the heart of these tales are issues like greed,
women’s roles, and love. Additionally, I believed that these were issues that all
students would be able to relate to on some level. I hoped, then, that these topics
would capture their interest and promote an engaging dialogue. Finally, I hoped
that our initial study of the characters in the Prologue would give them the
background knowledge they needed to feel confident participating.

**Socratic Circles #5 and #6—Getting it Right**

Students’ performances in the final two Socratic circles allowed me to
believe with confidence that we had made great progress. While there were
obstacles and stumbling blocks along the way, both my students and I used them
as learning experiences. For me, I reflected on everything I had learned about my
students and the Socratic circles themselves to select topics that would promote
effective discussion, with ample opportunities for critical thinking. By this point,
my students had found ways to remedy issues like awkward silences, erratic conversation, and non-participation. We had reached a point where students could sustain a thought-provoking conversation that would allow them to direct their own learning—while remaining motivated and engaged. Based on student commentary during the discussions, outer circle feedback, and student reflections, I constructed a pastiche to represent the level of student performance at the conclusion of the study (Figure 20).

**A perfect Socratic circle? Not quite.** While perfection would have been nice, both my students and I recognized that we hadn’t quite reached that level of performance. The outer circle feedback forms and student reflections continued, even for the final two discussions, to mention specific goals for the future. Students recognized that participation levels still were not completely balanced, as some inevitably talked more than others. They noted that, although significantly less frequent, there was still the occasional off-topic comment or unsupported opinion. And finally, they saw that some students came to the discussion less prepared than others. However, I was proud of my students for reaching a point where they could clearly identify these weaknesses and effectively set goals to improve them. And more importantly, I was proud of all they had accomplished in the areas of critical thinking, collaboration, and leadership. Students planned to continue working on the weaknesses, but more significantly, to continue engaging in meaningful and productive conversation.
Figure 20. Socratic Circles #5 and #6: A Pastiche.

ASKING QUESTIONS:
“Do you think that everyone is inherently greedy?” --Brian

CONSIDERING AUTHOR’S PURPOSE:
“So the Pardoner wants them to feel guilty so they’ll be more likely to give him money!” --Garrett

SUPPORTING OPINIONS:
“I don’t think the Queen stood up for him. I think that what she made the knight do is pretty bad punishment. Imagine doing what he did for a year and a day, not knowing if you were going to die. It would be torture!” --Amanda

ANALYZING TEXTUAL DETAILS:
“Well, look at the description of the Old Man. He’s bandaged, old, hunched over. He must be Death.” --Neil

SYNTHESIZING INFORMATION:
“So clearly the tale makes a strong connection between greed and death.” --Vanessa

MAKING PERSONAL CONNECTIONS:
“I think it shows how clever the Queen is. She’s smart. Girls are good at playing games like that…” --Randy

REFLECTING ON CHANGES IN THINKING:
“When I first read it, I thought that it was ridiculous that the knight gets a happy ending. But now I see how it serves the Wife of Bath’s purpose!” --Aaron

MAKING LITERARY CONNECTIONS:
“It’s like in ‘The Pardoner’s Tale.’ There was an ulterior motive to telling the tale. It wasn’t just for entertainment.” --Scott
Students had truly taken control of their own learning processes, and that sense of ownership stood out in many students’ reflections from Socratic circle #6 (Figure 21).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Has the class improved since the last Socratic circle?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The class has started to open up to each other.” --Susan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Yes, there were many references to the text to back up opinions.” --Neil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Both circles improved so much in…taking note of others’ opinions.” --Aaron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Yes, everyone talks now and we introduce deeper thoughts, ideas, and questions.” --Karen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Yes, we’re asking better questions and making sure everyone speaks up.” --Brad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Yes, I think people wanted to end off in a big bang and finish well.” --Jackie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“No, our last circle was so good that it was hard to improve on.” --Adam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Yes…especially since the first one!” --Vanessa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 21. Improvement in Socratic Circle #6.

**Socratic Circles are Like…-- Speaking in Metaphors**

After the final Socratic circle, I asked students to complete a final reflection, part of which required them to create an original metaphor to summarize their view of the Socratic circle strategy. I hoped that these simple comparisons would offer additional insight into students’ overall experiences. Most were positive, and reinforced strengths I had already recognized; some, though, were negative and pointed to specific challenges related to the strategy (Figure 22).
In these metaphors, many students positively described the growth they experienced, as well as their enjoyment of the social aspect of the activity. On the negative side emerged challenges I had already recognized throughout the study. First, students’ metaphors reminded me that there were many factors, such as the topic, that needed to combine in order for a Socratic circle to be successful. Additionally, students’ metaphors reinforced my realization that some students
find it more difficult than others to join the conversation, leading to an imbalance of participation levels. At this point in the study, I knew that I wanted to have the opportunity to learn more from some key participants. I hoped that, in talking openly with them about their experiences, students would be able to elaborate on and clarify things they had shared in their reflections.

**Key Participants’ Views—From Their Perspectives**

Using data from the initial survey, individual reflections, informal interviews, the final reflection, and, mainly, the focus group interviews, I constructed first person narratives to tell the stories of four different types of students throughout the study. Aaron had caught my attention from the beginning of the study because he had appeared to be quite uncomfortable in social situations, and, combined with his weak academic performance, I had initial concerns about his performance in the Socratic circles. Once we started, though, I was pleasantly surprised to see the Socratic circles support his learning (Figure 23).

Like Aaron, Catherine was another hesitant student in the beginning of the year. She was quiet and reserved but quickly showed impressive signs of leadership and confidence during the first Socratic circle. Unlike Aaron, though, she never quite got over her feelings of discomfort and uneasiness (Figure 24).
I think the Socratic circles are one of the best things I ever did. Normally, I feel so stupid during classes and I feel like no one wants to listen to me. And then I get really nervous to say anything. But I want to prove myself as a good student, so I know I need to participate. The cool thing about Socratic circles is that I get to make connections. Those are my favorite. I know so much about movies and comics, and so the heroism-related topics were the best. And since Socratic circles aren’t about right or wrong, I can say what I think without being afraid of being judged or criticized—like in my other classes. I didn’t really have any friends in the beginning of the year, but I think that the Socratic circles were like hanging out with friends, and I really liked that. And the thing I’m most proud of is that I started the last circle—I just wish I could have done more of that. I really hope we keep doing these!

Figure 23. Aaron: A First Person Narrative Part II.

I don’t feel as if I changed at all. I pretty much remained the same through all of the Socratic circles. My performance was overall okay. I feel as if I could do better. I kept hoping that I would participate more, but I never did. It’s like I wrote before, it’s just really hard for me to join in. I think it takes me longer to figure out what I’m going to say, and everyone just talks so fast. It’s not as easy for me as it is for others. And then I get upset at myself for not participating more. Overall, though, I think the pros do outweigh the cons. Even though they were kind of stressful, they really helped me think about the material and so I think they help me learn more than other class activities. Sometimes, it’s hard to read and understand something, so it really helps listening to what everyone else says. And I liked the Canterbury Tales ones the best because the topics made it easier to participate—and I’m most proud of when I got positive feedback from the outer circle. I do really want to keep doing these because I think they help me. I just need to get better at speaking up.

Figure 24. Catherine: A First Person Narrative Part III.
Quite the opposite of Catherine, Brian was a student who was strong in all aspects from start to finish: intelligent, academic, and confident. I wondered, though, since he was such a strong student, if he felt he benefitted from the Socratic circle. His interview revealed that he did, and it made me realize that Socratic circles have something to offer students of all levels (Figure 25).

Socratic circles are fun and educational—a sadly rare combination. The discussion in the inner circle is exciting and interesting, and a much more welcoming environment than a normal discussion. During the circle, there is a significant amount of incentive and desire to say something interesting and thought-provoking. And the other useful thing is that they really help increase confidence in pitching an idea to a group of people. I want to go into management, so it was good practice. In most CP level classes I have, we just regurgitate information. But this was more like my Honors classes because I had to actually think. The toughest thing for me was holding back from taking over the discussion. I obviously had more background knowledge since I studied Brit lit last year, so I had to refrain from looking arrogant (of course, it did feel good when I could explain something that was confusing everyone!). What I realized, though, is that I actually had things I could learn from everyone else. They brought up details and ideas that I never would have considered, and that was something I didn’t expect. I think me—and everyone else—will benefit if we keep doing these.

Figure 25. Brian: A First Person Narrative Part II.

Unlike Brian, Aaron, or Catherine, Melissa was a student who stood out because of her unwillingness to speak voluntarily during the Socratic circle discussions. Her reflections and comments were always somewhat negative, and she was one student who showed all the signs of strongly disliking the Socratic circles. In interviewing her, I wanted to gain a clearer picture of how she felt and why—and whether or not these feelings hindered her learning (Figure 26).
Obviously, I don’t like talking alone in front of a group of people, so overall I didn’t participate as much as others may have. I very strongly disliked how I was basically made to talk—like when people asked what I thought. It made me even more uncomfortable. I’m just honestly a really shy person, and I feel like I physically can’t talk in situations like this. I’ve always been that way. However, I was able to truly listen to people and understand what their opinions were—and then I could come to my own conclusions, even if I didn’t say them. And I feel like I learn more because I analyze the reading more. I don’t want to sit there and be confused, so I read a lot more closely than I normally would. It’s not that I hated the Socratic circles. I just hated the pressure to talk. I would be totally okay with doing more of them, as long as people would leave me alone and let me just listen. I still learn a lot, and it’s way more entertaining than regular class.

Figure 26. Melissa: A First Person Narrative

Finally, Vanessa was a student who emerged as a leader in the class. Often beginning discussions, she consistently seemed prepared, maintained a positive attitude, and made many valuable contributions to the Socratic circle discussions. Academically, though, Vanessa’s performance in the class was average. Her experiences served to show how participation in Socratic circles can impact “middle-of-the-road” students (Figure 27).

In the End & Looking Ahead

At the conclusion of the study, as I thought about all we gone through as a class, I reflected on our successes as well as our stumbling blocks. I had accepted that, by no means, had my students achieved the ideal from start to finish. There
In the beginning, I talked a lot and didn’t really listen. I also didn’t really care and thought what I thought was right. Now I listen to them and consider new ideas. This makes me more open-minded because I think out of the box. I also got better at expressing my ideas clearly and not rambling. It gets us ready for the real-world because it boosts our capability of working together. The best thing is that anything we talked about stuck in my mind a lot easier. It’s so much better than other English classes I had where we just went over questions. The other thing I noticed is that I read differently. For the first Socratic circle, I read no differently but now—without even meaning to—I start asking questions and looking at the text differently. I also enjoy knowing the background of the author so I can make connections. And now I always think about connections to the real world, too. Overall, I really enjoyed them. I love to talk and let people know what I think, so this was a good opportunity to do that. It helped me learn the material more thoroughly and gave me a better understanding. I’d like to keep doing them because I finally found a way that I enjoy going over literature—and it forces me to do the reading and work!

Figure 27. Vanessa: A First Person Narrative.

were some major challenges overcome, as well as some minor issues that still needed to be resolved. However, I recognized that, despite the challenges, students had engaged in a meaningful learning experience that exposed them to the process of sophisticated analysis, the elements of effective collaboration, the joys and stresses of taking ownership, and satisfaction of setting goals and achieving them. Although my initial focus was on critical thinking, I came to the important realization that, for some students, the greatest successes lay in other areas. Students of all personalities and academic abilities took something away from their participation in the Socratic circles. For Aaron, it was success in the social aspect of the activity—feeling accepted, comfortable, and confident. For
Catherine, it was learning about complex ideas from listening to her peers, as well as working towards being a more effective communicator. For Brian, it was building confidence as a leader but learning when to step down and work as a team player. For Melissa, it was being exposed to multiple perspectives and learning to read more closely. And for Vanessa, it was being held accountable and having the opportunity to say what she thought. At the very end of the study, I realized that I had learned more about myself as a teacher and my students than I ever had in the past. I reveled in the success of creating a classroom where my students took charge of their own learning and collaborated with their peers and me in a combined effort to reach their goals. And, most importantly, I looked forward to finding out how Socratic circles could continue to enrich the learning experiences of my students in the future.
DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

Both during and after the study, I engaged in various forms of data analysis in an effort to make meaning of my students’ experiences. As MacLean and Mohr (1999) explain, a teacher researcher cannot “collect data for very long without stopping to reflect, analyze, and reset [his or her] sights” (p.57). It was this process of ongoing data analysis that allowed me to plan the next steps in my study effectively, make sense of my students’ experiences, identify patterns and themes, and draw meaningful conclusions about student learning in my classroom.

Reflective Memos

Participant Observations

Bogdan and Biklen (2002) suggest that an important step in the analysis of qualitative data is taking the time to reflect frequently in writing about events that have transpired. Taking their advice, I wrote reflective memos of varying lengths almost every day using brief field notes I had recorded during class. On Socratic circle discussion days, these memos were quite extensive as I tried to capture and analyze one of the most important data sources. On other days, the memos were shorter, as I simply recorded and analyzed any events, comments, or thoughts I had during that day’s class period. I chose to write these memos in detailed narrative form in order to recreate things I had observed, as well as draw
preliminary conclusions about students’ engagement, learning, and critical thinking.

Student Work, Surveys, and Interviews

I also wrote several reflective memos after examining student work, including various class assignments, outer circle feedback forms, and student reflections. Although I retained copies of all of these pieces, writing short memos about them allowed me to record, in a concise manner, my thoughts and preliminary conclusions at the time about what students had completed. Finally, after students completed the initial survey, the final survey, and the final reflection, I wrote reflective memos that summarized my thoughts about what the data showed about students’ experiences and learning.

Mid-Study Reflection

At the midway point in my study, I completed a methodological memo that allowed me to reflect on the past, present, and future state of the study. This memo forced me to take a step back from my study, which was particularly effective in refocusing my purpose and goals. In addition to reflecting on what I had observed and learned up until that point, as Bogdan and Biklen (2002) suggest, I determined what data still needed to be collected and how I should move forward with the study.
Post-Study Analysis

While this reflective memo analysis occurred on a daily basis throughout the study, these pieces of writing were critical in my post-study analysis as well. At the end of the study, I was able to revisit my thoughts and conclusions and, as a result, identify emergent themes and patterns. Viewing these detailed reflective memos an additional time often revealed insights and conclusions I had not previously considered.

Analytic Memos

In addition to writing reflective memos, I also wrote analytic memos that allowed me to make sense of my data in a way that related to the work of educational philosophers. Dewey (2002) helped me to view the results of my study through progressive and traditional lenses as I considered what factors contributed to the most meaningful learning experiences for my students. Freire’s (2003) examination of the role of conversation in learning allowed me to view my students’ experiences through a dialogic lens. Finally, the work of Vygotsky (1978) helped me understand my students’ experiences through the lenses of social constructivism and the zone of proximal development. By considering my study in light of the work of these philosophers, I was able to gain great insight into the successes and failures that occurred throughout the intervention.
Discourse Analysis

Since the data in the study primarily came from what students said and wrote, one of the most revealing forms of data analysis in this study was an examination of figurative language. By considering the significance of the metaphorical language used by both my students and me, I was able to uncover many insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the Socratic circle strategy, the motivation and engagement levels of students, and the views and opinions of students. Additionally, as part of the final reflection, students created a metaphor to describe the overall experience of the Socratic circle. Although seemingly simple, these metaphors conveyed a great deal about many aspects of students’ experiences with the Socratic circle.

Coding and Binning

Towards the end of the study, I began rereading all pieces of my field log in order to code and bin the data (Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul, 1997). As I reread the log, there were many recurring ideas or issues, which were given “codes,” short words or phrases to represent them. Through the process of coding, I recognized several significant patterns and relationships emerging. To understand these relationships further, I grouped related codes together in “bins” (Figure 28). These bins helped me to begin answering my research question by
leading naturally into theme statements. These theme statements represented my findings based on the particular codes in each bin.

Figure 28. Codes and Bins.
FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of my study was to explore the effects of Socratic circles on the learning experiences of my twelfth grade, college preparatory students. My initial focus was to study the effects specifically on critical thinking skills, which was an area that I knew was of utmost importance when preparing my seniors for the college classroom and the future. When I had initially envisioned the conclusion of my study, I had that single goal in mind: critical thinking. I looked forward to studying their use of questions, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, and seeing them engage in this type of sophisticated thinking throughout the study was always a joy. However, as the study progressed, I quickly realized that there were many other significant things happening as a result of the implementation of Socratic circles in my classroom. Yes, the Socratic circle, when facilitated effectively, is a strategy that offers ample opportunities for critical thinking. But in addition to that, effective Socratic circles also promote active reading, speaking skills, and listening skills. They provide students with a sense of ownership and motivation, while holding them accountable to one another. Of course, I also learned throughout the study what challenges could arise when implementing Socratic circles, but, more importantly, my students and I discovered together how those challenges could be overcome. The following statements represent the
themes about student learning and achievement that emerged throughout the
course of the study.

Critical Thinking

*Socratic circles encourage the development of critical thinking skills by*
*providing ample opportunities for (1) the analysis of literature and textual
details, (2) questioning of ideas and views, (3) connection to outside sources*
*and experiences, (4) comparison and contrast with outside sources and*
*experiences, (5) exploration of multiple perspectives, (6) evaluation of ideas and*
*interpretations with support, (7) synthesis of multiple ideas, and (8)*
*consideration of the author’s purpose.*

First, as my initial focus in the study, the significant impact of Socratic
circles on students’ critical thinking skills quickly became clear. Arnold, Hart, and
Campbell (2002) and Polite and Adams (1997) found in their studies that Socratic
circles, when implemented on a consistent basis, developed students’ cognitive
abilities. Further, as Miri, David, and Uri (2007) found in their study, creating a
classroom in which students can openly explore ideas in a way that is relevant and
meaningful to them naturally leads to the development of critical thinking skills.
The results of my study lend further support to these researchers’ conclusions. In
their Socratic circle reflections, students frequently commented that they enjoyed
the opportunity to express their opinions without being under the control of the
teacher. Aaron, for example, expressed in his interview that he felt it was “just the
right amount of control” from the teacher to allow him to feel comfortable and confident participating. Many students, Aaron included, also found confidence in the Socratic circle because they were able to make connections to their outside knowledge and personal experiences. Consistently on the outer circle feedback forms were several comments from students who cited examples of these connections as being the “best” contributions during the discussion. As a result of the confidence and motivation that results from being in this type of student-centered environment, students had open opportunities to explore ideas and issues, without the fear of being “wrong.” It was that ability to explore without fear that students cited as a main reason why they felt they learned more during Socratic circle discussions that in other class activities.

By comparing the numbers of students who marked “frequently” or “sometimes” on the initial and final surveys, students indicated that they engaged in critical thinking more often when preparing for or participating in a Socratic circle than a traditional discussion (Table 2).

For all types of critical thinking, students believed that they engaged in them more frequently for Socratic circles. Brian, for example, shared in his interview that Socratic circles put pressure on students to formulate interesting and thought-provoking ideas. As he and other students indicated on their reflections, preparation for the Socratic circle as opposed to a traditional discussion is more “intense” because students know they will need to keep the
conversation moving forward. On that same note, Vanessa frequently shared that she was always thinking, before and during, of questions she could ask and insightful comments she could share.

Two of the largest increases appear in the categories of textual details and multiple perspectives. Students frequently explained in individual reflections and the final reflection that the nature of the Socratic circle promoted these two types of critical thinking. First, students explained that preparing for and participating in a Socratic circle required a more detailed analysis of textual details. One of the main reasons students cited to explain this fact is that they needed to be prepared to support their assertions with the text. In the beginning Socratic circles, students
frequently pointed out on the feedback forms that supporting opinions with
textual details was an area of weakness. As the circles continued, then, many
students tried to make a conscious effort to provide support when sharing an
opinion or making an assertion. Secondly, one of the most prominent comments
on individual reflections and final reflections related to the consideration of
multiple perspectives. The nature of the Socratic circle is such that students have
the opportunity to hear how many different students feel about the same topic.
Students frequently commented that they were able to think about the issues from
different angles and points of view, which led to a deeper understanding of the
material.

Freire’s (2003) belief in the role of dialogue in the development of critical
thinking lends support to this conclusion; he believed that “only dialogue, which
requires critical thinking, is also capable of critical thinking” (p. 92). As students
participated in the conversations during Socratic circles, they needed to constantly
be engaged in thought—and by listening and responding, participation in dialogue
naturally led to more thinking. Catherine’s comments in her reflections frequently
related to this idea, as she explained that, “it’s hard to follow everyone if you
don’t think [because] we can go really deep into meaning.” Simply putting
students in an environment where they could converse openly created the
opportunity for students to engage in many forms of critical thinking.
Active Reading

*Exhibiting a student-centered nature and promoting individual accountability, the Socratic circle encourages active reading strategies including analysis, note-taking, re-reading, and questioning as students engage in deliberate, detail-oriented reading in preparation for the discussion.*

Just as critical thinking took place during the Socratic circle discussions, students indicated that they needed to engage in a deeper thought process when preparing for the discussion. When I noticed that several students began commenting informally throughout the study about needing to read more closely, I began to pay more attention to this issue. After the first Socratic circle Jared, for instance, openly stated that he realized the importance of taking notes. Similarly, the outer circle feedback forms frequently gave credit to those students who came adequately prepared to the discussion. Students began to realize the importance of preparation, and their initial and final survey results demonstrated this change (Table 3).

The most dramatic shift occurred in the area of taking notes; on the initial survey, only two students indicated that they “sometimes” took notes on reading. On the final survey, though, all students indicated that they “always” or “sometimes” took notes on the text. Of course, students’ annotated texts were required to be able to participate in the discussion, which is likely a main reason for the dramatic increase. However, in our focus group interviews, many students
commented on the importance of coming prepared with written ideas to share in the discussion, just in case the discussion slowed down and a new idea was needed. Their responses did not cite the “requirement” as the main reason for completing the notes.

On students’ final reflections, one topic they had to address was whether or not they approached the reading differently for a Socratic circle. Twenty-six of twenty-nine students indicated that they did, in fact, read the text more closely in preparation for a Socratic circle. The three students who said they approached the text in the same way explained that they always read closely, and so the Socratic circle was no different. The others, though, cited similar reasons for engaging in
more active reading. First, they described that, in a traditional class discussion, it was easy to sit passively and allow everyone else to discuss the topic. In that type of environment there was no need for extensive preparation or a close reading. However, in a Socratic circle, they explained, they needed to be prepared to state ideas, support ideas, and respond to others’ ideas—all of which require a thorough knowledge of the text. Students clearly felt that the issue of being accountable to peers and the teacher led to a closer, slower, detail-oriented reading of the text.

Student Centered Learning

(a) The student-centered nature of the Socratic circle provides students with a sense of ownership by creating a standard of mutual accountability, giving them the right to take a leadership position, presenting them with opportunities for collaboration and relationship-building, and allowing them to learn from each other as they clarify misunderstandings and discuss the material in a personally meaningful and therefore memorable way.

One of the most prominent themes that emerged throughout the study related to the sense of ownership that students developed. Freire (2003) believed that in a liberating form of education, “the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which we all grow” (p. 80). This description
perfectly describes the classroom dynamic that developed during our Socratic circle discussions. What amazed me most at the beginning of the study was how much I did, in fact, learn from my students. As much as I prepared, read, and thought, students brought up important issues and questions that I had never considered. I quickly realized how limiting it would have been had I led the discussions of the texts with my “expertise.” The Socratic circles truly did remind me how much I can learn from my students.

Additionally, by putting them in a position where they could teach each other and me, students quickly developed a sense of ownership. Their feelings of ownership came through most strongly in their outer circle feedback forms and reflections, two places where they were able to cite strengths and weaknesses of the discussion. As we progressed through the Socratic circles, students could have potentially brushed off these assignments and completed them just for the sake of getting them finished. However, each time, most students in the class offered legitimate, detailed feedback and set meaningful goals. As various obstacles were overcome, the nature of the goals reflected their increased standards for themselves.

The issue of accountability is relevant here, too. Many students indicated in our conversations and their final reflections that they quickly realized that it was up to them to conduct the Socratic circle successfully. From their perspective, if it failed, it was because of the actions they did or did not take.
For that reason, they took the activity more seriously than they would if it was a teacher-led activity. On a related note, most students frequently commented throughout the study that they enjoyed being in a position of control because they had the ability to discuss what they wanted in a way that made sense to them. Most students truly took hold of that leadership role and made the most of the opportunity to direct their own learning.

Students’ sense of ownership also became apparent in the roles various students took on during the Socratic circle discussions. Dewey (1997) reminds teachers that “there is no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process” (p. 67). As students became accustomed to the strategy, they began holding discussions that served the group’s needs. For example, when I presented the initiating question for “Le Morte d’Arthur,” Zack stepped up as a leader and asked the group to hold off on the question until the plot was clarified. He, as well as other students, had a few comprehension issues that needed to be cleared up, and they made sure that the circle served that purpose. Dewey (1997) would see that, here, there was a gap between what I wanted the students to do and what they were capable of doing at the moment. Since they were in the Socratic circle, student-centered setting, though, they were able to close that gap as a team for everyone’s benefit. As the discussion
continued, the group came across a few questions about the rest of the story not included in the excerpt. The group had come to realize that Amanda had that background knowledge, and so they asked her to step in to provide it. Making decisions such as these showed me that the class was taking charge of their own learning as they realized the circle was “theirs” and they could ensure that it would satisfy their needs.

(b) *Socratic circles allow students to become active participants in their own learning process by providing frequent opportunities to engage in metacognitive reflection, content-based reflection, and personal reflection.*

Another major benefit of the Socratic circle strategy that emerged was the students’ opportunity to engage in meaningful reflection. Polite and Adams (1996) found in their study on Socratic circles that the most prominent area of growth for students was in metacognition. In the study, students were required to complete short reflections after each Socratic circle, as well as a final reflection. The individual reflections also specifically asked students to reflect on their progress, the progress of the group, and any noteworthy changes in thinking as a result of the circle. Since these were required, it is not clear whether or not students would have engaged in this type of reflection on their own. However, the quality of their reflections—and the goals they set for themselves and the group—speak to the value of this aspect of the Socratic circle experience. By forcing
students to consider their strengths and weaknesses, students took on an active role in their own learning process. For example, Paul realized early on that he was not very strong in clearly stating and supporting his opinions. In future circles, he was able to better prepare and organize his thoughts so that he was a stronger participant. Also, the group as a whole continuously set goals for themselves as a result of our reflective conversations after each circle.

Evidence of metacognitive thinking was present in students’ individual reflections after each circle, as well as during students’ conversations. There were many occasions in which a student would share an idea, others would respond, some would disagree, and then that first student would admit to seeing the issue in a new way. Or, if it did not happen verbally, the student would write about the change in thinking in his or her reflection. These moments were particularly rewarding because students were actively engaged in their own learning process. Additionally, these moments suggested that the Socratic circles prompted students to consider and reconsider their views, allowing the learning to continue beyond the discussion in the classroom.

Student Motivation

*Socratic circles increase students’ motivation by engaging them in the learning process, holding them accountable, providing opportunities to express personal opinions, allowing them to discuss topics of interest, encouraging them to share*
connections to personal experiences and prior knowledge, creating a sense of ownership, and permitting them to collaborate with peers in an open and comfortable environment.

The student-centered environment of the Socratic circle led to feelings of ownership and a sense of accountability for students. As a result, high levels of motivation were evident in students during Socratic circle discussions. By comparing the results from the initial and final surveys, the dramatic contrast between student feelings during traditional discussion versus Socratic circles becomes clear (Tables 4 and 5).

The graphs demonstrate that many students admitted to feeling bored, tired, and unengaged during traditional class discussions. Their initial surveys explain that most students feel as if the teacher talks the most, while the students simply listen. As a result, they are not mentally engaged in the activity. However, there is a drastic change when one compares these results to their feelings during Socratic circle discussions. Very few students admitted to feeling bored during Socratic circles, and no students said they felt tired. As I learned throughout the study, students felt that they needed to be engaged because of the accountability issue, but they also wanted to be engaged because they were able to talk about aspects of the topic that interested them. As Dewey (1997) explains, “experience
Table 4

Feelings During Discussion Part I

![Bar chart showing feelings during traditional discussion vs. Socratic circles.

Table 5

Feelings During Discussion Part II

![Bar chart showing feelings during traditional discussion vs. Socratic circles.]
does not occur in a vacuum…[so educators] should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile” (p.40). The student-centered nature of the Socratic circle offered an opportunity for students to incorporate all of their experiences outside the classroom into their learning. Many students indicated that they liked being able to share these personal experiences and background knowledge, and they felt it led to a deeper understanding of the material and more enjoyable learning experience. Since students were leading the discussion, they were able to direct the conversation in a way that matched their interests and experience, and that proved to be a major motivating factor.

Additionally, students account for their high motivation levels by explaining that they enjoyed being able to collaborate with their peers. According to Dewey (1997), “all human experience is ultimately social,” and a quality educative experience involves social interaction (p. 38). The purely interactive nature of the Socratic circle motivated students because they were able to talk and respond to peers, rather than the teacher. Throughout the study, data showed that there were many aspects of the Socratic circle strategy that led to higher levels of motivation for students.
Speaking and Listening

_Socratic circles promote the development of students’ speaking and listening skills as they collaborate with their peers in an effort to keep the conversation fluid and focused, respond to each others’ ideas and questions, and develop confidence and comfort in the social setting._

As the study progressed, another emergent theme related to the development of students’ speaking and listening skills. For most students, a student-centered discussion was an activity that was completely new. Their initial survey responses indicated that they were accustomed to traditional recitations in which their simple job was to answer questions posed by the teacher. For that reason, one of the main areas we worked on as a class was becoming more effective communicators in the Socratic circle. The first area in which students improved was in keeping the conversation flowing and focused. In the beginning Socratic circles, students often commented about the “awkward silences” that interrupted the flow of the conversation. However, as students gained more practice communicating with each other openly, that issue simply resolved itself. There was nothing in particular that we did to avoid the silences; it seemed as if students simply became more comfortable and were able to engage in a fluid, casual conversation with their peers. Relating to the issue of “flow,” the second area in which students improved was in responding to peers. In the beginning circles, there were more instances of students presenting ideas that were never
fully explored. It sometimes seemed as if the group “jumped” from one idea to the next, without really listening to and following through with each thought. After the first circle, students set a goal to build on one another’s ideas, and they were able to improve significantly by the sixth discussion.

In speaking with students and reading their reflections, it became apparent that one of the main reasons for improved speaking and listening skills was the issues of confidence and comfort. Many students explained that, in the beginning, they were less sure of themselves, which impacted their ability to speak clearly and listen closely. They were more focused on the procedure itself than the actual content of the conversation. After the first circle, though, most students explain that they gained the confidence and comfort they needed. (See Figures 4 and 5) Very few students, in their final surveys, said that they felt nervous or uneasy during Socratic circles. Clearly, when Socratic circles are implemented periodically, students have many opportunities to become more effective communicators by developing speaking and listening skills.

Obstacles and Challenges

*When facilitating Socratic circles in the classroom, obstacles and challenges come about when motivating non-readers, selecting topics with appropriate levels of both interest and complexity, encouraging non-participants and*
hesitant participants to take an active role, and creating balanced participation levels.

Despite all they have to offer students, the experiences of some study participants suggested that Socratic circles do create challenges for teachers and students alike. First, although almost all students indicated that they read more closely when preparing for a Socratic circle, the completion of the reading assignments proved to be a hindrance for some students. Students were required to bring their annotated texts to class in order to be eligible to participate in the discussion, and there were a few isolated incidents of students, Scott and Ashley, who did not fulfill this requirement. As a result, they completed an alternate assignment and could not participate in the discussion. As the teacher, trying to motivate them to complete the preparatory work was difficult; it was only because they did not want to complete a separate writing assignment that they began to keep up with the reading. For some students, I learned, the peer accountability is simply not enough to motivate them to read and prepare in advance.

Another challenge I encountered was related to the topics of the Socratic circle discussions. Determining what aspects combined to make for the most successful Socratic circles became the driving force behind my planning decisions throughout the study. Each circle topic, especially in the beginning, taught me something new about how to create the most meaningful learning experience for students. Something I kept in mind throughout this learning process was Dewey’s
belief that “the quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences” (p.27). Generally, I wanted students to react positively to and enjoy the Socratic circle discussions; I knew that these positive feelings would contribute to higher levels of motivation and interest. However, I also knew that a truly educative experience would promote learning and growth. Throughout the study, my challenge became trying to select topics that would meet both of Dewey’s criteria, and I did not always succeed. Through these obstacles, though, I learned that the most effective Socratic circle topics were focused, high-interest, relevant, and challenging.

Finally, Socratic circles also present a challenge in the area of participation. Throughout the study, there were students who did not participate nearly as much as others—and there were a few who never participated voluntarily. While the vast majority of students clearly indicated in the reflections that they enjoyed talking in the circles, some students never quite found their confidence to emerge as leaders. As the facilitator of the circle, I obviously wanted to see all students willing and ready to participate openly. However, as a teacher, I realized that the ideal is impossible to achieve. In speaking with the more reserved students in the class, I found that they—like the frequent vocal participants—still feel that they benefit from the discussions. While I was glad to hear that they feel that they still learn through listening, I could not help but feel
that the circles would get only richer with more students’ perspectives. The challenges I encountered throughout the study, although difficult to overcome, were the moments that taught me the most about my students’ learning and my teaching.
NEXT STEPS

Although the study has ended, my passion for engaging students in the learning process through Socratic circles has not. Fortunately, I still have my study participants in class for the rest of the year, and so we have had many opportunities to continue working with the strategy. When we encounter topics that are especially meaningful to students in some way, topics that are open to multiple perspectives, or topics that students simply have a lot to say about, we use the Socratic circle as a way to deepen our collective understanding and further engage with the subject matter. While we have not perfected every aspect of this type of discussion, we continue to set goals and work towards reaching them. I can say with confidence that this strategy has continued to enrich our classroom by actively involving students with the content and their learning process.

As we move forward, and as I think about upcoming classes, there are a few things I’ve learned from the study that cause me to approach Socratic circles differently. First, I remember the importance of selecting topics that will promote effective discussion, and I reserve Socratic circles for those topics only. Secondly, the study taught me the importance of team-building activities before beginning Socratic circles. As I move forward, I plan to incorporate even more of these opportunities so that more students will feel confident and comfortable participating with peers. Finally, I plan to provide opportunities for students to practice critical thinking skills when reading a text before the implementation of
Socratic circles. I think that short mini-lessons on topics like asking open-ended questions, making connections, and considering context will help some students be better able to make strong contributions to the discussions.

In the future, I also plan to implement Socratic circles with other classes, including my eleventh grade college preparatory level students, as well as my twelfth grade general preparatory level students. I’m interested to see how younger students respond to the strategy, and I hope that it will get them ready even earlier for sophisticated literary analysis to come in their senior year of high school and their college career. Also, I have yet to try Socratic circles with general preparatory level students, but after conducting the study, I strongly believe that the strategy has something to offer students of all ability levels. While I realize that these students might require more front-loading and scaffolding, I do believe that they would be up to the challenge. I look forward to raising my standards for these students, and I’m excited to see what impact the strategy will have on their learning.

Conducting this study has truly caused me to reflect on my role as teacher and the capabilities of my students. I realize that, as a teacher, I must avoid thinking for my students; instead, I must give them the skills they need to think for themselves. As I’ve seen, when this happens, their learning becomes significantly more meaningful and I can rest assured that I have done my part in
creating critical and sophisticated readers, speakers, and thinkers who are ready to take on the challenges that lie ahead in the college classroom and the future.
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doi:10.1080/02619760802420784.


Appendix A: HSIRB Approval Letter

MORAVIAN COLLEGE

May 10, 2010

Bridget M. Doklan
1608 Rader Avenue
Bethlehem, PA 18015

Dear Bridget M. Doklan:

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board has accepted your proposal: “Effect of Socratic Circles on Students' Critical Thinking Skills.” Given the materials submitted, your proposal received an expedited review. A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSIRB Chair.

Please note that if you intend on venturing into other topics than the ones indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSIRB about what those topics will be.

Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this letter, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation.

This letter has been sent to you through U.S. Mail and e-mail. Please do not hesitate to contact me by telephone (610-861-1379) or through e-mail (browerg@moravian.edu) should you have any questions about the committee’s requests.

[Signature]

George D. Brower
Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board
Moravian College
610-861-1379
Appendix B: Principal Consent Form

April 12, 2010

Dear [Name],

I am currently taking courses toward a Master’s Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. These courses allow me to learn about the most effective teaching strategies that I can implement in my classroom in an effort to provide meaningful learning experiences for my students. Next year will be the final step in my coursework at Moravian, which means that I am currently planning my Master’s thesis.

During the Fall 2010 semester, I am first required to conduct a systematic study of my teaching practice. My research will examine the use of Socratic circles in conjunction with various readings during the Anglo-Saxon and Medieval periods of British literature. Socratic circles are a form of student-centered discussion that encourages active reading and critical thinking skills. In working with this strategy, then, the focus of my research will be the effects on students’ critical thinking skills. Overall, I hope to prepare my students for higher education by allowing them to develop into sophisticated readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers.

I will be gathering information to support my study through surveys, student interviews, reflective journals, and observation. By carefully analyzing these data, I will be able to reflect on and improve my teaching practices. All students will have the opportunity to provide valuable feedback through these methods; however, I will only use information collected from students who have permission to participate in the study in any written reports of my research. All of the students’ names will be kept confidential as well as the names of teachers, other staff, and the school. Only my name, the names of my sponsoring professors, and Moravian College will appear in this study. No names will be included on work samples or in any reports of my study. Minor details of a students’ writing may be altered to ensure confidentiality. Finally, all research materials will be kept in a secure location in my home.

All students in my classroom will receive the same instruction and assignments as part of the English curriculum. Participation as a subject in the study, however, is entirely voluntary and will not affect the student’s grade in any way. Any student may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by writing me a letter, sending me an e-mail, or leaving me a voice-mail. The parent or guardian may also withdraw the student at any time. If the student withdraws, I agree that I will not use any data pertaining to him or her in any written reports of my research.

If you have any questions or concerns about my research at any time, please contact me at school by phone or by e-mail at [Redacted]. The head of the Master of Education Program at Moravian is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted at Moravian College by phone at [Redacted] or by e-mail at [Redacted].

If you have no questions at this time, please sign and return the bottom portion of this letter. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Ms. Bridget M. Doklan

I attest that I am the principal of the teacher conducting this research study, that I have read and understand this consent form, and that I have received a copy. Bridget Doklan has my permission to conduct this study.

Principal’s Signature: [Redacted]  Date: 4/2/10
Appendix C: Parent Consent Form

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian(s),

I am currently taking courses toward a Master’s Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. These courses allow me to learn about the most effective teaching strategies that I can implement in my classroom in an effort to provide meaningful learning experiences for my students. This year will be the final step in my coursework at Moravian, which means that I am currently planning my Master’s thesis study.

During the Fall 2010 semester, I am first required to conduct a systematic study of my teaching practice. My research will examine the use of Socratic circles in conjunction with various readings during the Anglo-Saxon and Medieval periods of British literature. Socratic circles are a form of student-centered discussion that encourages active reading and critical thinking skills. In working with this strategy, then, the focus of my research will be the effects on students’ critical thinking skills. Overall, I hope to prepare my students for higher education by allowing them to develop into sophisticated readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers.

I will be gathering information to support my study through surveys, student interviews, reflective journals, and observation. By carefully analyzing these data, I will be able to reflect on and improve my teaching practices. All students will have the opportunity to provide valuable feedback through these methods; however, I will only use information collected from students who have permission to participate in the study in any written reports of my research. All of the students’ names will be kept confidential as well as the names of teachers, other staff, and the school. Only my name, the names of my sponsoring professors, and Moravian College will appear in this study. No names will be included on work samples or in any reports of my study. Minor details of a students’ writing may be altered to ensure confidentiality. Finally, all research materials will be kept in a secure location in my home.

All students in my classroom will receive the same instruction and assignments as part of the English curriculum. Participation as a subject in the study, however, is entirely voluntary and will not affect the student’s grade in any way. Any student may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by writing me a letter, sending me an e-mail, or leaving me a voicemail. As the parent or guardian, you may also withdraw the student at any time. If the student withdraws, I agree that I will not use any data pertaining to him or her in any written reports of my research.

If you have any questions or concerns about my research at any time, please contact me by phone at [redacted] or by e-mail at [redacted]. The head of the Master of Education Program at Moravian is Dr. Joseph Shost. He can be contacted at Moravian College by phone at [redacted] or by e-mail at [redacted].

Please indicate below if you approve of your child being a participant in my research study and sign and return the bottom portion of this letter. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Ms. Bridget M. Doklan

I understand that Ms. Doklan will be observing and collecting data as part of her research on Socratic circles in her classroom, and my child has permission to be a participant in the study.

My child does not have permission to be a participant in the study.

Student’s Name:________________________________________________________

Parent/Guardian signature: _____________________________________________ Date__________
Appendix D: Initial Survey

Name ___________________________ Period ______ Date ____________

Survey: Reading and Discussion
Directions: Respond to the following questions based on your personal experiences and opinions. Your honesty and openness are highly valued. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers, and your responses will not be used as a basis for evaluation—they will only be used to allow me to better help you. 😊

PART I: READING
What are your personal opinions and feelings about reading?

What is your step-by-step process as you read a text?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By circling the appropriate number, indicate how often you engage in the following activities while reading individually:</th>
<th>(Frequently)</th>
<th>(Sometimes)</th>
<th>(Rarely)</th>
<th>(Never)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Clarify what you’ve read by rereading</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Record your thoughts by taking notes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Ask yourself questions</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Evaluate the author’s purpose, audience, and/or context</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Reflect on your personal opinions about the material</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Analyze specific details from the text, including the author’s word choice or use of literary devices</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Consider multiple perspectives or ideas about the material</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Make connections between the text and your personal experiences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Make connections between the text and the outside world (history, current events, culture, etc.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Make connections between the text and other works of literature you’ve studied.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K. Reflect on how your ideas or thinking about the topic have progressed while reading</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Summarize central issues or problems within the material</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D (cont.): Initial Survey

PART II: DISCUSSION
During a class discussion about a text...
...the teacher...

...the student...

...the purpose is...

...I...

During a class discussion about a text, how do you feel? Circle all that apply. On the blank lines, add any adjectives that come to mind but are not listed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confident</th>
<th>Comfortable</th>
<th>Nervous</th>
<th>Uneasy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Energized</td>
<td>Motivated</td>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>Bored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>Uninterested</td>
<td>Unengaged</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Complete the following chart based on your past experiences with class discussions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Discussions about a Text</th>
<th>PROS/ STRENGTHS</th>
<th>CONS/ WEAKNESSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Frequently)</td>
<td>(Sometimes)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By circling the appropriate number, indicate how often you engage in the following activities during a class discussion about a text:

M. Participate by sharing new ideas or thoughts

N. Participate by asking questions

O. Participate by responding to comments made by your peers

P. Truly listen to others’ comments

Q. Use others’ ideas to build on your understanding

R. Reference the text for clarification
Appendix E: Outer Circle Feedback Form

Outer Circle Feedback Form

Choose two specific people who did something well during this Socratic circle. Identify their names, and describe what they did—be specific (try to quote them!)

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Next, identify one area in need of improvement for the group as a whole. Then, describe one way we can work to improve it—and set it as a goal!

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Appendix F: Socratic Circle Reflection Sheet

Name ______________________ Period ______ Date __________
Socratic Circle # ____________ Topic ______________________

Socratic Circle Reflection

PART I
Directions: Please reflect openly and honestly about your experience in this Socratic circle. Be as specific and detailed as possible in your responses. WRITE IN COMPLETE SENTENCES!

1. What is your general reaction to your experience in this Socratic circle?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. Has the class as a whole improved since the last Socratic circle? If so, how? If not, how not?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3. Have you personally improved since the last Socratic circle? If so, how? If not, why not?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

4. In what ways did this Socratic circle advance your understanding of the material? If you don’t feel it helped, then in what ways did it hinder your understanding?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

5. In what ways did this Socratic circle force you to think? Identify three ways & be specific!
   (a) ____________________________________________
   (b) ____________________________________________
   (c) ____________________________________________


Appendix G: Focus Group Interview Questions

Interview Questions

When you consider your participation in Socratic circles, what comes to your mind?

How would you describe the Socratic circle experience to someone who has never done it before?

How did you feel while participating?

What are your opinions about and views on this form of discussion?

Do you prefer this type of discussion or a discussion led by the teacher? Why?

What was your favorite thing about our Socratic circles?

What was your least favorite thing about our Socratic circles?

How would you rate your preparation for Socratic circles? Why? What did you do to prepare?

How would you rate your contributions to the conversation of the inner circle? Why?

Was this discussion beneficial to you or others in the class? Why or why not?

Did the discussions help your understanding in any way? Explain.

What did you learn as a result of participating in the discussions?

Have you improved throughout the Socratic circles? How? Why?

Did the discussions hinder your understanding in any way? Explain.

What was the most troubling thing you observed throughout our Socratic circles?

Which Socratic circle discussion did you like best? Least? Why?

What goals do you have for your next Socratic circle performance?
Appendix H: Final Reflection Handout

Name ____________________________ Period __________ Date __________

**Socratic Circle Experience: Final Reflection**

**Directions:** Please respond to each of the following questions in an open and honest manner. I truly value your feedback and want to learn about your feelings and experiences throughout this process. The more detailed you are, the better—so please explain your responses using details and examples. It might be helpful for you to go back to your reflection sheets and study guides to refresh your memory. These are the six Socratic circles in which you’ve participated, for your reference:

1. Looking at the above list, select one Socratic circle for each of the following topics. Under your choice, give a brief explanation as to why you picked it.

   a. Your FAVORITE: ____________________________

   b. Your LEAST FAVORITE: ____________________________

   c. The MOST HELPFUL: ____________________________

   d. The LEAST HELPFUL: ____________________________

   e. The MOST THOUGHT-PROVOKING: ____________________________

   f. The LEAST THOUGHT-PROVOKING: ____________________________

   g. The EASIEST: ____________________________

   h. The MOST DIFFICULT: ____________________________
2. Overall, what are the advantages and disadvantages of using Socratic circle discussions in class? Do the pros outweigh the cons? Or vice versa?

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

3. Overall, in what ways does a Socratic circle make you THINK? Consider what you do before, during, and after the Socratic circle itself.

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

4. Which of the following do you feel the Socratic circle prompts you to do MORE OFTEN than other class activities? Put a STAR next to the ones you select. [select all that apply.]

   A. Clarify what you’ve read by rereading parts of the text
   B. Record thoughts by taking notes or referring to notes
   C. Ask questions to further the discussion
   D. Evaluate the author’s purpose, audience, and/or context
   E. Reflect on your personal opinions about the material
   F. Analyze specific details from the text, including the author’s word choice or literary devices
   G. Consider everyone’s opinions and perspectives about the material
   H. Make connections between the text and your personal experiences
   I. Make connections between the text and the outside world (history, current events, culture)
   J. Make connections between the text and other works of literature you’ve studied.
   K. Reflect on how your ideas or thinking about the topic change based on the discussion
   L. Summarize central issues or problems within the material
   M. Participate by sharing new ideas or thoughts
   N. Participate by asking other group members to clarify their ideas
   O. Participate by responding to comments made by your peers
   P. Truly listen to others’ comments
   Q. Use others’ ideas to build on your understanding
   R. Reference specific details in the text for clarification
Appendix H (cont.): Final Reflection Handout

5. Overall, how would you describe your performance throughout the course of the six Socratic circles? (Consider these topics: Did you improve? How or how not? Did your confidence level change? What were your successes? Weaknesses?)

6. In comparison to simply going over the material in a traditional way, do you feel like you learn MORE or LESS or THE SAME AMOUNT by participating in a Socratic circle? Explain.

7. In preparing for a Socratic circle, how do you approach the reading? Is it any different from how you approach other reading assignments? Explain.
Appendix H (cont.): Final Reflection Handout

8. In what ways might the skills practiced/used during a Socratic circle prepare you for college? The “real-world”? A job? Or, if you feel it won’t, explain.


9. Create a simile! Remember, a simile is a comparison between two UNLIKE things. Complete the sentence to create your simile (it must be original!):

Socratic circles are like...

Explain your simile:


10. Please use the space below to tell me anything else about your experiences in our Socratic circles. Just write something! 😊


Thank you for taking the time to share your opinions!
Appendix I: Final Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Final Survey: Socratic Circles**

Directions: Respond to the following questions based on your personal experiences and opinions. Your honesty and openness are highly valued. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers, and your responses will not be used as a basis for evaluation—they will only be used to allow me to better help you. ☀

**PART I: READING**

Have your experiences with and/or feelings about reading changed since your participation in Socratic circles? Why or why not?

What is your step-by-step process as you read a text in preparation for a Socratic circle discussion?

By circling the appropriate number, indicate how often you engage in the following activities before or during a Socratic circle:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Clarify what you've read by rereading</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Record your thoughts by taking notes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Ask questions of yourself or others</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Evaluate the author's purpose, audience, and/or context</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Reflect on your personal opinions about the material</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Analyze specific details from the text, including the author's word choice or use of literary devices</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Consider multiple perspectives or ideas about the material</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Make connections between the text and your personal experiences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Make connections between the text and the outside world (history, current events, culture, etc.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Make connections between the text and other works of literature you've studied</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K. Reflect on how your ideas or thinking about the topic have progressed</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Summarize central issues or problems within the material</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix I (cont.): Final Survey

PART II: DISCUSSION

During a Socratic circle...
...what are the roles of teacher and student? Is this more or less beneficial than in a traditional class discussion? Why?

...what is the purpose or end goal? How successful have our Socratic circles been in achieving that goal? Why?

...what role do you typically play? Have you grown throughout your experiences with Socratic circles? Why or why not?

During a Socratic circle, how do you feel? Circle all that apply. On the blank lines, add any adjectives that come to mind but are not listed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confident</th>
<th>Comfortable</th>
<th>Nervous</th>
<th>Uneasy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Energized</td>
<td>Motivated</td>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>Bored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>Uninterested</td>
<td>Unengaged</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Complete the following chart based on your experiences with Socratic circles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socratic Circles</th>
<th>PROS/ STRENGTHS</th>
<th>CONS/ WEAKNESSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By circling the appropriate number, indicate how often you engage in the following activities during a Socratic circle:

M. Participate by sharing new ideas or thoughts
   (Frequently) 4 (Sometimes) 3 (Rarely) 2 (Never) 1

N. Participate by asking questions
   4 3 2 1

O. Participate by responding to comments made by your peers
   4 3 2 1

P. Truly listen to others’ comments
   4 3 2 1

Q. Use others’ ideas to build on your understanding
   4 3 2 1

R. Reference the text for clarification
   4 3 2 1
# Appendix J: Participant Checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Circle #</th>
<th>Topic:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation Checklist Item</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
<th>Synthesis of Problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textual Details</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position/Opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context: Purpose: Audience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Connections to Own Exp.
Connections to Other Exp.
Connections to the World
Appendix K: Rating Scale

**Socratic Circle Self-Analysis: Rating Scale**

*PART II:*
Directions: Honestly evaluate your INDIVIDUAL performance on the following criteria by circling the appropriate number. Base your response on what you did BOTH while preparing for the Socratic circle AND while participating in the Socratic circle. ☺

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Excellent)</th>
<th>(Pretty Good)</th>
<th>(Just Okay)</th>
<th>(Needs Work)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Clarified what they’ve read by rereading parts of the text</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Recorded thoughts by taking notes or referring to notes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Asked questions to further the discussion</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Evaluated the author’s purpose, audience, and/or context</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Reflected on their personal opinions about the material the material</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Analyzed specific details from the text, including the author’s word choice or use of literary devices</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Considered everyone’s opinions and perspectives about the material</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Made connections between the text and their personal experiences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Made connections between the text and the outside world (history, current events, culture, etc.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Made connections between the text and other works of literature they’ve studied.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K. Reflected on how their ideas or thinking about the topic changed based on the discussion</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Summarized central issues or problems within the material</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Participated by sharing new ideas or thoughts</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Participated by asking other group members to clarify their ideas</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O. Participated by responding to comments made by their peers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. Truly listened to others’ comments</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. Used others’ ideas to build on their understanding</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. Referenced specific details in the text for clarification</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix L: Handout on Socratic Circles

Socratic Circles
“The unexamined life is not worth living.” – Socrates

GOALS
1. To think more deeply about what you read and to have a sense of purpose while reading; to think for yourselves.
2. To interact with each other in socially appropriate ways and to begin to understand how educated people can collaborate in a quest for understanding.
3. To become more sophisticated and critical readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers ready for higher education and the “real world.”

DESCRIPTION
The Socratic circle is a form of student-centered, in-class discussion that is focused on a particular piece of text that you have spent time reading and thinking about. However, the nature and process of a Socratic circle differs radically from the typical, teacher-led, question-and-answer discussion that you’re used to. It is you, the student—not me, the teacher—who guides and directs the focus of the conversation. “Socratic” refers to the Greek philosopher Socrates, who led people to understanding through questioning rather than “instruction.” Socrates’ theory was that it is more important to enable students to think for themselves than to merely fill their heads with the “right” answers; all too often, this is the form of instruction that takes place in school.

The teacher is not part of the discussion. I will only intervene when absolutely necessary—you must rely on yourselves to keep the discussion moving forward. In a Socratic circle, you will work cooperatively with your peers to construct meaning from what you have read and will avoid focusing on a “correct” interpretation of the text.

Socratic dialogue is an exploration—a quest for understanding—that has no definite beginning or end. It is not about answers and solutions; it is about accepting multiple perspectives on a certain topic and reexamining your own experiences and opinions in light of those perspectives. The goal for discussion is not opposition or arguments—the goal is for you to collaborate and build on each others’ ideas.

PROCEDURE
1. On the day before a Socratic circle, you will read a passage of text.
2. That night at home, you must spend time reading, analyzing, and taking notes on the text. If it is in your textbook, use post-it notes—do NOT write in your book. This is your ticket into the circle discussion; if you are not prepared, you will complete an alternate assignment.
   a. Identify key words and phrases—important, unfamiliar, etc.
   b. In the margins, keep track of the story or idea as it unfolds. Record any questions you have.
   c. Note word patterns and repetitions or anything that strikes you as confusing or important.
3. During class the next day, you will randomly be divided into two concentric circles: an inner circle and an outer circle.
4. If you are in the inner circle, you will engage in a discussion (based on a guiding question provided by me) of the text for approximately ten minutes, while students in the outer circle silently observe the behavior and performance of the inner circle, recording notes on an evaluation sheet.
5. After this discussion of the text, the outer circle assesses the inner circle’s performance and gives ten minutes of feedback for the inner circle.
6. Students in the inner and outer circles now exchange roles and positions.
7. The new inner circle holds a ten-minute discussion and then receives ten minutes of feedback from the new outer circle.
Appendix L (cont.): Handout on Socratic Circles

8. Following the discussion, you will compose a written reflection detailing your experience as a participant in the Socratic circle.

**POSITIVE BEHAVIORS**

**Asking a question (or follow up question)**
This question should not interrupt the discussion of a previous question. Be sure your question is either analytical or thematic. Occasionally discussing summary and vocabulary are helpful, but the goal is to keep the discussion rooted in the text.

**Connecting with another student’s comment**
Because a discussion is really responses to previous comments, you may make this clear by restating another person’s comment in your own words, then making a clear connection to your own comment or question.

**Referring to the text**
Going back and looking at the text is essential in these conversations. When you refer to text, you give the page number and location on the page, pause so that the group may find it, then make your comment or question.

**Making an effort to involve certain members of the circle**
There may be some members of your circle who have not contributed yet to the discussion. We all have our shy moments, so help boost their confidence by specifically asking them for their thoughts.

**Active listening**
Your body language will indicate the extent to which you are engaged in the conversation. Make eye contact with those people who are speaking, and show you’re listening by responding to comments you hear.

**BEHAVIORS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT**

**Looking at the teacher while speaking**
The teacher is not part of the discussion. Funny, weird, or awkward moments may happen, as they do in any discussion. Don’t look to the teacher for confirmation of your own or others’ comments

**Interrupting another student**
Interrupting another person when he/or she is speaking is rude and shows you aren’t really listening, but instead thinking about your response. On the other hand, two people may begin talking at the same time. This is not interrupting, but it does require both people to consider the other person’s contributions to the Circle. The person who has said less ought to be allowed to speak. This is how polite people behave.

**Making faces or exchanging meaningful glances**
As with any group of people, you will not always like or agree with anyone else. In order to create a working Socratic Circle, everyone must treat each other civilly, both verbally and nonverbally. Making faces at anyone or exchanging glances in reaction to another person’s comments are not acceptable behaviors – in the classroom or the real world.

**Rude, sarcastic, or throwaway remarks**
Although it may sound weird, your sincerity is needed in this discussion. You may not lessen your ideas by added comments like, “I don’t really care about the story”, etc. These statements take away from the discussion and show you are not actually engaged. You may not like the text or people’s responses to it, but these comments are not actually part of the conversation. Articulating and explaining your reaction is a reasonable way to “mean what you say.”

- Remember silence is your friend. This is time to look back at the story and reconsider ideas.
Appendix L (cont.): Handout on Socratic Circles

- Beware of arguments that imagine how the story would be different if it had been written differently. The text is rich enough for discussion, and talking about “what might have been” is not the most helpful way to approach a work.

9 GREAT WAYS TO PARTICIPATE IN ASOCRATIC CIRCLE DISCUSSION: THINGS TO CONSIDER THE NIGHT BEFORE...

(1) Ask an open-ended, thought-provoking question.
   - **Clarity:** Could you elaborate further? Could you give me an example?
   - **Accuracy:** How can we determine if that is true? How can we verify your statements?
   - **Precision:** Could you be more specific? Could you provide more details?
   - **Relevance:** How does that relate to the issue? How does that align with the question?
   - **Depth:** What are some of the complexities of this question? What factors need to be considered?
   - **Breadth:** Do we need to consider another point of view? Do we need to look at this from a different perspective?
   - **Logic:** Does what you say follow from the evidence? Does all of this make sense?
   - **Significance:** Is this the central idea? Is this the most important issue to consider?

(2) Consider the historical/social context. What was going on during the time period that may have influenced the work? What do you know about the author? What might the author’s purpose be?

(3) Take a position on some aspect of the text. What do YOU think about what you’re reading? Be prepared to back up your position with the text!

(4) Analyze specific details from the text. Does the author use any important literary devices? What purpose do they serve? Are there any specific words or phrases that strike you? Interest you? Confuse you? Shock you? Why?

(5) Make a connection to your personal experiences. In what ways can you relate to the text? How do those connections influence your view of the material?

(6) Make a connection to the outside world or historical events. In what ways does the text relate? How does the connection influence your view of the material?

(7) Make a connection to another text. How does the text compare to other things you’ve read? How does that comparison affect your reading of this text?

(8) Try to pinpoint the overall message/theme. What is the author’s point in writing this text?

(9) Consider what multiple perspectives your peers might offer on the topic. What are the different ways to view this issue? Which do you favor?