Teach like Socrates: Encouraging Critical Thinking in Elementary Social Studies

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Who decides when children are ready to talk about hard issues? At what point are our students willing and able to become critical consumers of society? There is no hard and fast rule to answer these questions. To develop as critical thinkers and instrumental players in the transformation of our future society, young citizens need to participate in authentic activities that will foster critical thinking skills early in their academic careers. In my combined second-and-third grade classroom, I have been systematically implementing various strategies to create what I call a Socratic classroom. These strategies were used to approach a question I am curious about: Are young elementary students capable of thinking critically?

The ideas of Socrates suggest that being a true citizen is about more than becoming involved politically or within the community. He valued integrity and its role in civic virtues. Because of this, his teachings showed that relentless questioning and intellectual honesty are vital to the development of citizens who care about justice. Based on these ideas, I use the term Socratic classroom to mean a safe space where students are encouraged to question societal notions, understand the feelings and emotions of others, and consider multiple perspectives. A benefit of incorporating this philosophy into the structure of the classroom is developing citizens who can think critically, ask questions, and consider the views of others around them.

To develop this idea in my classroom, over the course of a semester, I engaged my students in various strategies and activities I hoped would encourage them to ask questions about themselves and their world. As a class, we read books of all disciplines. I encouraged students to consider the ideas found in these stories outside of the context in which they were introduced, and we were able to use those ideas to ask questions about their world. Additionally, I used techniques such as classroom community meetings and class debates to help facilitate dialogue.

One of the instructional shifts hoped for with the implementation of the College Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards is for students to “apply knowledge and ideas in real world settings to become active and engaged citizens in the 21st century.” These strategies provided students with the ability to achieve this goal, as evidenced by the connections they made between classroom activities and the real world. Critical thinking is emphasized as an educational aim and referenced explicitly as part of the impetus for creating the C3 Framework, in which another goal is to “build critical thinking, problem-solving, and participatory skills to become engaged citizens.” Developing critical thinking skills through dialogue as an approach to learning is also aligned with the Common Core Standards.

Learning Goals
In my classroom, I expect my students will begin to understand their place in the world and the responsibility that comes with it. I want my students to question and not accept traditional paradigms at face value, to suspend judgment and see both sides of an issue, and to synthesize knowledge. Generating critical thinking skills helps students work toward all of these goals, and research shows that implementing Socratic methods in an elementary classroom enhances the development of critical thinking in several ways. First, when teachers use shared inquiry in this form, truth can be understood more effectively as a result of group discussion rather than trying to grapple with it independently. Participating in this type of discussion models how to interact with others with an open mind and without criticizing other viewpoints. Socratic dialogue also encourages listening skills as students must listen carefully to respond. Beyond discovering a universally recognized truth, these methods allow students to look past what they are explicitly taught and question underlying assumptions about global citizenship.
On the following pages, I have articulated three teaching strategies used to support the development of Socratic classrooms, and show how these ideas can be implemented with young learners.

**Strategy A: Questioning Our World by Asking Questions about Things We Read**

The first strategy I used in my class to encourage children to ask questions and think critically is to model that very activity. In my school, we teach history chronologically rather than using the expanding horizons paradigm. As such, I teach my second graders world history starting with the Egyptians all the way to the end of the Roman Empire. This fall, I was teaching about Ashurbanipal and the Assyrian empire. The text I use, *The Story of the World*, shares historical information through stories. During our study of the Assyrians, we read two stories from our book about Ashurbanipal. The first told of his great conquests as the king of the empire and everything he had accomplished in the expansion of his nation, but it also told of the heinous acts of war he committed as the commander of the army—burning homes, dumping salt in enemy fields, and killing people from other nations. The second story told of the way he treated the people in his country, the beautiful capital city he built, and his creation of the first library—he is commonly known as the first librarian. The structure of these two stories laid an excellent foundation for an opportunity to think critically: Can a person be good AND bad?

Too often, we think of historical figures as being heroic examples which we should all attempt to emulate or evil villains who never accomplished anything worth imitating. However, the truth almost always lies somewhere in the middle: historical figures are both good and bad, and this is a truth that can be understood by seven-year-olds. To help my students learn to think critically, I modeled the skill. I asked a question (“Wait, can a person be good AND bad?”) and provided some supporting details (“I mean, he burned homes, and he killed people, but he also imported beautiful plants and created the first library…”). The responses that followed from my students astounded me:

Student One: “Well, yes... King David was good and bad right?”

Student Two: “I bet the people in his kingdom who lived in his city thought he was good.”

Student Three: “But what about the people he attacked with his army? They probably thought he was bad.”

Student Two: “What about our army? Are they good or bad?”

Student One: “Well most people say they are heroes.”

Student Three: “But what about the people who live in other countries?”

And then, true to second-grade form, Student Two stuck a Dixie cup on his chin (we were reading the story during our snack time) and said: “Look, I have a beard!” The conversation ended there, but not before the children had made some very critical observations.

After modeling this strategy (asking questions about what we have read), I found that students are excited to ask questions about EVERYTHING we read. As such, this extends well to any other subject where you can bring in stories and allow students to lead the questioning. During our science time, we read a book, *11 Experiments That Failed.* Just reading this book sparked many questions that require critical thinking, including “Where does our water go when we flush the toilet?” “Does it just go out into the ocean?” “Do we swim in poop?” (These are seven- and eight-year-olds after all.) To answer their questions, we grabbed the book *Magic School Bus at the Waterworks* and
read about how the water treatment plants clean our water. One of the side comments in that book is, “Less than 1 percent of the water on earth is drinkable,” which led to another student asking “Wait, are we going to run out of water?”

When students can formulate a question like this in second or third grade, what will that mean for them when they are in high school? When they already recognize that historical characters can be both bad and good, how will they interpret history more critically in the future?

**Strategy B: Questioning Ourselves by Participating in Community Class Meetings**

To honestly be critical thinkers, we cannot only question the outside world: we must also question our actions and the actions of our community. To that end, I implemented community class meetings in my classroom. Once a week, on Friday afternoon, we gather on the carpet to talk about how our week went. After I modeled the format the first week, a different student now leads the meeting on each consecutive week. The questions we ask are “What did you enjoy this week?” “What could we improve on this week, either individually or as a class, and how?” “What did we do well this week?” By asking these questions, students have to think critically about their actions and those of their classmates.

From the first student-led meeting, I have been impressed by how serious the students are when they take their turn leading the session. They expect their peers to consider the questions, and they also critically examine their behavior as well as the classroom behavior. During one week, a notoriously goofy boy led the meeting. He patiently called on several students to ask how we could improve, and we brainstormed ideas. Then, as I prompted him to move to the next question, he said “I have one more, about me. I didn’t finish all my work in class this week. What can I do?” The students took this heartfelt question seriously, and they gave him ideas on how he could improve next week: “Don’t sit with your friends during quiet working time.” “Make sure you understand the directions.” “If you are stuck, ask a friend for help.”

**Strategy C: Questioning Perspectives by Debating an Issue**

A final strategy I successfully implemented with my second grade students was using class debates to look at an issue from more than one perspective. The class spent about ten days studying the city-states of Athens and Sparta in Ancient Greece. We read multiple texts about each city-state and then completed several activities where the students were required to compare the two city-states in different ways, including graphic organizers that showed how each was alike and different and worksheets that asked the student to think about what life would have been like in each city-state. Finally, I asked the students which city-state they would have preferred to live in and why. At the culmination of this activity, after students had considered both perspectives, they were assigned to “Team Sparta” or “Team Athens.” Since the class I teach is made up of both second and third grade, the third-grade students acted as the judges for the debate. They were asked to listen to both perspectives and then make a decision on which city-state was
a better place to live. As the teacher, I acted as the moderator and asked questions to lead the debate.

The first time I asked second graders to debate each other, I was unsure how it was going to go. Are seven- and eight-year-olds even capable of considering both sides of an issue? Could they listen to how the opposing team answered a question and respond in a way that showed they had been listening and understood the issue? Over and over again, my students showed me that they are capable of this level of thought. Additionally, they took our text—just facts that did not attempt to sway the reader to a specific conclusion—and made inferences that went beyond the material presented. For example:

Student One: “Athens enjoyed art and music and math and gymnastics.”

Moderator: “Sparta, do you agree with them that those are some of the positive things about Athens?”

Student Two: “Yes, but, most of the girls in Athens didn’t usually get to enjoy most of that.”

Moderator: “If we are just talking about women in Athens, do you agree that Athens is a better place for women?”

Student Three: “No, because they didn’t get to go to school and in Sparta, they got to [have physical training].” (Long pause and, after a prompting from Student One) “And they were property of their husbands.”

When I, as the moderator, asked for additional arguments that may help sway the audience at the end of the debate, Student Two shared: “Well, I think Sparta would be a better and safer place to live because they had an army that was always prepared but in Athens, they didn’t really mind their army, so, if a, uh, powerful army came and attacked their city, they wouldn’t really be able to be really strong. They might not be able to fight it off. But in Sparta, the army was always prepared and very strong, and so I think they would probably be able to beat almost anything.” That is not something we ever discussed in class; it is something she inferred on her own from reading about the two city-states and the other stories we have learned about this fall.

Planning and Crafting Socratic Experiences
Deciding how to incorporate these strategies in the classroom can be challenging as teachers attempt to work within the standards and curriculum restraints, especially within social studies as it frequently receives less classroom time at the elementary level. With that in mind, to craft activities that question our

Suggested Books and Starter Questions


*What did Larnel learn from Mrs. Katz? Who do you know that is different than you? What can you learn from them?*


*How do we treat enemies differently than we treat friends? When you have a disagreement with another person, what are some different ways you can settle it?*


*If no one is willing to ask questions about the beliefs and attitudes our culture shares, how can we all move forward and grow? What freedoms are we able to enjoy that Galileo did not?*


*Are there ways we (students) can make the world a better place? Why is this important?*


*Where does your water come from? Have you ever been thirsty but could not get a drink?*
world by asking questions about things we read, I start with
the books I already use in my classroom and read through
them with a critical lens, thinking about what hard questions
could be addressed and what conversations could be started
through a simple story. All of the examples I’ve shared here (see
sidebar, p. 7) started from books or topics that align with the
required objectives and curriculum where I teach. However,
it is interesting to note that many of the best conversations in
my class were led by student questions and interests. So while
it is important to be prepared with good literature and starter
questions, it is equally important to be willing to walk away
from your own questions and follow where students lead the
discussion. I found that their thoughts are often more interesting
than what I had planned.

To develop community class meetings where students are
asked to question themselves, I consistently use three questions
that guide students to reflect on their actions. Our questions, as
I shared earlier, were “What did you enjoy this week?” “What
could we improve on this week, either individually or as a class,
and how?” “What did we do well this week?” When choosing
these questions, I wanted to both start and end positively, and I
wanted just a few, easy questions that students could remember
so they would be able to lead these discussions without help
from the teacher.

Finally, to create activities where students question perspec-
tives by debating an issue, I chose a time in history of particular
interest to my students and then found texts that presented
different perspectives of life during that period. I provided
multiple texts and modeled techniques like compare/contrast
and imagining what a day would be like if we lived in that time.
From those activities, students began to make judgments about
which perspective they agreed with, and classroom discussions
helped students think through their reasons. To culminate the
unit, we staged a debate. I primarily used opinion questions
when structuring the debate which they answered and sup-
ported with the facts they had learned. I acted as the moderator
to ensure both sides participated equally. Other students in the
class who were not actively debating acted as “judges” who were
required to take notes and decide collectively which team made
a more convincing argument.

Difficulties, modifications and improvements
While I have been pleased with the results of implementing
these methods in my classroom, there are things that I would
modify or do differently as I proceed forward. I would make
some changes to the way the questions are phrased, and I would
be less dismissive of students’ comments that I think are overly
outrageous. I also acknowledge that discussions did not always
go the way I intended.

I recognize the question “Can a person be good and bad?”
could be perceived as problematic. I intended that students

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would examine an issue and be able to see that people take many actions that can do both good and harm. Even though seven and eight-year-olds can relate to the terms “good” and “bad,” the use of these terms simplifies the situation and, as a result, it equates contrasting actions to moral equivalents. As teachers ask these sort of questions, we should consider the implications our phrasing has. Moving forward, focusing on an individual’s actions (i.e. “Can a person’s actions be both good and bad?”) might allow students to connect individually to actions they are reading about in the text, rather than making generalizations about the character of the person we are considering.

One of the goals I have for creating a Socratic classroom is to create a safe space for my students to discuss issues without fear. Throughout the year, I recognize times that I have done things that work directly against this goal. For example, we read The Boy Who Drew Birds and discussed the theories of James John Audubon. On one page, the book shares previously held beliefs about what happened to birds during the winter. As we read, one of my students suggested a theory that “Maybe the birds were abducted by alien zombies every winter and that’s why they disappeared.” Instinctively, I gave a short “No” and continued reading. Almost instantly I regretted that. Although in my mind that is an outrageous suggestion, I want my students to feel like they can share their thoughts openly, and by responding the way I did, I discouraged him from sharing ideas in the future. Since then, I have been more conscious of the way I react and accept the comments my students share.

Finally, while we had conversations in my class that were so encouraging, I also attempted conversations that were complete duds, especially at the beginning of the year. From my observations, I noticed that for students to start to speak up, they first needed to be comfortable with their classmates and their teacher, and even when they begin to feel comfortable, some of my questions did not spark any discussion at all. Despite this, I consistently continue to ask questions about hard issues, and through trial and error, I have been able to craft questions that are more likely to meet my students where they are at and get them engaged in critical conversations about our society.

Concluding Thoughts
While these observations seem to indicate that yes, young elementary are students capable of thinking critically, I am curious whether implementing dialoguing in the elementary years creates students who are more able to participate in thought-provoking classroom discussions in the secondary years. According to Diana Hess, secondary teachers who attempt to hold discussions in social studies classrooms often find it “difficult both to teach and to learn these skills.” Beginning critical classroom dialogue through scaffolding techniques at the elementary age could potentially create a more significant opportunity for students to grow as critical thinkers throughout their education. Based on my observations this semester, I propose that if we, as teachers, are going to create critical thinkers, the best time to start is not in secondary school but in the very early grades.

Notes
13. Diana Hess & ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, B. L., “Teaching Students to Discuss Controversial Public Issues.” ERIC Digest.

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