Circles of Learning: Applying Socratic Pedagogy to Learn Modern Leadership

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Abstract

In response to the National Leadership Education Agenda, this application brief furthers priority one, addressing the teaching, learning, and curriculum development of leadership education. The ability of students to demonstrate leadership outcome mastery in areas of communication, self-awareness, interpersonal interactions, and civic responsibility (Seemiller, 2014), is valued across disciplines. Socratic Circles provide a structured discussion learning strategy based on Socratic pedagogy (Copeland, 2005), beneficial to the practice of leadership outcomes. Discussed are descriptions of implementation methods; outcomes related to Seemiller's (2014) Student Leadership Competencies; and practitioner reflections of the use of Socratic Circles in college level leadership courses.

Introduction

In 2013, Andenoro, Allen, Haber-Curran, Jenkins, Sowcik, Dugan, and Osteen proposed the National Leadership Education Agenda providing strategic direction for research in the leadership education field. Priority one of the agenda addresses the teaching, learning, and curriculum development of the field of leadership education. Furthering the agenda in leadership education, the following proposed teaching practice, Socratic Circles, supports the capacity and competency development process of leadership education learners (Andenoro, et al., 2013). Moving beyond a typical classroom discussion, Socratic Circles turn ownership and discussion over to the students (Copeland, 2005). We offer Socratic Circles as a structured discussion-based activity for developing students' metacognition and intellectual discourse skills. We address the implementation and outcomes of Socratic Circles, providing reflections from execution in the leadership classroom and recommendations for use.

Socratic Circles provide a platform for students to engage in meaningful discussions with peers encouraging the development of leadership competencies in areas of communication, self-awareness, interpersonal interactions, and civic responsibility (Seemiller, 2014). Students are challenged to think deeply about a topic of discussion through questioning and the sharing of differing perspectives. The purpose of Socratic Circles is not to identify definitive answers to leadership issues, but discuss topics engaging multiple points of view and experiences. Feedback sessions allow students to work together identifying strategies to be better participants of

discussions. It is the feeling of discomfort that creates an environment supportive for student engagement in discussion and community building with peers.

Learner-Centered Leadership Classrooms. Understanding that leadership and leadership development are defined as a process (Guthrie, Bertrand Jones, Osteen, & Hu, 2013), leadership educators utilize teaching strategies that are learner-centered to provide active participation and reflection for leadership students. Experiential learning and discussion-based activities provide students a supportive environment to actively engage in leadership and process experiences, developing leadership skills and philosophies. Jenkins and Cutchens (2011) argued experiential learning strategies encourage critical thinking in the classroom, translating to leading critically. Guthrie and Bertrand Jones (2012) identified the need for both experiential learning and reflection, illuminating the opportunity leadership educators have in guiding students' meaning making of personal experiences. Many leadership educators use classroom discussion to process experiences in leadership and information regarding topics of leadership.

Jenkins (2013) found the most commonly used teaching method in leadership classrooms to be discussion-based pedagogies, with the understanding that leadership is relational and discussions create an environment that, "emphasizes inclusiveness, empowerment, and ethics through a defined process" (p. 55). Cross (2012) described a learning-centered discussion with the following words: high expectations, active engagement, cooperation, interaction, diversity, and responsibility. Educators utilize classroom discussions to challenge students intellectually and promote the development of dialogue skills. While discussion-based activities are beneficial in the leadership classroom, Cross (2012) argued discussions require proper planning and structure on the part of the instructor. Socratic Circles provide leadership educators a structured, discussion-based teaching strategy beneficial to the leadership development of students, including the development of critical thinking and discussion skills needed to lead effectively.

Socratic Pedagogy. Based on the questioning employed by the ancient philosopher, Socratic pedagogy serves as learner-centered instructional strategies valuable to the development of student critical thinking and discussion skills. Gose (2009) identifies five strategies Socrates used in engaging in critical questioning with students: asking probing questions, questioning about relationships among ideas, using devil's advocate and comic relief roles, maintaining group relationships and processes, and identifying roles of discussion participants. The goal of Socratic pedagogy is to develop students' ability to think critically about and question evidence about information through classroom discussion (Gose, 2009; Paul & Elder, 2007; Polite & Adams, 1997; Tredway, 1995). Differing forms of Socratic pedagogy include Socratic questioning (Paul & Elder, 2007), seminars (Tredway, 1995), and circles (Copeland, 2005; North, 2009). Each instructional strategy engages students in higher order questioning; Socratic Circles provide a structured instructional strategy specific to development of questioning and intellectual dialogue skills.

Paul and Elder (2007) discussed the definition and benefits of Socratic questioning, defining it as, "systematic, disciplined, and deep," focusing on dialogue about, "foundational concepts, principles, theories, issues, or problems" (p. 36). The benefits of Socratic questioning are two-fold: challenging students' metacognitive abilities and teaching them a critical questioning skill (Paul & Elder, 2007). Tredway (1995) discussed Socratic seminars, defined as

"structured discourse about ideas and moral dilemmas" (p. 26), and argued the use of Socratic seminars contributes toward moral development and free inquiry in education. Compelling questions and cooperative inquiry challenge students to gather and analyze data before constructing ideas (Tredway, 1995). Socratic pedagogy develops students' critical thinking skills, behaviors, and attitudes towards differing opinions and because so, has been incorporated into secondary and higher education courses.

Intending to change general psychology students into active learners, Ferguson (1986) used Socratic dialogue to engage students in questioning readings and information presented in class. Students developed questions in reaction to readings based on personal experiences and discussed in small groups in class. Polite and Adams (1997) found that Socratic seminars used by middle school teachers, regardless of content area, aided in the cognitive and social functioning abilities of students. Copeland (2005) developed Socratic Circles as a classroom activity structured for intentional questioning as a means of engaging middle and high school English students in critical analysis of required texts. Socratic Circles engaged students in deep public discourse of social justice tenants, challenging students to question information, perspectives, and opinions of authors and classmates (North, 2009). While Socratic pedagogies are designed to enhance critical thinking and questioning, it is important for educators to demonstrate effective questioning strategies and plan for structured learning of the skill (Polite & Adams, 1997).

Because of the success Socratic Circles have had at the middle and high school level (Copeland, 1995; North, 2009), we believe the same level of success could be found in higher education and sought to implement the practice in the leadership classroom. This learning strategy appears to be beneficial for college students engaging with challenging leadership topics, furthering their development and practice of skills necessary for discussion and feedback with peers. The use of Socratic Circles in leadership pedagogy is beneficial for the intentional planning of intended outcomes for students to engage in critical questioning of leadership topics and development of discourse skills. We adapted Copeland's (2005) model for Socratic Circles for leadership courses in higher education.

Description of Socratic Circles Methods

Socratic Circles are structured for students to engage in both discussion and observation, providing feedback while the instructor facilitates the activity. The activity is structured with two groups of students who will form two circles within the classroom, requiring movement of desks in the physical space. The first circle, known as the inner circle, is arranged facing each other in order to have discussion. The responsibility of the inner circle is to converse together, analyzing and questing the assigned reading, video, or information source. The outer circle is situated around the outside of the inner circle facing inwards, as well. The responsibility of the outer circle is to observe the behavior and performance of the inner circle's discussion. It is recommended that the inner-circle discussion last for ten minutes, giving enough time for the group to talk about the topic and time for the outer circle to record observations. Another ten minutes is recommended to provide feedback and evaluation from the outer circle. After completion of the first round of discussion and feedback, the circles will switch roles and positions. Planning and facilitation skills are crucial for success implementing Socratic Circles with students.

Prior to engagement in the Socratic Circle activity, students read a passage of a text, video, or information source, preparing critical thoughts and questions for discussion. The method of Socratic Circles places students in a participant role and an observer role. While in the participant role students discuss the topic and reading. While in the observer role students evaluate the quality of discussion. These alternating roles encourage diversity of opinions and perspectives through critical thought and questioning of required information sources. They also enable a feedback loop on discussion skills and challenge students to be open and aware of the diversity of thought.

Four Steps. Copeland (2005) suggested focusing on four steps for effective implementation of Socratic Circles: text selection, monitoring the inner circle, directing conversations of the outer circle, and the assessment and evaluation of the activity. The selection of text for the Socratic Circle is important for the foundation of in-class discussion. It is imperative for selection of materials to be relevant and meaningful to students and align with the course curriculum. Copeland recommended selecting materials that provide a, "richness of ideas, presentation of an issue, or examination of values," encouraging, "open and thoughtful conversation" (p. 31). Students will want to have read or watched and analyzed the selected material before participating in the Socratic Circle activity.

To start the activity, students will divide into two groups. Half will then engage in the inner Socratic Circles discussion of the assigned reading. What truly makes the Socratic Circles teaching method learner-centered is the ability of the instructor to allow students to lead the discussion, to feel more, "ownership, control, and investment," in the conversation and learning process (Copeland, 2005, p. 32). Sitting as a member of the outer circle each round, the role of the instructor during the discussion is to coach students to move beyond simple answers while they engage in conversation. If discussion lags, the instructor may use a probing question to re-engage students or redirect students. The instructor may also clarify or repeat student responses. It is important to be aware of the time limit for the discussion phase of the Socratic Circles. Keep initial discussions shorter to develop student time management of discussion and extend the length as experience is gained and richer conversations ensue (Copeland, 2005).

When the inner circle's discussion has concluded, the instructor facilitates the feedback conversation of the outer circle. Students focus on providing positive and constructive criticism. Instructors can guide feedback by providing students with scales to rate performance. To start conversations about feedback, Copeland (2005) suggests having each student provide one initial observation of the discussion, encouraging every student to participate. Once everyone has shared, the instructor should prompt the outer circle to brainstorm possible solutions for improved performance.

In order to effectively develop student discussion and feedback skills, it is imperative for instructors to provide timely assessment and evaluation for individual students and the whole class. Provide feedback after each inner circle discussion and after the entirety of the activity (Copeland, 2005). Taking time to converse about discussion performance allows students to reflect on the importance and impact of building skills necessary to effectively engaging in discussion, especially skills such as active listening to understand others. Rubrics, written feedback, scorecards, and communication maps are examples of guided feedback provided for

individual students and the class (Copeland, 2005). Well-intentioned feedback will acknowledge the achievement of students and provide suggestions for mastering proficiency of desired outcomes.

Alternatives. This basic structure can be modified in a myriad of ways to adapt to the curriculum and the participants. For example, consider a three-round design with medium class sizes, utilizing three groups, rather than two. When conducted with small classes of fewer than 24 students, the two-rounds design works well with half the class, recommending no more than 12 students, per circle. With medium classes of 25 to 40 students, half the class is still quite large for a group discussion. In these settings consider moving from two rounds of Socratic Circles to three rounds. This still involves an inner circle and an outer circle, but only one third of the students in the inner circle. Students then participate in two rounds in the outer circle, and one round in the inner circle. This design functions largely the same as the two-round design, with students still getting a small-group discussion and listening to other groups' discussions.

For a deeper group discussion, consider having five minutes of paired discussions prior to commencing the Socratic Circles activity. There are three benefits to doing this pre-activity discussion. First, it centers student's minds on the topic of the day; they all are thinking on topic before their time begins in the Socratic Circle. Second, this supports students who speak less in group settings, allowing them to share their thoughts in a one-on-one setting first, then after the practice they may feel more ready to share with the group. Third, this enables every student the opportunity to share thoughts on the topic and feel heard. This lessens the frequency that students will bring the group discussion to focus on themselves during the Socratic Circle activity. Student pairs may be in the same group during the Socratic Circle activity.

Multiple lessons using Socratic Circles help students get comfortable with the pedagogy. In the first or second use of Socratic Circles the recommended ten minutes of discussion is sufficient time. But as students grow more comfortable with the discussions the facilitator can plan for longer inner-circle discussion times, typically growing in increments of three to five minutes each lesson. Students are keen to fairness so planning is important to ensure the last discussion has the same length of time as the first discussion.

Finally, while Copeland (2005) emphasizes the selection of material, a pre-activity worksheet may be useful for students to complete in addition to engaging with the source of information beforehand. Consider adding a worksheet that students prepare for the day of the Socratic Circle. This should include questions that focus students on the key points the instructor wants them to gain from the material. Further, at the worksheet's end, include the prompt "What is one question you have for your classmates?" Students' responses here then become excellent discussion questions during the Socratic Circle. Encourage students to have their worksheet out during the group discussion and refer to their own response to the prompt when the group is ready for a new question. This easy addition can greatly enhance the group conversation by supporting students in being well prepared for the discussion.

Considerations and Limitations. Along with the power of Socratic Circles pedagogy to facilitate learning of leadership, a few points of caution are warranted when preparing lesson plans. Commit to using Socratic Circles in at least three lessons during the course. The first time

students experience a Socratic Circle activity they frequently push back on the unfamiliar pedagogy. This feedback is common after the first lesson. However, this initial discomfort is beneficial in learning. Educators should listen to and acknowledge students' concerns as well as identify discomfort as a space for learning, highlighting that different lessons resonate with different students throughout the course. After at least three experiences with Socratic Circles students can better assess the value of the pedagogy.

The material chosen for the Socratic Circle discussion topic should be thought provoking for students. Particularly in leadership education, contemporary theories like servant leadership or topics such as social justice issues are excellent choices. Students thrive in Socratic Circles when there is a lack of agreement on the discussion topic and they are listening to understand others' viewpoints.

It is also important to beware of the changing classroom dynamics over repeated uses of Socratic Circles. The method has been used in up to five lessons per semester. After two times, we observe that students have addressed many of the constructive criticisms highlighted early on and there is less need to focus on these. Instead the time can be devoted to more in-depth discussions. We also found that around the fifth time the format began to feel overly familiar to students, and so we have settled on four times to be a good fit. Leadership educators would do well to be mindful of what frequency works best for their curriculum and their students.

Outcomes

The learning outcomes of Socratic Circles strongly resonate with Seemiller's (2014) Student Leadership Competencies. Though multiple competencies are addressed using Socratic Circles, we discuss six key competencies toward which Socratic Circles most contribute. The six competencies met by the use of Socratic Circles are verbal communication, advocating point of view, listening, receiving and giving feedback, productive relationships, and inclusion. All are competencies needed for leaders to effectively include others in the process of leadership.

Students learn effective verbal communication strategies allowing them to practice speaking within groups (Seemiller, 2014). Copeland (2005) identified speaking as an academic skill learned through the engagement in Socratic Circles. Prepared to share thoughts and ideas, students are better able to participate verbally in the inner circle because they have prepared questions and answered prompts given with the assigned text or video. Feedback with brainstormed strategies for improvement from peers allows students to reflect on strategies to better verbally communicate while participating in the inner circle.

Learning to advocate one's point of view is a competency gained from Socratic Circles. Seemiller (2014) defined advocating point of view as, "Understanding strategies to effectively communicate one's beliefs, opinions, or ideas so that others clearly and fully understand both the meaning and significance" (p. 101). Socratic Circles create an environment for students to share openly their personal opinions and experiences, developing their social skills (Copeland, 2005). The purpose of Socratic Circles is not to identify answers to questions, but to garner a diversity of perspectives, encouraging students to advocate their point of view by sharing with peers.

Socratic Circles encourage the development of the listening competency. Well-developed listening skills allow students to effectively receive a message communicated by a peer verbally (Seemiller, 2014). Listening skills prepare students to engage in discussion, listening attentively and effectively in order to consider peer's thoughts and challenge personal beliefs (Copeland, 2005). Students must engage in active listening when participating in the inner circle so as not to repeat questions and thoughts, keeping the discussion meaningful and rich with ideas.

Socratic Circles are designed for the receiving and giving of feedback from peers. Receiving feedback from peers is important for the development of self and increasing the ability to work with others; giving feedback to peers is important for providing constructive criticism and praise in a respectful manner in order to encourage the development of peer's leadership skills (Seemiller, 2014). Socratic Circles help create an environment for students to receive and give timely feedback in measurement of their ability to engage in and contribute to the discussion. Students work together to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses, brainstorming strategies to improve their discussion skills.

Developing productive relationships is another competency addressed by Socratic Circles. Productive relationships provide students the skills to connect with peers in a meaningful way, contributing to the well-being of all members in the discussion (Seemiller, 2014). Productive relationships are a social skill that enhances team and community building skills (Copeland, 2005). Together, students build relationships on respect and affirmation through the sharing, understanding, and listening of each other's thoughts, opinions, and perspectives.

Lastly, Socratic Circles supports the competency of inclusion. Students demonstrating inclusion possess skills to, "…include others in roles, processes, and experiences" (Seemiller, 2014, p. 78). Socratic Circles encourage team and community building through the inclusion of members by creating an environment which values the personal experiences of all students regardless of personal beliefs or demographics (Copeland, 2005). Students engage in discussion with the purpose of learning from each other by sharing diverse experiences and challenging one another to think deeper about the topic. Students are challenged to share experiences with each other through questioning and the use of identified strategies for greater inclusion given during feedback sessions.

Reflections of Practitioner

The following reflections are that of the second author on using Socratic Circles in a college-level leadership course. First introduced to Socratic Circles by a close friend teaching in middle school five years ago, I was hesitant about whether it was transferable to college students. Since implementing it in my own course, I have used the pedagogy every semester due to the transformative ability it has to empower students. When introducing it to a class for the first time, I emphasize its value to improve skills for team discussions, listening, and social perspective taking. These skills are key leadership outcomes, as described earlier within Seemiller's (2014) framework.

At the end of every semester, the course evaluations frequently mention Socratic Circles. They are polarizing, with a few students each time commenting on how engaging in Socratic

Circles was the least favorite class activity. During finals week I ask students to identify five lessons, of the total 35 lessons covered in the course, that resonated with them the most and to describe what they have gained in their reflection of the lessons. Even more students include Socratic Circles here. The descriptions often start, "At first I didn't like Socratic Circles but…"—and go on to discuss how the student was positively changed by the experiences provided by the learning strategy. They describe the value they gained from being challenged to act as observer in the outer group, only allowed to listen to the inner group. They see their role as a group member differently, choosing more carefully what would contribute to the group's discussion. But the strongest affirmations come from students who describe learning that their peers valued their own personal opinion.

Further Research

Further research is needed on this relatively new pedagogy in leadership education. The literature on Socratic Circles is dominated by prescriptive lesson planning but little literature contains empirical evidence to understand the lasting effects as a teaching strategy, which students may most benefit, as well as the instructor-level effects on instructional effectiveness. Next steps for future research should include qualitative investigations of student perceptions through individual interviews. These should be conducted shortly after the Socratic Circle experiences, as well as a month or two later to examine the lasting memories students have of the experiences. After identifying this through individual interviews, the development of a survey instrument would enable more broad study of many students' experiences, including the competencies gained as a participant and observer, and in the process providing and receiving feedback.

Conclusion

Adding to the National Leadership Education Agenda in the area of teaching, learning, and curriculum development (Andernoro, et. al., 2013), Socratic Circles provides a learner-centered teaching strategy for leadership educators to structure in-class discussions. Socratic Circles place students in the center of discussion, allowing students to engage in both the role as participant and observer, and engaging in feedback sessions. Outcomes of Socratic Circles support the Student Leadership Competencies proposed by Seemiller (2014), engaging students in the development of communication, self-awareness, interpersonal interaction, and civic responsibility skills. Though we have experienced push back from students when first implementing Socratic Circles in the classroom, the experience from engaging with the instructional strategy multiple times in a course has demonstrated powerful experiences from students in learning how to be better engaged in discussions, as well as understanding differing points of view and feeling accepted for differing points of view. It is recommended that further research include both qualitative and quantitative methods to better understand the impact and effects Socratic Circles has on the leadership development of students.

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