Scaffolding Socratic Seminar for Struggling Students, including ELL Students

Grade Six English Teacher

An active learning strategy that I have found especially helpful in getting students to dig for deeper meaning in a text and to promote academic conversation among students is the Socratic Seminar. However, the way my colleagues and I have conducted the Socratic Seminar varies a bit, and it is typically a multi-day process. Through a process of trial and error, we now conduct a Socratic Seminar as described below.

We take several days to prepare for a Socratic Seminar. First, we select a high-interest, but challenging text. For our ELL students or our struggling readers, we find a less complex text that shares certain key elements with the text selected for the rest of the class, or we modify the original text, or read the text aloud to those struggling students. The less complex text must have a common theme with the text selected for the rest of the class, must contain multiple pieces of evidence to support this theme, and must still contain vivid or memorable language. There are times that we have had students read multiple texts that share a common theme. This is a good modification for stronger readers.

Once the text is selected, students read the text silently in class. After reading the text silently, or reading multiple texts, students are given time to write closed questions (have one right answer, yes or no question, or can be answered in a few words) and, more importantly, open-ended questions (do not have one right answer, can't be answered simply, lead to a good discussion). Open-ended questions include the MA state Standards. The open-ended questions are really the goal here, but we have found that with some struggling students they will begin to write open-ended questions *after* writing closed questions. We generally do not use the closed questions in the discussion, but it has proven to be a good modification to get some students thinking about and writing questions. If students are really struggling to generate questions, I will often reread the entire text aloud. This can mean adding an extra day, but it is usually worth it, because as I read aloud I model my thinking, which leads to students generating questions. I also have question starters/sentence frames that can help students generate questions. Once students have had time to generate good open-ended discussion questions, and the teacher has had time to review them, we review the rules for Socratic Seminar.

When the actual discussion takes place we then place the desks in two concentric circles. The outer circle listens to the discussion and takes notes (on a guided note-taking sheet). The inner circle is in charge of discussing the questions that students generated the day before. The questions might be on slips of paper, and placed in a bowl for students to pull from, or students might just have their notes from the day before (this depends on the level of organization - I have had some classes where it was safer to have students hand all questions in, and I then type them up, print them out and place them in the bowl - otherwise students would lose their questions!). Students are expected to follow general rules for discussion, such as: show active listening (make eye contact, nodding, leaning slightly in toward the speaker), respectfully disagree, do not dominate the discussion (it's a conversation not a monologue), use inside voices, do not interrupt, and make sure everyone has a turn to ask or respond.

As students ask and discuss the questions, they are encouraged to refer to an Academic Conversation sheet, which contains question and response prompts (great for ELLs).

Examples of providing supports for ELL students to develop questions to ask in the inner circle include, “Can you elaborate on…”, or “Can you give supporting evidence from the text?”, or perhaps, “I am not sure I understand. Can you explain it a different way?” Response prompt examples include, “I agree with \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ because....”, or, “I disagree with \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ because…”

 Students that are in the inner circle will ask the questions and discuss the various answers. We leave one open desk in the inner circle in case a student sitting in the outer circle really has something important to share, at which point the student can move from the outer circle to the inner circle. After roughly half of the class has transpired, we switch the inner and outer circles. This gives all students the opportunity to be in the inner circle, asking questions and discussing answers, and in the outer circle taking notes on the guided note-taking sheet. The guided note-taking sheet includes a place to write additional questions (if they have any), to record what topics being discussed interest students the most, and a place for all students to reflect on their participation, what challenges they faced, and what aspects of the Socratic Seminar they enjoyed the most.

This is a really engaging activity that students have generally enjoyed.