Teaching notes

This discussion exercise could take as much as a whole lesson, if done thoroughly. Based on Socrates’ principles of learning, the discussion is designed to be led by your students, and allows you to direct rather than dictate! It is worth introducing your students briefly to Socrates’ philosophy before setting up the task.

The guided questions could be adapted for any text or topic, and employ Bloom’s Taxonomy structure to probe students’ understanding. You could use Teachit’s resource ‘Bloom’s Taxonomy’ (14266) to create alternative questions.

You will need to remove all desks from the learning space, and set up two circles of chairs: a smaller circle for six-eight students, and a larger circle for the remainder of the class around the outside of the room. You could leave a seat or two empty in the ‘inner circle’ for any members of the ‘outer circle’ to choose to sit in at any time.

You will then need to select students who will complete the discussion in the ‘inner circle’. The ‘outer circle’ comprises of active listeners: the remainder of your class.

Your students will need a copy of the relevant text, a pen and a relevant worksheet. The question sheets for the ‘outer circle’ could be printed onto colour coded sheets so that you are able to distribute them equally around the class.
Socratic discussion

Activities: information for all students

Socrates was an Ancient Greek philosopher and teacher. He encouraged his students to share their thoughts and opinions. During discussions, he remained silent while his students talked. A ‘Socratic discussion’ is a method of discussion based on these principles:

The inner circle
The ‘speakers’ are in this circle. They are responsible for laying down the rules of who speaks when, and for making sure that the discussion topics are all relevant. They may ask extra questions to clarify understanding, but must reach an agreement on each question or agree to disagree.

The outer circle
The ‘listeners’ /observers are in this circle. They must remain silent at all times. They may opt to sit in an empty seat in the inner circle, but must then stay in that seat. If they are unable to hear what members of the inner circle are saying, they should raise their hand to request that they should speak up.

Activities: the inner circle

Read An Inspector Calls Act Three, from Eric having a drink [Eric (miserably): Could I have a drink first?] to the Inspector’s exit. Appoint a time-keeper, and decide how you will discuss the events (hands-up, taking turns, a leader chooses?). Read the events aloud at least once and then discuss the questions in detail.

1. What happened when Eric met Eva?

2. Explain what Eric meant by saying, ‘I suppose she didn’t know what to do.’

3. Explore what Eric implies when he says, ‘Well, I’m old enough to be married, aren’t I, and I’m not married, and I hate these fat old tarts round the town – the ones I see some of your respectable friends with –’

4. Compare Eva’s attitude towards marriage (in 1912) with views of marriage in the 21st century, or your own views.

5. Analyse Mr Birling’s response to Eric’s theft of company money. What are his main concerns?

6. The Inspector says, ‘You’ll be able to divide the responsibility between you when I’ve gone.’ Consider each character separately and decide how much each is to blame for Eva’s death.

7. Summarise how Eric’s and Mrs Birling’s involvement are connected, and examine how Mrs Birling reacts to this realisation once Sheila has framed her.

8. Assess Eric’s condemnation of his mother, ‘You don’t understand anything. You never did. You never even tried – ‘. What does he suggest about his family and the difference between the parents and children?

9. Imagine you are the Inspector. How would you rank each character’s level of responsibility?
Socratic discussion

Activities: the outer circle

You will be observing: gender roles

As the discussion progresses, make notes on how the boys and girls behave!

How many girls?

How many boys?

Keep a tally of:

How many times the girls talk:

How many times the boys talk:

How many times a boy interrupts a girl:

How many times a girl interrupts a boy:

Other observations.

You will be observing: team work

As the discussion progresses, make notes on how the team behaves:

- Who acts as 'leader'?
- Who stays quiet?
- Who has good ideas but struggles to make themselves heard?
- Who talks too much or over other people?
- Who has lots of their own ideas?
- Who responds well to others' ideas?
- Keep a tally of how many times the conversation stops and gets awkward:
- Other observations.
Socratic discussion

You will be observing: .................................................................
(name of classmate)

As the discussion progresses, make notes on how they work within the group:

- Write down words or phrases they repeat more than once.
- Write down the most interesting word they say.
- Write down any questions they ask.
- Keep a tally of how many times they participate in the discussion.
- Other observations.

You will be observing: discussion skills

- As the discussion progresses, make notes on the use of discussion skills by the group.
- Who moves the discussion on to interesting topics?
- Who asks the most questions to create further discussion?
- Who brings the discussion to abrupt stops?
- Who says a lot about not very much?
- Who says not very much but has really interesting points.
- Keep a tally of how many times each person speaks (choose two people).
- Other observations on discussion skills.

You will be observing: use of vocabulary

- As the discussion progresses, make notes on the use of vocabulary by the group.
- Write down the most common word(s) used and who said them.
- Write down the most interesting word(s) used and who said them.
- Write down good questioning word(s) used and who said them.
- Write down words which seem to break down or stop the discussion and who said them.
- Who uses the most interesting and least interesting words?
- Keep a tally of questions asked by the group to create further discussion.
- Other observations on good/poor use of vocabulary.