SOCRATICS, REMIXED

A lesson design for more focused and engaging student-led discussions.

Henry Seton

KATOK_ELALOK/SHUTTERSTOCK

As more classrooms return to in-person instruction, many teachers (including myself) are longing for lessons built around student discussion. Student discourse frequently floundered over the past year amidst inconsistent camera usage, weak microphones, internet lags, and the overall awkwardness of virtual classrooms.

The Socratic seminar is a particularly seductive lesson structure. Its origins reach back as far as ancient Greece and more recently to influential 20th century educators such as Mortimer Adler. Exact definitions vary, but in its most essential form, students gather into one or more circles to discuss a text. They take the lead in not only formulating ideas but also constructing the questions that guide their discourse.[1] Educators, in turn, are drawn to the potential for student-directed inquiry, critical questioning, and collaborative teamwork—not to mention the possibility of sitting back and putting the heavy lifting on students' shoulders.

Yet Socratic seminars frequently fall flat. Teachers can intervene too much or too little. We can rely on complex protocols that overly restrict student discourse or conversely fail to provide adequate scaffolds. Students can arrive unprepared. Discussion can dwindle into long, awkward silences or drift into tangents and lose any sense of urgency. Rigor can evaporate. Without careful calibration, Socratics result in lost lessons.

Many teachers have experimented with lesson design elements to address these issues. For example, Alexis Wiggins has developed an approach where the whole class gets the same grade for the seminar to encourage all students to participate and collaborate.[2] Over the past decade, however, I have developed an approach to Socratic seminars with my high school English students that I have yet to encounter in the literature or in dozens of school visits. This approach, what I call a remixed Socratic, has heightened the rigor and urgency of my class discussions while simultaneously increasing engagement, collaboration, and joy. And this method, I have found, can work effectively with other subjects and age groups beyond high school English.

Remixing the Classic Structure

In reworking the Socratic lesson, I sought to empower my students as problem-posing scholars while still maximizing the impact of every instructional minute and allowing for individualized data collection. I wanted a design that would improve students' skills not only as discussants but also as readers and writers. And I needed a simple yet versatile structure. I wanted to use it repeatedly during a unit without boring students. I also wanted to be able to target whatever student growth areas might arise.

This approach organically integrates the holy trinity of literacy skills: reading, writing, and discussing. Because students do not know what passage is going to be on the exit ticket, class becomes a treasure hunt.

I hit upon the idea of developing an individual post-discussion assessment that would meet these criteria. Socratic lessons typically end with some sort of silent writing task—a final take on the ideas in the discussion, a reflection on the discussion process itself, or some combination of the two. I wanted to find an alternative assessment that would encourage students to bring greater focus and urgency to their conversations, but would not straight-jacket student discourse.

I eventually settled on what English teachers call a *passage analysis* or *passage identification assessment*—a common summative English language arts exam in high school and college. For those not familiar, this approach usually

takes the form of a test that asks students to identify and analyze a variety of passages from the entire semester. For each excerpt, students must not only identify the text and author but also contextualize and closely read the text. Students are typically asked to make connections to relevant moments and larger themes outside the passage, so it requires broader comprehension as well.

Over time, I mixed this method into my Socratic lesson design, so that open-ended student discussions are anchored by a brief passage-analysis assessment at the end of *each class* as a low-stakes exit ticket. See Figure 1 for a description of what an hour-long lesson might look like.

This revised lesson structure is simple, but its elements work together powerfully. The approach organically integrates the holy trinity of literacy skills: reading, writing, and discussing. Because students do *not* know what passage is going to be on the exit ticket, class becomes a treasure hunt in which students must do the work of identifying and discussing the most important passages. Because there are most likely multiple salient passages, students cannot spend the whole time digging into just one; they have to work together to balance depth and breadth in their analyses.

Students take notes during the discussion, since even the strongest readers will not have explicated every textual nuance ahead of time, and

FIGURE 1. Sample Remixed Socratic Lesson: *Gem of the Ocean* Act 2, Scene 1

1) Pre-work: Students read assigned text before class—e.g., a chapter in a novel or a selection of poems.	Students read and annotate Act 2, Scene 1 of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* for homework with a focus on key themes that I previewed at the front end of the unit.
2) Warm-up (10 min): Students evaluate an exit ticket or two from the previous lesson, usually in a write-pair-share format.	Students silently read Monique's exit ticket from the previous day and then write about what she does well and what could be stronger. I chose her exit ticket because she is struggling with embedded quotations, which is a growth area for many of her peers as well. After students talk briefly with a partner, I cold-call on students to share their thoughts. Before moving on, I make sure to emphasize a class-wide focus area (embedded quotations) captured by Monique's work and ask them to revise her writing right then and there with this focus area in mind.
3) Discussion (30 min): In one to three large groups, students identify the most important passages from the homework reading, close-read these passages together, and connect them to larger themes.	Students circle up into two simultaneous discussion groups. I sit in the middle between the two circles and mostly take notes—only jumping in occasionally if I am worried they are getting off track. In their groups, students take turns highlighting key passages from the homework and analyzing them together. For example, Kerwean might point her peers to Solly's long monologue early in the scene and ask if they think it sheds light on the theme of economic freedom. A few minutes later, Jeremy might ask about the stolen bucket of nails and wonder if it might be a symbol to unpack. Students work quickly to explicate a handful of moments like this in their groups before time runs out.
4) Exit ticket (20 min): Students have to write a page in which they identify, contextualize, and analyze a passage chosen by me (their teacher) from the reading they did for homework.	I put one of the important passages from the homework—a monologue by Aunt Esther about the nails—on the exit ticket. Students, working independently without their books, now have to identify first who is speaking to whom and what is happening in that moment. Then students close-read the passage and connect it to larger themes and other relevant moments in the book. While they silently write, I circulate and coach them on their writing skills.

I allow students to reference these notes during the exit ticket. Students are also incentivized to collaborate more conscientiously, because the more effectively they identify and analyze key passages, the more likely they will be to crush the exit ticket.

While students are initially intimidated by the pop quiz awaiting them at the end of each lesson, most quickly become fans. I interviewed several former 10th grade students, who, even years later, recalled the format fondly. Iverson loved the challenge and compared it to leading his own bible study group because everyone could bring their own interpretations to the table. Sam said these remixed Socratics reminded him of a "themed potluck" where all the dishes work together as a well-balanced meal. Judeline felt "like a teacher for a day [or] a college student, with a more independent role." Satoya likened the process to a *Where's Waldo?* book because students "have to look closely and sift through the text." Even though she is a strong reader, Satoya said she had to work carefully with her peers because they would inevitably find key moments that she missed.

Secrets of Success

Within this relatively simple lesson structure, there is room for nuance, so let's examine three elements of this design in more depth: the *warm-up*, *discussion*, and *assessment*.

The Warm-Up

The warm-up can be used for many purposes—such as a quick reading quiz for accountability or brief vocabulary drills. However, I find that a read-write-pair-share activity examining earlier student work is often most fruitful. Early in the unit, students might silently examine for a few minutes an exemplary exit ticket written by a peer during the previous lesson, identifying and explaining a few strengths of it, and if there is time, considering how to improve it. During a later lesson, a teacher might juxtapose a stronger and weaker exit ticket before asking students to explain which is stronger and why. If time permits, students could even revise the weaker one to match the quality of the stronger one.

The Discussion

Before the first major discussion, teachers should explain the overall lesson structure to students—that they will need to identify and analyze key passages with an eye to being prepared for the surprise passage on the exit ticket. It is helpful to do a quick think-pair-share mini-lesson beforehand about what clues indicate that a passage might be important and worthy of discussion. The class can then brainstorm and take notes on these clues. We might, for example, discuss how a lengthy speech by a character or the reoccurrence of a symbol could indicate a passage's significance. I also often model how to make comments in the form of a question to spur and deepen a textual conversation. Even if students are unclear about the meaning of a particular passage or symbol, they can point peers to it and ask for their input, maybe sharing a few tentative hypotheses as they do.

Each day, it helps to give students a few minutes to test out their initial thinking about the reading in smaller duos or trios before the larger discussion begins. During the larger group discussions, teachers should keep their own remarks to a minimum. While the teacher may want to intervene occasionally in the first few lessons—for example, to encourage students to slow down or speed up their analysis of a particular passage—most of the heavy lifting should be done by the students. The students should feel that the onus is on them to identify and explicate the key passages without counting on the teacher to rescue them.

For early discussions, teachers may want to keep students in one larger group to better monitor and coach their discourse. Later on, however, shifting to multiple simultaneous groups will allow students to double or triple their opportunities to participate.

After the discussion, the teacher might take a couple of minutes to debrief with the whole class. The teacher can lift up moments of skillful facilitation or insightful analysis that the whole class can learn from. After some time, students can often lead debriefs like this on their own.

The Assessment

Lastly, how does regular assessment work within this lesson design? In addition to the occasional reading quiz, I recommend daily in-class homework checks for some sort of meaningful reader response, whether sticky-note annotations in their book or a two-column journal. Teachers will likely want to grade discussions to encourage participation by quieter students. I usually do not grade for the quality of student responses since students already have an incentive to work as efficiently as possible, but I do track the frequency of their participation on a clipboard (or enlist student volunteers to do this for me).

I typically enter this as a small classwork grade every few days. That way, students who struggle to join the discussion one day can make up for it with their participation another day. I also award daily bonus points to the students who first lead their peers to the passage chosen for each day's exit ticket—a beloved bit of daily suspense and gamification!

As for the exit ticket itself, I tend to choose just one passage for each lesson for students to analyze and then ask students to write anywhere from a paragraph to a couple pages of text. The basic *who*, *what*, *how* prompts are as follows:

- *Who* is talking? *Who* are they talking to?
- *What* is happening at this moment? *What* is the context?
- *How* does this moment shed light on the larger themes of the text? Make sure to close-read for the significance of at least a couple words or phrases in the text.

I usually give students anywhere from 5–20 minutes to work on this. Students at first often benefit from more time to craft their analyses and can start their nightly readings once they are done.

Some teachers may have the capacity to grade them each day while others might grade only one lesson's worth of exit tickets per week. Either way, feedback can be brief—as simple as a quick grade, a commendation, and a recommendation. The grade can be based on the accuracy of students' contextualization and the depth of their analysis, but it can be tailored to whatever reading and writing skills the class is working on. Typically, a student who meets expectations correctly identifies the "who" and "what" of the passage as well as close-reads at least a couple phrases for thematic development. Students can exceed expectations through even more extensive and/or less obvious analyses. Even if teachers do not grade each day's exit ticket, they can still circulate and give formative feedback while students write them in class.

And what about a culminating assessment? While one can end a Socratic-centered unit like this with a longer, multi-day paper, the natural conclusion is a longer passage-identification test similar to the exit tickets students have been completing daily. Since many students may be new to the longer passage-analysis test format, it is useful beforehand to do one final think-pair-share mini-lesson in which you ask students to brainstorm how to study for such an assessment—for example, by having a family member quiz them on randomly chosen passages or building a set of notes about key symbols and their meanings. That said, students usually excel on these final passage-analysis tests since they have been practicing this skill in each lesson and usually have plentiful notes to support their studying.

I have yet to find a more potent student-centered lesson design for my English classes.

That Magic Balance

Is this lesson design so perfect that I use it for every unit? Hardly. There is a place for assigning longer papers, at least quarterly. I also find that this type of lesson goes better in the second half of the year after I have used more traditional lesson structures to teach and model various close- and open-reading strategies. And when students are infectiously and insatiably engaged by a text, I sometimes drop the exit ticket quiz and revert to the traditional, more open-ended Socratic lesson structure.

That said, I have yet to find a more potent student-centered lesson design for my English classes. This principle of pairing open-ended, student-centered discussions with a more focused, individual post-assessment can easily be applied to other subjects as well. History teachers could have students read and discuss a packet of primary sources—à la the document-based question on the AP U.S. history exam—before choosing one source for students to analyze independently for the exit ticket. STEM teachers could have students wrestle with a textbook chapter or problem set in groups before choosing one concept or word problem to break down on their own at the end of class.

This remixed lesson structure is far from perfect; but it is a starting point for further innovation using student-centered discussions. I hope teachers continue to refine this method and share their results as we continue to pursue lesson designs that find that magic balance between autonomy and accountability, between joy and urgency. EL

[1]Copeland, M. (2005). *Socratic circles: Fostering critical and creative thinking in middle and high school*. Portsmouth, NH: Stenhouse.

[2]Wiggins, A. (2020). A better way to assess discussions. *Educational Leadership, 77*(7), 34–38.

Henry Seton (hseton@gmail.com) is a humanities teacher-leader, writer, and presenter. He formerly chaired the humanities department at the Community Charter School of Cambridge in Massachusetts. Follow him on Twitter @HenrySeton.