

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

Using Socratic Circles in Authentic Learning with Undergraduates

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We look for interesting pedagogies which both engage our 3rd year undergraduates in the theory and concepts of our subject, and contribute to their development and practice of 21st century employability skills (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017, see in particular pages 4-5). Socratic Circles provide an engaging and effective method to generate deeper discussion and insights and thus practice many of these employability skills (see Copland, 2005, for a description).

In our flipped class, we conduct an in-class activity in which students complete an assessable written group response to a case they individually prepare at home. The case exemplifies theory covered in readings and lecture materials. Drawing on each other for ideas, knowledge, and the different perspectives that enrich understanding, we hoped groups would work together to think about the theory and explore its application in the real life authentic learning situations provided by the cases.

Not so. Over several semesters, we tried various methods to improve our student's understanding of how to think about, explore, and problem solve the case questions. We wanted them to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the open-ended problems we set for which no prescribed or self-evident solution existed. To do so, they needed to draw upon and practice higher order skills including: the ability to transfer knowledge to new situations; the artfulness of

critical thinking; and the breadth of creative thinking (see Collins, 2014). Yet, despite our collective efforts, the majority of submissions comprised perfunctory paragraphs to gain marks.

By good fortune, when discussing this problem with a colleague he suggested Socratic Circles. A quick google generated a raft of useful resources, including videos, demonstrating how to apply the method. As we watched, we reflected on previous feedback in which some students had requested more discussion of the case in class. It occurred to us that by sandwiching the Socratic Circle discussion between the at-home preparatory reading of the case and the in-class assessable group questions, we could generate a good discussion of the case for those interested, whilst providing observers with more insights into the case material than they may otherwise have gained. After investigation and discussion, the teaching team agreed to roll out Socratic Circles across seven different classes comprising 219 students.

After the very first Socratic Circle had concluded, the five volunteer discussants commented upon their experience. Discussants were all positive and spoke of how quickly the time went, how surprised they were about the volume of what they had to say, and how they forgot about the observers listening and watching them, so caught up had they become in the process of discussion. Subsequent feedback from teachers and students was also consistently positive, with interesting discussions occurring and the caliber of responses to the assessment questions improving.

The average class size was 31 students, giving between 6 to 10 opportunities across the semester to join a 5-person Socratic Circle discussion. As observation over time familiarized and de-stressed the process, we found the majority of those students reluctant to volunteer as discussants had lost their social anxiety. By the end of the semester, 70% of the cohort had

volunteered for at least one Socratic Circle, and nearly half the cohort had volunteered for three or more.

We believe adding the Socratic Circles contributed significantly to increasing the students' learning and enjoyment of the subject. Not only were students more actively engaged in class and submitting better quality case responses after the introduction of Socratic Circles (at T2), but also the institution's end of semester feedback survey revealed a significant drop in the count of negative comments related to the class and cases when compared to the previous period (T1). After introducing Socratic Circles in T2, the count of negative feedback about class length dropped from 24% (101 respondents) in T1, to 6% in T2 (81 respondents). Similarly, the count of negative feedback related to the cases dropped from 17% in T1 to 4% in T2.

These results were consistent with the informal paper-based voluntary survey conducted in two of the classes (n=29, 39% response rate) in which students rated questions on a 5-point scale (1= strongly agree and 5= strongly disagree). On the two questions probing benefits of the Socratic Circles (helped me understand, gave me additional insights) the mean response was 2 (agree). There was an overall satisfaction question for each of a) the preparatory case notes, b) the Socratic Circle, and c) the group assessable submission (..... is/are/were a useful learning activity). Each response mean was 2 (agree).

We interpret these results to suggest the following: students found the Socratic Circles so engaging they did not notice time passing; the activity gave them a better insight into, or more enjoyment of, the case study process; and Socratic Circles do provide a good learning experience for students. However, the observers to the Socratic Circle discussion do need to be encouraged to stay focused on the conversation and not be side tracked by their digital devices.

The innovation of the Socratic Circle was possible because the faculty's Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning supports teachers willing to identify and trial innovative pedagogies that might improve student outcomes of engagement, satisfaction, and performance. Our teaching team care about good learning experiences for students, and they are prepared to do the extra work that might contribute to improved outcomes for students. In implementing the Socratic Circles, the positive increase in student engagement with the cases and consequent learning experience went hand in hand. If the students had proven unwilling to participate in the activity, the previous activity could have been quickly be re-introduced. However, it was immediately apparent that this activity, which gave students center stage in the classroom, and showed them their opinions and thoughts mattered and were worth sharing, was a keeper.

Thus, the Socratic Circle is now a permanent part of the teaching process in this class. In each class, there is a different case study, a new set of questions from the student body, and a new assessable question from the teacher. However, the process remains consistent, giving students the opportunity to build their confidence in the process and find, in their own time, a willingness to "join the conversation". The sheer pleasure of watching a class of students buzz with engaged discussion, the boost individuals get when they see their question has been selected for the class work, and the improved caliber of responses to case questions all contribute to make this simple task a pedagogical winner.

References

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