SOCRATIC CIRCLES

Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking

in Middle and High School

MATT COPELAND

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For my students—

Thanks for all the lessons you've taught me

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Introduction

On the first day of school, James entered my classroom several minutes before the tardy bell, making sure no one else was in the room. He slammed his books on a desk and said firmly, "Just so you know, I hate English and there is absolutely nothing you can do to change that."

Standing at five feet six inches, James had a smile and a charm that usually helped him talk his way through any situation. He was a bright and verbose young man with a great deal of bravado and swagger that carried over from the fields of athletic competition. His successes on the soccer field ensured his popularity, and his sense of humor and smile made him shine. In class, however, James lacked focus and direction. The qualities that made him a celebrity among his peers also made him resented and, at times, despised. His passion and energy often led him into trouble with his teachers and peers alike. His exuberance and strong will turned off many fellow students to his ideas, not because of what he said but because of how he said it.

As tempting as it was to fire back with a sarcastic comment after James's outburst on the first day of class, I bit my tongue and masked my pain with a smile of my

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own. That was the last time I heard James say that he hated English, but I've never forgotten those words. In fact, as I look back on them now, I realize just how crucial and revealing they were. James needed to vent; he needed to blow off some steam. His frustration was not directed at me. It was not even directed at the content of my class. James was unhappy with himself and his abilities. He dreamed of gaining more from English class and more from himself. When I met James as a high school junior, he was one credit behind his peers in English, labeled an "at-risk" student in jeopardy of not graduating on time, and abhorred English class.

By the end of his senior year, James's dream was coming true. He was concurrently enrolled in three English classes (by choice), was going to graduate on time, and had decided that English was going to be his college major. Now a Division I soccer player at a university in the Midwest, James has continued his growth and found many of the answers and resolutions he was looking for. If you ask James what was responsible for such a dramatic transformation in his life, his answer will be encased in that same soccer-field smile and swagger; his answer will be Socratic circles.

I had the privilege of working with James during the two-year period when I first began implementing Socratic circles in my classroom. As a first-year teacher, I was frustrated with my students' poor reading abilities and habits. I was frustrated with their lack of critical thought and creativity. I was frustrated with their complete unwillingness to engage in discussion. During my first year of teaching, my students clearly communicated to me their belief in the philosophy that education is a passive activity. I struggled all year long to help them overcome that belief, but to no avail.

That summer I searched high and low for something—anything—that might help alleviate my students' apathy. I wanted a strategy that asked them to probe below the surface meaning of what they read, one that allowed them to think creatively and critically, one that stimulated discussion in my classroom that made learning active and engaging, rather than an exercise in passivity. In scouring the research and other pedagogical publications and in talking with peers and colleagues, sifting through strategy after strategy, one idea kept reappearing: the Socratic seminar.

After that discovery, and in the five years since as I have modified and adapted this practice to fit my classroom and my students, I have begun to achieve my dream of turning students into critical consumers of all forms of literacy. Socratic seminars can be structured and can appear very different from one classroom to the next. In fact, even the names applied to the strategy can vary greatly: a "Socratic seminar" here, a "fishbowl conversation" there, an "open forum" across the way. In talking with colleagues and adapting my use of this strategy, I've settled on the practice outlined in this book, *Socratic Circles.*

Socratic circles are the best activity that takes place in my classroom, bar none, and I am convinced that their power will unlock doors for both fellow teachers and their students. The results that manifest themselves in front of a teacher's eyes are mesmerizing. For teachers who seek to instill learning skills in their students that will carry them through life long after they have left the confines of the classroom, Socratic circles offer a portion of the answer.

Socratic circles turn partial classroom control, classroom direction, and classroom governance over to students by creating a truly equitable learning community where the weight and value of student voices and teacher voices are indistinguishable from each other. What might appear to be random chaos to the naked eye of a hallway passerby is, in fact, the careful implementation of a method of philosophy more than 2,400 years old.

Socratic circles change the way individuals read, think, discuss, write, and act; they have the power to change a student's perspective on living, learning, and behaving. Critical reading, critical thinking, discussion skills, listening skills, team-building skills, vocabulary improvement, and student ownership, voice, and empowerment are all valid reasons for including Socratic circles in the classroom. But perhaps more important is the reality that Socratic circles foster in students a new way of looking at the world around them. One of the keys to creating lifelong learners—students who continue the quest for knowledge and understanding long after they have exited our classrooms—is contained within the magic of Socratic circles.

In a time when our students are being inundated with increasing numbers of standardized tests and an increased push to have the "correct" answers at all times, they have less and less time to work on the critical and creative thinking skills that will ultimately facilitate their growth and development into productive, responsible citizens. Socratic circles are one strategy that provides this opportunity while still having students practice and polish skills in a wide variety of other curricular areas, including reading, speaking, listening, and vocabulary.

Our students need practice and instruction in working collaboratively to solve problems, making decisions, and determining meaning. The activity in our classrooms should not always concern itself with students knowing the right answers; sometimes it should concern itself with students asking the right questions. With the help of Socratic circles and effective circle leaders, our students can be empowered to do just that.

This book is designed to help teachers begin using Socratic circles in their own practice. This strategy can be adapted in numerous ways and modified to fit a wide range of classrooms from the elementary to the college level. It is my hope that the book provides the necessary back-

ground and framework to help teachers start thinking, designing, and constructing an arrangement for the use of Socratic circles in their own teaching and that it can be a continuing resource for them as their own practice and experience begin to grow.

The first chapter outlines the reasons and purposes for implementing Socratic circles into the classroom routine. Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 explain in detail the process and procedures of Socratic circles and offer insight and helpful hints into making them work. Chapter 6, then, shows an example Socratic circle from my own classroom to reveal how students perform in these situations and how these skills blend together to create a cohesive whole. Extension activities, follow-up activities, and methods of assessment are outlined in Chapters 7 and 8 to help align the strategy with the curriculum and help students make connections between their discussions and other content material.

At the beginning of each chapter, I have also included student dialogue inspired by some of the critical reading and thinking we have done in my classroom. Rather than transcribing this dialogue directly, I have chosen to remove many of the "likes," "umms," "you knows," and other snippets of teenage vernacular, not only for the purposes of readability but also to help the reader focus on the collaborative thinking in which the students are engaged. Through these examples, and the interactions and insight within each, I hope readers begin to see the growth and learning Socratic circles can facilitate.

In many ways, this book is a celebration of the power and influence of dialogue. If it weren't for the ongoing assistance of my colleagues, through their thoughts, ideas, questions, reassurances, and beratings, these pages in front of you might never have been written. Their help has been indispensable. Among them are Bryan Anderson, Lawrence Baines, Jerrod Bohn, John Bushman, Annette Collins, John Franklin, Jeff Handley, Judy Hayn, Annie Heidersbach, Chris Goering, Todd Goodson, Marc Grout, Dara Oswald, Sam Rockford, Julie Samuels, Ingrid Seitz, and Bill Varner. Thanks.

Socratic circles have changed the way I teach. They have made my classroom a more open, inviting place, where students want to be and want to learn. They have transformed my practice and philosophy and have created a community that fosters active, engaged learning. I once dreamed of a classroom where true learning was a noble endeavor that stimulated the minds, hearts, and imaginations of students, a classroom that instilled a desire to explore life and the world beyond its walls. With the help of the classroom dialogue created through Socratic circles, I've realized that dream.

Chapter 1

THE BENEFITS OF SOCRATIC CIRCLES

DIALOGUE INSPIRED BY BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S "BEATING TIME."

BRITTANY: *Obviously she's upset that Arizona got rid of poetry in all of their classes.*

JIMMY: *What makes you say that?*

BRITTANY: *Look at the lines and the way she worded things, even in the first stanza—"interdicted . . . evicted . . . squanders." It's like she's just screaming at the governor.*

STEPHANIE: *I agree. She thinks this is a total mistake, and she's trying to convince others she's right so that maybe people will realize their mistake before it's too late.*

TYLER: *Too late for what?*

STEPHANIE: *Too late for poetry. If people grew up without learning about poetry, none of us would understand it. It's like a whole art form would be lost forever.*

JIMMY: *It's not like poetry is difficult. I'm sure people could still figure it out even if it wasn't taught in school. I don't understand what she's so mad about.*

JOSE: *You're probably right. People probably would still be able to figure out poetry, but I'm not sure they would figure it out as well or if it would mean as much if we didn't learn about it in school. I mean, every time I read a new poem, it gets easier, and what I learn in one poem I can usually use in another poem.*

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STEPHANIE: *You lost me.*

JOSE: *Okay. Like right here in the middle of the poem she says, "where the fans overhead / whispered 'I am, I am' in iambic pentameter." If it wasn't for studying poetry in school, I'd have no idea what iambic pentameter was. And I certainly wouldn't pick up on the idea that the noise the fan blades make sounds like iambic pentameter.*

BRITTANY: *Yeah, that makes sense. The more you learn about something, the more you are going to understand it.*

JOSE: *I think it's more than that, though. I think that's her whole point.*

STEPHANIE: *What's her whole point?*

JOSE: *She's saying that if poetry isn't taught in school, if we don't learn about all the tricks and devices poets use, then we won't be able to understand her, we won't understand all the poetry that's going on around us all the time.*

BRITTANY: *I get it. We become like poetry morons who don't understand or appreciate the beauty of poetry, whether it's written poetry or natural poetry, like the storm and the rain in the last stanza. Then she has no one to communicate with, no one to share what she writes with, and we all just sit there dumb. That's what she's angry about.*

JOSE: *Exactly.*

In November 1999, after three long months working and struggling each week to better understand the material of the class and one another, students enrolled in my freshman English class finally got it. A collection of once downcast, uninspired expressions suddenly lighted up with wisdom, understanding, and purpose. Seated in the center of my room in two concentric circles, students appeared to freeze in their places, savoring and enjoying the moment, only their eyes moving as if in a slow waltz from face to face. And at each stop around the circle, as their eyes slowly traveled from peer to peer, something deep within them was surging to the surface, ready to erupt. Only after the first face cracked at the corners of the mouth and the smiles of self-satisfaction, accomplishment, and success became contagious throughout the room, did those student eyes fall to me, their teacher. And at that moment, after three months of my own frustration and soul-searching, I knew something magical had just happened for my students.

The conversation above represents a "lightbulb" moment when suddenly the class curriculum, real-world life skills, and the discovery of personal meaning and relevance all erupted within our classroom. Suddenly what we studied and learned in the classroom, even the intricacies of poetry and iambic pentameter, seemed urgent and important. The result was a group of students with a deep understanding of a selection of text, improved skills in comprehension, vocabulary, listening, speaking,

and critical thinking, and experience in working together to construct meaning, solve problems, and explore life connections. The method for helping students to achieve this learning was the strategy known as Socratic circles.

A BRIEF HISTORY

More than 2,400 years ago, Socrates believed there was a more effective and productive way of teaching students than the lecture. He believed that within each of his students resided an often-untapped reservoir of knowledge and understanding. And by helping students examine their premonitions and beliefs while at the same time accepting the limitations of human thought, Socrates believed students could improve their reasoning skills and ultimately move toward more rational thinking and ideas more easily supported with logic. The methodology he used to accomplish this has come to be known as Socratic questioning.

Modern education appears obsessed with answers—both correct and incorrect. It is questions, however, that drive the human mind in critical thought. Elder and Paul (1998) note, "Questions define tasks, express problems, and delineate issues. Answers, on the other hand, often signal a full stop in thought. Only when an answer generates a further question does thought continue its life as such" (p. 297). Typically, teachers ask questions because we hope the answers will represent a final destination of learning and thought, a kind of educational checklist where either "yes," this learning has occurred, or "no," this learning has not occurred. We must push our students through this initial barrier of surface meaning, show them that all thinking involves the asking of questions, and reveal that the asking of one question leads to the asking of further questions. It is the ongoing, honest quest for information and understanding through the act of questioning that embodies the true ideal of democratic education.

Socratic questioning, then, greatly assists us in this endeavor. The purpose here is to use questioning to bring forward already held ideas in the students' minds, to make them more aware and cognizant of the learning and understanding that has already occurred. Adler (1984) defines this concept as "questioning students about something they have read so as to help them improve their understanding of basic ideas and values" (pp. 17–18). With this goal in sight, the idea of Socratic questioning is incredibly valuable in reviving student minds made numb to critical thought.

Socratic questioning is a systematic process for examining the ideas, questions, and answers that form the basis of human belief. It involves recognizing that all new understanding is linked to prior understanding,