SOCRATIC SEMINAR IN THE BASIC ENGLISH
COMMUNITY COLLEGE CLASSROOM

by

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Date ___16 May 2018___

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in
Teachers College, Columbia University

2018
ABSTRACT

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This case study documents three Socratic seminars in a Basic English class in a community college in an urban center in northeast United States. Specifically, the study examines the presence and absence of dialogue in these three Socratic seminars. The researcher employed qualitative methods to address the following questions: (1) What are the characteristic features and affordances of the discourse that takes place in a Socratic seminar conducted within a community college Basic English class for nine enrolled students in that class who participated regularly in an assigned Socratic seminar? (2) How do these nine students perceive and describe their experience of the discourse of the Socratic seminar in which they participated? Examining her data through the lens of a socio-cultural theory perspective, this research found that students effectively employ many of the criteria of dialogue. Students described their previous experiences of classroom discussion and their more recent experiences of Socratic seminar. This investigation suggests that Socratic seminar provided opportunities for dialogue and meaningful interaction for these students of Basic English.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my advisor, Professor Blau, whose knowledge, encouragement, and patience has been invaluable during my time at Teachers College.

Thank you to Professor Morrell whose questions and promptings have helped me to think broadly and critically.

Thank you to Professor Fecho for your passion and commitment to dialogue as a theory and in reality.

Thank you to Dr. Rock for being a part of my committee and for your interest in this topic.

Thank you to Professor Randi Dickerson through whose class the ideas for this study first were trialed.

Thanks to Erick Gordon for deciding to introduce our class to Socratic seminar.

Thank you to my husband for both his support and belief that I could do this. To my children, Anya and Ayan, who inspire me through their questions, curiosity, and laughter.

Thank you to Maa and Babujee for your support and encouragement over the years.

Thank you to my sister, Jane Dicker, who first ignited the Socratic seminar fire inside me, for her brilliance and passion in the what education should be.

Thank you to my mum who has instilled in me the importance of allowing people the space to talk and explore. For being brilliant, yet humble.
Thank you to my dad for being a constant rock in my life, for being the one who asked me whether I was happy doing what I was doing, who reminds me that we should spend our time doing what we love.

Thank you to my doctoral cohort, specifically, Maryam Alikahani who always knows where to find the answer, to Moira Pirsch who inspired me to keep at, to Mariette Ogg, my dissertation proposal partner, who epitomizes what dialogue looks like.

To Margaret Scanlan who was always so helpful, encouraging, and cheerful.

To Rocky Schwarz without whose practical help this could never have looked nearly so professional.

Thank you to God who blessed me with these people in my life.

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Chapter I
BACKGROUND

My interest in collaborative, and specifically dialogical, discussion as integral to the learning experience is simultaneously a response to, and a reaction against, my own experiences as both an educator and student. As a student, I have participated in many types of classes, including lecture-based classes, online classes, and seminar-style classes; as an educator, I have also experimented with a variety of different pedagogical methods. As a higher education student, I have found that unless a class is specifically designed to foster student collaboration, I could feel isolated from other students. In the college classes that I have taught, many students have stated that they like to work alone and dislike collaborative work; yet it is in these classes, when I have provided opportunities for student collaboration, that I have heard these same students leaving my room talking to one another about the topics raised in the class.

As a masters student at Teachers College, I took a class taught by Erick Gordon, where we were introduced to Socratic seminar. My sister (Jane Dicker), also an English teacher, was visiting from England, and she came along to the class with me. After this experience with Socratic seminar, Jane went back to England and began to introduce Socratic seminar to her own high school students. A few years later, Jane moved to New York to pursue her masters degree in educational anthropology at Teachers College. Consequently, we both took a research class together under Randi Dickson. It was as part of this class that we piloted a study on the impact of Socratic seminar in the community college classroom. This study led me to believe that student dialogue, teacher-facilitated
but not teacher-controlled, seemed to provide a space where students revealed a more nuanced understanding of the classroom literature than in the alternative classroom activities I had provided for them.

As a classroom teacher, I was able to see the increase in student investment and engagement in their own learning when the students themselves were central to the construction of meanings and where collaborative learning was a focus of the class. In my studies as a graduate student, I have found myself agreeing with Freire’s (1970) views of student-centered learning; being enlightened by Rosenblatt’s (1968) theories about reading as a transaction; and finding understanding in socio-culturalists' advocacy of verbal collaboration. The combination of these beliefs and experiences have led me to see the value of certain types of talk in the classroom, specifically talk that is collaborative and dialogical rather than recitative and competitive. In order that students are able to successfully engage in discussion that is engaging, collaborative, and meaningful, there must be dialogical discussion.

In this study, I have explored when, how, and why Socratic seminar is dialogical and when, how, and why it can also sometimes falter. I have also explored the students’ own perceptions of their experiences as participants in Socratic seminars in their community college class.

**Definitions of Dialogue and Discourse**

"Dialogue" and "discourse" are two key terms that I am using in the research questions for this study; therefore, it seems appropriate to at least provide brief definitions of these two concepts before we proceed. These terms are more fully discussed in Chapter II as part of the literature review. I am using "discourse" to refer to “language-in-use” (Gee, 2014, p. 20), specifically, for the purpose of this study, language that is spoken. I am not arguing that discourse has to be spoken, but rather my interest for
this study is that of spoken discourse. This concept of spoken discourse is particularly relevant to this study since all the data I have collected has been spoken discourse.

In terms of "dialogue," I am defining it, again for this study, as spoken dialogue. I am not claiming that dialogue can only be spoken. Indeed, one of Bakhtin’s (1981) essays on dialogue is concerned primarily with the written word, that of the novel, but for this study, my interest is in spoken dialogue. I am defining "dialogue" in the following ways: it is used with the intention of developing real and collaborative understanding (Britton, 1970; Bruer, 1994; Moffett, 1968; Tannen, 1998; Wells, 2000), through the co-construction of knowledge (John-Steiner, John-Steiner, & Teresa, 2000; Wells, 2000), it never needs to arrive at a consensus (Matusov & Duyke, 2009; Nikulin, 2006; Wells, 2000), and may never have an obvious “final end-point” (Matusov & Duyke, 2009, p. 85).

**Student Talk in the Classroom**

Literature and student conversation have long-been connected. In the 19th century United States, students would discuss literature, not as part of classroom-sanctioned activities, but rather in extracurricular student-run literary societies (Applebee, 1974; Graff, 1987). The 1960s Dartmouth Conference advocated student talk over the continually popular lecture (Dixon, 1967, p. 35). The current reality, though, is that for many students, for much of the time, teachers lead/dominate/control most of the classroom “discussions.” Students are often foils to the teachers’ show. Students seem to be frequently asked to talk, not as a way to explore new ideas, but rather in order to expose their lack of knowledge (Cazden, 2001; Marzano, 2003; Moffett, 1968; Nystrand, 1997; Pinnell & Jagger, 2003) For teachers who strive for monologue, the talk that is often employed in the classroom is typically: scripted questions, controlling discussions, ignoring off-topic comments, and evaluating students (Cazden, 2001; Mehan, 1979;
Nystrand, 1997). This type of discourse is the verbal equivalent of written short-answer and fill-in-the-blanks, also called Initiate, Respond, Evaluate (IRE) (Cazden, 2001, p. 30; Nystrand, 1997, p. 16). Where this monologically organized instruction occurs, the textbook (edited by an unseen authority) and the teacher's voice are the primary voices in the classroom.

In community colleges, the dominant teacher voice may be even more pronounced than in secondary schools. Felderman (2016) found that community colleges have more instructors employing lecturing than any other method of instruction. McClenney and Peterson (2006) gathered information from over 39 community colleges and found that the time spent on lecture in community colleges is as follows: “Ninety-eight percent of faculty report using lecture in their classes, and almost a third (31 percent) spend at least half of their class time lecturing. Another 40 percent of faculty use lecture between 20 percent and 50 percent of the time” (p. 26).

Lei (2007, 2008) found that the percentage of time spent on lectures varies according to the instructors’ seniority and education. Specifically, he found that adjunct instructors and instructors without a doctorate spend more time on lecture than on any other form of instruction. Not only did they spend more time on lecture than other instruction, but they did so more than their “full-time counterparts” (Lei, 2007, p. 156). Considering the 2012 National Center for Educational Statistics report that within community colleges the part-time faculty is over 70% of the teaching staff, then it is not too much of a stretch to suspect that most community college classrooms are lecture-heavy and student voice-light.

All the students in my study reported that they had very little or no experience of any type of class discussions in their English classrooms before they had started college that semester. Why does it even matter that my students have had very little opportunity to speak or have any discussions in the classroom? Surely, the teacher knows more than students, and therefore has the duty to impart this knowledge to the students. Indeed,
while traditionally it was the belief teachers had the responsibility to lecture while
students had the responsibility to absorb the information, the tide has turned. Bligh’s
(1998) comprehensive research of the literature about lecture found that, while lecture is
as effective as other method at “transmitting facts and information” (p. 6), it is not
effective for “promoting thought … teaching values, inspiring interest in a subject or for
personal and social adjustment…, for teaching skills” (p. 6). Indeed, the study of
literature is more concerned with all that lectures do not do well (promoting thought,
values, interest, and skills) and far less with what they can do (teaching of facts).

**Problem Statement**

While undergraduate English programs often claim to strive for higher order
critical thinking skills, basic-level college classes are often expected to focus on “drills
and practice … e.g. subject-verb agreement, punctuation rules, sentence-level writing”
(Grubb, 2012, p. 52). The basic-level English classes that I have taught are generally
comprised of students who have been assigned to low-level English classes for the
majority of their academic lives.

At the college where this study was conducted, the students in this study had been
assessed by the community college through a multiple-choice reading exam and a writing
exam as needing additional support through basic classes before they were considered
eligible to qualify for undergraduate classes. The student, or the taxpayer, pays for these
“basic” courses, but these classes don't count as credit toward the students’ actual degree.
The student is required to continue to take basic-level classes until such time as they
“exit” out of the basic classes. For the students in this study, their combined portfolio
grade and the results of a writing exam and a computerized Accuplacer reading exam
determined whether they would remain in basic-level classes for the next semester or
could begin taking English classes that would count as credit toward their degree.
Having been in the educational field for over 15 years, I have been involved in various initiatives that have sought to improve student literacy. I have taught both advanced English and Basic English (in some schools referred to as remedial English), and I have found that while the curriculum for advanced English can often be exciting, inspiring, and challenging, the curriculum for Basic English frequently seems to be irrelevant, tedious, and repetitive.

Levin (2008) acknowledges that while there has not been any “reliable national survey of the teaching techniques used in remedial courses at community colleges” (p. 186), the consensus is that “drill-and-skill approaches are still dominant” (p. 186). Grubb’s (2012) study sought to redress the lack of data in “basic skills education in community colleges” by spending three years in over twenty community colleges in classroom observations and interviews. Grubb found that what happens in the “basic” college classroom; is an emphasis on, a “remedial pedagogy,” that is to say, an approach that is concerned with “the most basic skills” (p. 55). He contends that teachers in these classrooms frequently utilize IRE questioning and exhibit expectations that students should passively learn by, “absorbing material from the instructor. It is relentlessly teacher-centered, with almost no chance for students to participate in their own learning” (p. 55).

The differences between the basic/remedial English classroom and the advanced English classroom at the high school level have been even better documented. Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) examined the practices in 19 different schools in both urban and suburban schools, documenting what happened in three types of classes: remedial, general, and honors. They found that “lower track students have less engagement in all aspects of effective English instruction: dialogic instruction, envisionment-building activities, extended curricular conversations, and high academic demands” (p. 719). And in terms of actual numbers, the average amount of time provided
for open discussion was 3.7 minutes per hour in the lower-track classes, compared to 14.5 minutes per hour in the high-track classes (p. 719).

My experiences with lower-track students, my research on remedial education, and my beliefs about the importance of the active role students should play in constructing meaning opened me up to the opportunities Socratic seminar might have to offer. I wanted to explore whether Socratic seminar could give my students an opportunity to use critical thinking skills in a dialogue-rich environment as a way to improve their understanding of literature.

**Sociocultural Theory**

This study is grounded in sociocultural theory. While Vygotsky has long been considered the forefather of sociocultural theory; sociocultural theories have been influenced by other figures such as Wertsch (1985, 1990, 2009), Minick (1987), and Bruner (1985, 1987) and continues to be refined and added to. For example, Wells et al. argue that the linguist Halliday’s (Halliday & Hassan, 1976) work can be considered to complement the work of Vygotsky. Wertsch (2009) has proposed that Vygotsky’s sociocultural approach has three main themes:

1) A reliance on genetic, or developmental, analysis; 2) the claim that higher mental functioning in the individual derives from social life; and 3) the claim that human action, on both the social and individual planes, is mediated by tools and signs. (p. 20)

Recent sociocultural work has emphasized that of “ontogenesis (development over the life of an individual) and microgenesis (development over the course of, and resulting from, particular interactions in specific sociocultural settings)” (Wells et al., 1999, p. 5). Bonk and Kim (1998) argue that while sociocultural theory has long been linked to K-12 education (p. 68) (perhaps due to Vygotsky’s later work on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which highlights scaffolding techniques as a way to help students
reach their full potential) it also has relevance to adult learning. Indeed, Bonk and Kim, present sociocultural pedagogy as having a firm place in the adult class with its emphasis on “dialogue, teacher colearning, peer collaboration, questioning, students bringing knowledge to class, and joint knowledge construction” (p. 69).

It seems helpful, to me, to explain how sociocultural theory has informed my specific thinking about this project. The ideas that I have derived from sociocultural theory have influenced both my teaching and this study. I considered the implementation of Socratic seminar in my community college class a worthy endeavor because I believed that the theories of sociocultural theorists have merit. It appeared to me that providing opportunities for students to collaborate and discuss the literature that they had read would result in them having a better grasp of the literature than if they were did not engage with one another in this way. Additionally, using sociocultural theory as a framework for this study helped me to consider two main ways that I could explore the spoken word in the Socratic seminar. Firstly, I considered the verbal interactions in terms of the importance and the transformative effect of the tool of language and the ways in which language might promote and assist thinking, or to put it more succinctly, how it might “mediate mental activity” (Wells et al., 1999, p. 7). Secondly, I considered how these verbal interactions could also be examples of collaborative learning and specifically the times that the students seemed to be learning from one another through their conversation.

Talking allows the individual to benefit from the collective understanding. Studies show that talk seems to both aid thinking and promote understanding (Harman, 1991; Vygotsky, 1962). Indeed, Billett (1998) offers the explanation that, according to a sociocultural perspective, talking is valuable because different interpretations are an inevitable product of any social encounter. If interpretations were identical, there would be little need to communicate (Newman, et al., 1989), consequently, the need for communication among
individuals provides evidence of the interpretative nature of knowledge construction. (p. 25)

The act of talking to people who think differently from oneself is, in itself, a way in which we develop new perspectives and interpretations on the world.

Critical to the understanding of why talk is significant in helping students begin to interpret literature is Vygotsky’s (1980) theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which he defines as “the distance between actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86).

This is central to my beliefs about why students may benefit from participating in Socratic seminar. Specifically, I am considering whether and how students learn from one another in Socratic seminar (Dixon, 1967, p. 103). This study will focus throughout on how and to what extent students reap benefits in skills and understanding from working in partnership with peers who are who are only slightly more or slightly less advanced than themselves (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990).

There are strategies that De Valenzuela (2006) refers to as “instructional conversation” (p. 305) that effective teachers employ. These such strategies include the asking of questions, comments that encourage reflection, and engagement in dialogue. Such strategies can be employed by the students themselves within the Socratic seminar. The use of such practices can help the students to examine, more closely, both the literature and to encourage one another to clarify their thinking. These practices that build upon Vygotskyan learning theory are closely connected to the idea of a “cognitive apprenticeship” (Beaufort, 2000; Ding, 2008). According to Ding (2008), a cognitive apprenticeship depends upon the context and situation in which newcomers engage in cognition and learning. That context is called by Lave and Wenger (1991) “legitimate peripheral participation,” whereby learners acquire knowledge and skill by observing and
imitating experts as well as participating at the periphery of community activities. (Ding, 2008, p. 6).

It is the necessity of collaboration and interaction that enables “tacit learning” to occur, suggests Ding (2008, p. 6), and while observation and imitation have their place in learning, it is this actual “doing” that is integral to a cognitive apprenticeship. It is not difficult to see how this idea of cognitive apprenticeship relates to the Socratic seminar, where the students are literally peripheral when they are observing their classmates and where they then proceed to “do” the discussion through collaboration with the other participants in the discussion. The structure of the Socratic seminar and the principles that it promotes are important in allowing and encouraging students to assist one another.

Assorted studies have found that collaborative learning is effective in a variety of different scenarios, from elementary school students in the playground (Miller & Almon, 2009) to medical students diagnosing a patient (Bruffe, 1989). One explanation for why collaboration has been found to be so effective is that when students are working in groups, “with other people who are at about the same stage of development … [they] are less afraid of risking errors that are inevitable whenever we try to learn something new” (Bruffe, 1989, p. 219). Unlike typical class discussions, where the student offers a contribution to the teacher, or to the class, as an individual, the structure of the Socratic seminar is such that the individual student is no longer standing alone and making a statement about the text, but rather they have the support of the group who together are trying to “figure it out.”

In contrast to a collaborative learning classroom, discussion can, at times, seem to be competitive, and the students themselves seem constructed and bound to each other as "winners or losers" (McDermott, 1997). These types of competitive discussions promote individualism at the expense of the growth and development of the collective. Socratic seminar may offer students the opportunity to talk and deepen their own, and each other’s, understanding of the subject being discussed in a more collaborative
environment. A Socratic seminar promotes collaborative, rather than competitive, class
discussion by providing feedback for students at the end of each discussion—feedback
that is concerned with the students’ behavior rather than the specifics of their academic
contributions, and collaborative behavior is commended while competitive behavior is
criticized.

**Socratic Seminar**

Socrates is a figure from over 2,400 years ago, but there is much debate about
whether he is really the source of contemporary Socratic practice. We have no written
records from Socrates himself, so we have to rely on Plato’s *Dialogues* to paint a picture
of Socrates for us. Schneider (2013) argues that we know so little about Socrates that, “it
is notoriously difficult to determine what his actual instructional practices may have
been” (p. 614). Mintz (2009) reconciles the disconnect between what we know about
Socrates and Socratic pedagogy by suggesting, “Such theories may not be inspired by
Socrates’ pedagogical methods so much as by his life and reputation as an educator” (p.
491). The common denominator when using Socrates's name in reference to education is
that of, “active engagement of students through questioning…. Socratic education is
directly opposed to lecturing” (p. 479). Of course, IRE is also a method of instruction
built on asking questions. Mintz explains, however, that the asking questions does not
itself define a pedagogy as Socratic. The key issue is what kind of questions are asked.
IRE questions typically call for the recollection of information and facts, while Socratic
questioning tends to challenge beliefs and call for reflective and critical thinking (p. 483).

Much of what today is termed as Socratic pedagogy is based on the work of John
Erskine of Columbia University in the 1900s. Erskine has been credited with creating an
instructional model for a classroom that focused upon discussion over lecture (Schneider,
2012, p. 27). While Socratic seminar today is most commonly practiced in K-12 schools,
St. John’s College in Annapolis has used Socratic seminar as its mode of teaching since 1937 (Schneider, 2013, p. 630).

Although it has been argued by Schneider (2013) that Socratic practice has no agreed set of specific practices beyond that of “asking questions” (p. 632), I would point to contemporary sources as being in agreement that Socratic practice is concerned, not just with any type of discourse, but more specifically discourse that is dialogic in form. Copeland (2005) commits a chapter to classroom dialogue, and Moeller and Moeller (2002) open their book on Socratic seminars by asking, “If good teaching is dialogue, why does the little-red-school-house method continue to dominate?” (p. 1), while Strong’s (1996) book on Socratic seminars also dedicates a chapter to “Intellectual dialogue.”

Socratic seminars can take a number of forms. Schneider (2013) describes the variety of Socratic seminars in the following ways: “Teachers are at the center of some and at the periphery of others. Talk is common in all, but it includes chaotic zigzagging in one class and linear directionality in another. Socratic classrooms can be relaxed or tense, loud or quiet, large or small” (p. 26). Nevertheless, the commitment to dialogue, questions, and student voice are the common components of all the versions of Socratic seminar.

My longstanding desire to engage students actively in their learning and to foster collaboration in classroom discussions turned me emphatically against the traditional banking model, which lecture, whereby the student is largely silent and “the teacher is the depositor” (Freire, 1970, p. 58), seems to epitomize. While, quite legitimately, there is an argument that because students may be silent while attending a lecture it cannot be assumed that they are passive, they could, in fact, be engaging with the lecture in a multitude of ways. Nevertheless, aside from the difficulty of identifying when students may be engaged during lecture this type of format does not provide many opportunities for the teacher to be responsive to either student interest or need. I wanted to be part of a
class where I explicitly emphasized active student-centered learning; which I felt lecture
did not so easily lend itself to. This led me to search for a type of Socratic seminar that
characterized the pedagogical opposite to the banking model. In finding my own way to a
satisfactory Socratic seminar, I, like many Socratic educators, have felt “free to borrow
… from others” (Schneider, 2013, p. 632), including techniques that my sister Jane
Dicker used in her work on Socratic seminar, which emphasized compassion and
empathy in the classroom.

Compassion and empathy are vital in encouraging students to be open to the ideas
of one another’s ideas, experiences, and perceptions, and are a necessity in schools where
too many students feel excluded and insignificant (Aronson, 2002). Instrumental in
shaping Jane Dicker’s view of empathy were the works of Gordon and Green (2008),
whose study explored the ways that increased empathy led to decreased aggression
among school children; Seppala, Rossomando, and Doty (2013), who make the
connection between social connection and empathy; Leiberg, Klimecki, and Singer
(2011), whose study saw a connection between compassion and prosocial behavior; and
Gilbert (2004), who focused upon compassion as multi-dimensional and leading to
personal change. Dicker’s approach to Socratic seminar, therefore, begins with a
preliminary workshop that introduces her students to the principles and practices of
empathy, compassion, active listening (Longaker, 2003), and the use of questions.

Both Jane’s and my own beliefs on the importance of the democratic classroom
(Dewey, 1916), student collaboration, and critical thinking skills (Tishman, Jay, &
Perkins, 1993), combined with what we knew about Socratic practice as being
collaborative, inclusive, seeking understanding through questioning, and the willingness
to reject easy answers led to the version of Socratic seminar that we used in the
classroom, both for the pilot study and for this study.

The role of the teacher varies according to the individual educator’s version of
Socratic seminar that they have adapted. The version of Socratic seminar that I have
adopted embraces Copeland’s (2005) theory that the key to implementing successful Socratic seminar is the teacher’s role in preparing “the classroom environment … both in terms of the physical environment and in terms of the emotional climate” (p. 29).

Secondly, the teacher is important in fulfilling these roles: (1) to select the text for discussion, (2) to keep the discussion of the inner circle focused and moving, (3) to direct the feedback of the outer circle, and (4) to assess and evaluate the individual student and group performances” (p. 31).

My own implementation of the Socratic seminar is heavily influenced by Copeland (2005), whose book provides instructional details about how to use Socratic seminar in the classroom (he refers to them as Socratic circles). Thus, in my class, I begin by dividing my students into two groups. Half of the class is asked to work in a discussion group where they will discuss a piece of literature the whole class has read. That group becomes the inner circle, whose members discuss the text, while the outer circle is formed by the half of the class that, for now, are assigned to observe the discussion and behavior of the members of the inner circle. The discussion is timed, and when the time is up (typically 15-25 minutes), the observers provide public verbal feedback to the participants they have observed in the inner circle. Then the groups reverse their roles. This format both ensures that each discussion group is small enough that all its members have an opportunity to participate and that they all have a witness to their participation.

The use of feedback by the students in the outer circle to the inner circle is, as Copeland (2005) acknowledges, “focused not on the content of the inner circle but rather on the behavior the members of the inner circle exhibited during their conversation” (p. 29). According to the model Dicker implemented, the feedback must be specific and refer to the principles of Socratic seminar, that is, with regard to evidence of the participants’ active listening, their own verbal contributions, and their use of genuine open-ended questions. The observer must provide positive feedback, an area for improvement, and another positive note (in that order). The feedback session is
instrumental as a way of reinforcing these principles, since it encourages students to notice when and how these principles had been adhered to or deviated from. And finally, following Copeland’s method, the “two circles would switch places and the process would be repeated” (p. 29), ensuring that all students participate in both the inner and the outer circles.

When describing Socratic seminar to my students, I explain to them that while debate is another type of class “discussion” they may have participated in, Socratic seminar is markedly different from debate, as it focuses upon knowledge through collaboration rather than through competition. This highlighting of the difference between debate and Socratic seminar always seems to be helpful as, for many students, their only other opportunities to speak in front of their classmates seems to have been through the format of debate.

My Background

As an adjunct faculty member, I fell into teaching ‘Basic English’ at the community college level. While I had made a conscious decision to move from teaching in high school to teaching in college, I had not really considered the various levels of English which exist in the college system in the United States. Coming from England, I was familiar with a college system that is really very different, with students specializing in their specific area of study by the time they are 16, so that at college level there are no general subject requirements. This means that once a student has become a part of a higher education institution, they would no longer be required to take any subjects not directly connected to their major. The idea of the community college, as found in the United States, is quite unlike the higher education institutions I was exposed to in England.
Once I began teaching at the community college-level Basic English classroom, I found that I was in both familiar and unfamiliar territory. I was teaching students who often had similar academic skills to students I had taught at high school, while simultaneously I was working with adults who frequently had quite broad life experiences and many times seemed more open about sharing these experiences than the adolescents I had previously taught. When I began to teach at the community college level, I was concerned that the sample syllabus I was offered as a potential outline for my college classes appeared to encourage lots of comprehension questions, rote learning, and a reliance on textbooks, with students not offered many opportunities to actually engage with the texts in a meaningful way. I wanted to facilitate a class where the students were given an opportunity to utilize their own knowledge and experiences to construct meanings rather than to guess at right answers and to challenge and reflect on their own thinking about the literature we were exploring.

Many of the studies surrounding Socratic seminar are concerned with the K-12 classroom and seem to be focused on being practical guides about the ways in which to implement Socratic seminar into the classroom (Ball & Brewer, 2000; Copeland, 2005; Moeller & Moeller, 2002). This study is somewhat different, as it explores both when dialogue does and does not occur in Socratic seminar and the strengths, weaknesses, and features of Socratic seminar with community college students assigned to a Basic English class.

**Methods**

This observational case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016) employed the observation of the students in my community college class participating in Socratic seminar. I videoed, audio-recorded, and observed three Socratic seminars that they participated in. I divided the class into two groups, and this study focused on one of these groups. Each
group was composed of nine students. I also engaged the students in semi-structured interviews, employing Spradley’s techniques (1979). This gave the students an opportunity to both describe and analyze their experiences in Socratic seminar and to explain how these experiences may be similar to, or different from, other class discussions they had previously participated in. With all these data, I identified key components of “dialogue” and then analyzed and coded these transcripts for examples of dialogue and for the times when other notable or reoccurring patterns were present. The use of the interviews helped to me confirm whether these patterns, and examples of dialogues, were in anyway connected to Socratic seminar.

This study may provide a framework for educators to reevaluate their perceptions of what the benefits and shortcomings of the Socratic seminar are with adults and older adolescents in "basic"-level community college classes.

**Research Questions**

This inquiry addresses the following questions:

1. What are the characteristic features and affordances of the discourse that takes place in a Socratic Seminar conducted within a community college Basic English class for nine enrolled students in that class who participated regularly in an assigned Socratic Seminar?

   - To what extent is the discourse of the Socratic Seminar, which was organized to promote and sustain dialogue, seem dialogical, and to what extent does it seem to foster or tolerate other forms of discourse, and what seems to be accomplished in the Socratic seminar?
   - How do different contextual conditions appear to affect the types and qualities of the discourse that transpires?
2. How do these nine students perceive and describe their experience of the
discourse of the Socratic seminar in which they participated?

- How has their experiences of Socratic seminar differed from their previous
  experiences with classroom discussions?
- How do the students feel about their experiences in Socratic seminar?
- What do the students believe they have lost and/or gained from their
  involvement in Socratic seminar?

**Dissertation Overview**

This first chapter has introduced my experiences as an educator, which led to my
beliefs about why the topic of Socratic seminar in the Basic English community
classroom was worthy of research. Chapter II provides a background of the literature in
order to contextualize community colleges, community college students, and the Basic
English program. In addition, I have provided both a historical context and some
contemporary research on the use of talk and learning in the English classroom. This
second chapter also explores and defines, dialogue, critical thinking, and the role of the
teacher facilitator. The third chapter describes my research methods, data collection, and
positionality. Chapter IV presents the background for Socratic pedagogy, brief
descriptions of the student participants, a summary of the three Socratic seminars, and
analysis of these three Socratic seminars. Chapter V presents an analysis of the interviews
that I had with the students. Chapter VI concludes the study by exploring the significance
of this research, as well as considering future areas of research on this topic.
Chapter II
HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I thought that it was important to reflect upon the site of this study: the community college classroom; and within the community college, the Basic English classroom; and the students who may be present in a Basic English community college class. Next, I chose to explore the connections between talking and learning since the focus of this study is that of students utilizing talk as a mode through which to explore literature. I have also more fully defined the concept of dialogue and critical thinking in this chapter. Finally, I wanted to consider the teacher’s role during Socratic seminar and so I presented some of the scholarship about the teacher as facilitator.

Community College/Basic English in Context

A Brief History of Community Colleges in the United States

Community colleges have a long history within the US. In the 1920s, they were more often known as junior colleges, that is to say, two-year institutions that offered college-level instruction, which then led either to a vocation or a four-year college. By the 1950s, community colleges were more specifically colleges that were both “comprehensive” and “publicly supported” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 4). Community colleges have been well-documented as places where “racial/ethnic minorities, low-income students, first-generation college students, adult learners, and recent immigrants” (Malcolm, 2010, p. 19) have been granted access. They continue to serve population
groups that have been historically disadvantaged. Community colleges are distinct from other places of higher education in that they have historically been academic institutions that serve the needs of a local population that otherwise had little access to traditional higher education:

those who could not afford the tuition; who could not take the time to attend a college full time; whose ethnic background had constrained them from participating; who had inadequate preparation in the lower schools; whose educational progress had been interrupted by some temporary condition; who had become obsolete in their jobs or had never been trained to work at any job; who needed connection to obtain a job; who were confined in prisons, physically disabled, or otherwise unable to attend classes on campus; or who were faced with a need to fill increased leisure time meaningfully. (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 33)

**Basic English**

A broad variety of types and skill levels characterize community college students. The specific group I am working with are in a Basic English class. Basic college classes, also identified as “remedial” or “developmental,” are usually defined as “courses that are offered at the postsecondary level and whose content is generally considered 'precollege'” (Shaw, 2000, p. 194). As Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2010) note, the intention of basic or developmental classes is to provide instruction in order that “students who arrive unprepared for college are provided instruction to bring them up to an adequate level” (p. 1). But even this apparently straightforward definition is riddled with inconsistencies. Bailey et al. lament that even the “experts” do not agree what “college ready” might mean, and so there are variations not only across states, but even across programs within the same college (p. 1).

There are a variety of reasons students may find themselves in a basic-level English class, including those enumerated by Hoover and Lipka (2013): “Something, somewhere, went wrong. They didn't care about school, or school didn't care about them. For some, reading or writing never came easily. Maybe they didn't speak English as
children. Or they lacked money, guidance, opportunity” (p. 27). While this may be an oversimplification, many of my Basic English students have, indeed, expressed dissatisfaction with their previous educational experiences. These basic classes at community colleges attempt to give students the skills to be ready to take classes that count toward some kind of college degree.

There is also much debate about whether “remedial”-type college courses have a positive impact on the students’ academic outcomes (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Bettinger & Long, 2005, 2009; Schnee, 2014) or a negative impact on student academic progress (Calcagno & Long, 2008; Martorell & McFarlin, 2011). While the large numbers of students enrolled in basic or remedial courses are well documented, the benefits of such courses are somewhat more difficult to measure. Some recent studies suggest that the limited success of remedial courses is inevitable, given the students they serve:

Some, if not all, of the negative impacts of remediation may be attributable to selection bias. For instance, Bettinger and Long (2005) found that remediation was no longer negatively related to student outcomes after controlling for students’ backgrounds. (Crisp & Delgado, 2014, p. 103)

There still appears to be evidence that students who take remedial-level courses at a two-year institution, such as a community college, are at a disadvantage compared to those that take such courses at a four-year institution. Those students who are enrolled in a four-year institutions are, according to Callahan and Chumney (2009), better prepared for future academic success than their two-year counterparts. In addition, Crisp and Delgado (2014) found that

the negative significant impact of developmental education on student transfer to a 4-year institution was present even after minimizing selection bias and controlling for student- and institutional-level variables that have been previously shown to impact community college student outcomes. (p. 109)
In other words, taking into consideration any other factors, Crisp and Delgado found that students who participated in developmental or basic-level classes were less likely to transfer into a four-year institution than students who had not participated in such classes. The implication is that such a class would adversely impact a student’s future academic career, rather than resulting in the academic progress it was intended to promote.

Shaw (2000) suggested that the problem lay, not so much in whether these basic courses could lay the foundations for future academic success, but whether they could truly help the students who most required their help, since, “while students who successfully emerge from remedial courses are likely to continue to be successful in their college-level courses, the failure rate in remedial courses is disproportionately high” (p. 197). Indeed, with the 18 students in my study, while only one student failed the class, only four of the others exited out of the Basic English program. This meant that 13 of my students, while passing my class, were still required, the following semester, to register for another, albeit a higher level Basic English class. The reason that it could be possible to pass a basic-level class but then still need to take more basic classes in the same subject is that in this particular college there are five levels of Basic English. This class was categorized as the second to lowest level within the basic classes. At the end of the semester, the students’ portfolio grade, final reading exam grade, and final writing exam grade were added together, and it was determined whether they had failed the class, or should move up one, two, or three levels within the basic system, or whether they were eligible to exit out of the basic-level classes. Therefore, it was possible for a student to pass the class but still be required to take more basic-level classes, and of course at a future date, they may also fail a basic-level class. As Bailey et al. (2010) found in their extensive study of over 250,000 community college students over three years (p. 2), the reasons students did not exit the basic classes and enroll in a “gatekeeper” or credit bearing course was that a number of students (19%) dropped out of the basic program after failing or withdrawing from a class (p. 2). A further 8% of the students who did pass
a developmental course, then “did not enroll in the next course in their sequence” (p. 2). This suggests that although all, bar one, of my students passed the Basic English class that I taught, they all were not guaranteed to make it to credit-bearing classes.

**Non-traditional Students**

In the class I worked with for this study, some of the students would fall under the category of non-traditional students. Bowl (2001) defined non-traditional students as mature students and students with children in higher education. Some of the challenges, Bowl suggests, that are faced by non-traditional students include financial difficulty and “learning the rules of academia … time management, reading and structuring assignments” (p. 156). Some of the students from this study did, indeed, appear to have similar challenges; the challenge that was most visible was the task of managing the time commitments of work, family, and school. Some of my students were also parents, and although this may, unsurprisingly, bring additional challenges to succeeding as a student, there is research that suggests that “motherhood may also be a factor in helping women reevaluate their perspective of school and school’s importance for their lives” (Zachary, 2005, p. 2566). Indeed, Jessica, one of the participants in my study, expressed, on a number of occasions, that her children were a major inspiration in her decision to attend college.

**On the Relationship of Talking to Learning: A Review of the Literature**

While the oral tradition has been a part of English classroom in the USA since the 1800s, the focus in the 19th century was on debate, oral catechisms, and orations (Myers, 1996, p. 47). The intention in the 1800s was for the teacher to use student verbalization as a way to assess the students’ ability to recite from memory (p. 67). Later, Dewey (1916)
advocated for the democratic classroom, where students, as well as teachers, might be active verbal participants.

**Talking and Thinking**

Vygotsky (1962) pointed toward speech as inherently social, something that comes from the social and leads to individual articulation (p. 36). Talk is both possible and desirable because of the need to communicate with persons outside of oneself. Our thinking, we can deduce, is impacted by our own relationships, which are, more often than not, based on dialogue. Indeed, it seems fair to say that that Dixon’s (1967) claim that discussion is critical in providing a sense of purpose within the classroom (p. 36) would widely be accepted.

While Vygotsky (1962) argued that it is possible to think without the use of language and that there are vast areas of thought that do not use language, he went on to say that to think at a deep level does require language. Vygotsky explained that “[a] child’s intellectual growth is contingent on his mastering the social means of thought, that is, language” (p. 94). Vygotsky’s assertion that “thought development is determined by language” (p. 100) suggests that the more fluent a person is, in terms of their language usage, the more fluent their thinking might be. While the Sapir-Whorf theory, that without the words or language to express an idea, the individual will not be able to think about that idea, or at least there will be a “dimming” of certain ideas (Whorf, 1956, p. 213), has been largely debunked, Deutscher (2010) has made a compelling argument that language is still important in shaping “our orientation to the world and our emotional responses to the objects we encounter … they may also have a marked impact on our beliefs, values and ideologies” (p. 11). Indeed, Vygotsky (1962) also argues, “The true direction of the development of thinking is not from the individual to the social, but from the social to the individual” (p. 38). The discourses that individuals are involved in,
therefore, will shape both their perceptions and responses to the world. Providing spaces where meaningful talk might occur must surely be one of the intentions of education.

Vygotsky (1962) also explored the importance of speech in difficult cognitive tasks. When young children talk through difficult tasks (egocentric speech), this ongoing commentary appears to help the child successfully complete the given task (p. 228). While adults typically do not use egocentric speech, they use an adapted form of egocentric speech called inner speech. Inner speech is the way we might silently talk to ourselves (p. 3). If inner speech helps us organize conscious content, then surely audible speech will have a similar function. Audible speech has the advantage that a listener might seek clarification and expansion, something we do not get with internal speech. Egocentric speech doesn’t necessarily become obsolete with age, argues Wells (2000), but rather it transforms into dialogue, since:

[dialogue] opens up the possibility of… a form of collaborative meaning-making in which both individual and collective understandings are enhanced through the successive contributions of individuals that are both responsive to the contributions of others and oriented to their further responses. (p. 58)

It is this development of our ability to relate to others, and our need to engage with verbal interactions with people outside of ourselves, that makes egocentric speech redundant. As more of our skills become automatic, the less we need language to support them (Marzano, 2003, p. 689).

While talk is social in nature, it is also “the most potent single known factor for the growth of individuality” (Sapir & Mandelbaum, 1964, p. 19). It is through this collaboration with others that the individual can come out of their own space of isolation and individualism and benefit from a collective understanding (p. 20). Language is important, not just for communicating to others, but also to aid our thinking and to promote our own understanding (Harman, 1991; Vygotsky, 1962).

The process of turning thoughts into speech is more complex than simply saying out loud the words that are waiting to be spoken; it is through articulating our thoughts
that the thought itself will change—by speaking aloud, the thought “finds its reality and
form” (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 219). Or put another way, “precisely because thought does not
have its automatic counterpart in words, the transition from thought to word leads
through meaning” (p. 251). When we speak, we are translating our thoughts into words,
rather than simply making our thoughts audible. Since speaking in a discussion involves
so many cognitive moves—listening, comprehending, thinking, translation of thought
into words—the act of speaking may result in the speaker internalizing the concept that
they wish to make; this in turn, also makes it easier later to recall this idea (Britton, 1970,
p. 30; Myers, 1996, p. 26). This is one of the reasons, I believe, that so many teachers
understand their own subjects so well, because they spend most of the lessons talking
about their subject, and it is this talking that helps them become experts; this is in contrast
with the students, who may be rarely asked to talk about the subject. It is as if we expect
the individual to be an expert on a subject before they speak, but in actuality, it is
speaking that is one of the major components that lead a person to become an expert.

As Moffett (1968) noted, speaking is an important component of writing. If an
individual has first engaged in dialogue about a given subject, then they will be more
fluent in writing on the same subject. It is this active engagement of thought through
speaking and writing that promotes reflection and a greater understanding of a given
issue. These written and verbal articulations allow the flow of inner speech to be “heard”
both by the audience, but also by the person who is more fully realizing their own
thoughts as they are “published.”

Talk is social, yet it also leads to individual internalization (Wertsch & Stone,
1985, p. 163). It is this internalization, putting it into your own words, if you will, that
leads the speaker to become at one with that which they have spoken. Once someone
goes beyond just hearing or reading an idea and speaks it, it belongs to them. Important
issues are explored, understood, digested, and analyzed through talk (Britton, 1970,
p. 30).
Another advantage of verbalization is that it is not permanent: once something has been spoken, usually, there is no record of it, and this allows a speaker to take various stances “without committing [themselves] permanently” (Dixon, 1967, p. 38). Speech can be seen as a less threatening way than writing for students to experiment with different ideas before being forced into the “permanency” of writing (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975, p. 30). Ironically, of course, through participation in this study, the students’ verbalizations were recorded and transcribed and therefore took on an element of permanency that is not typical of most speech.

**Talk and Classroom Dynamics**

Language is a “great force of socialization” (Sapir & Mandelbaum, 1964, p. 15). This is most obvious when thinking about greetings and verbal etiquette. “It is not what is said that matters so much as that something is said” (p. 17). Talk can be used as a social lubricant to help put people at ease and to try to ensure that they feel a part of the group. This type of social talk is also important for classrooms in terms of creating community; a class where there is no socializing could be a difficult place for many people to feel really free to express themselves. Socializing is part of what builds a community. It is those initial, perhaps tentative, verbalizations that can lead to a feeling of comfort and familiarity with the people around. Simple niceties are not enough to build a community but may be the place it starts.

Another value of the student voice in the classroom is that it is something the students themselves often seem to find motivating. In *Seeing Themselves as Capable and Engaged Readers*, Alvermann (2003) documented that students believed they learned best and felt most capable as learners when they were allowed to talk about what they had read, viewed, or heard in class. They claimed that discussions among students, rather than just between teachers and students, kept their attention better and made classes they ordinarily disliked more interesting. (p. 8)
As any teacher can profess, working with students who are motivated and interested in the work yields far better results than working with students who are disinterested and unmotivated. It is interesting to see Alvermann making the point that even classes that the students “ordinarily disliked” became “more interesting,” thereby suggesting that, when given the opportunity, students are capable of making the irrelevant relevant.

A classroom becomes its own community; that is not to say that it is isolated from the rest of the world, but the talk within the classroom does become specific to that particular classroom community. Everything that is spoken has a context, and therefore, the specifics of the time, place, and people are significant in influencing the talk within each different classroom. This is best articulated by Bakhtin (1981), who said,

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (p. 276)

What develops is a language community, whereby words, sentences, phrases, and clichés are used in a specific way that is idiosyncratic to that group at that time. Classroom dialogue “in part can be internalized by each pupil” (Dixon, 1967, p. 44). Student-centered talk, even when it does not include the teacher, may be expected to reflect the students, the teacher, the work, and events from outside the classroom.

The classroom is full of “utterances” that are connected to what has previously been spoken inside and outside of the classroom and go on to influence what is later spoken (Bakhtin, 1996). When Bakhtin (1981) refers to an utterance, he is referring to a speech act that is either in response to or provokes a response in any rhetorical situation (p. 272). Drawing on Bateson (1979), Tannen (2007) explains that it is through an individual’s past experiences that they can “adapt it to the present interaction” (p. 11). Therefore, any utterance cannot belong to only one person, but rather becomes “an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a
continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it—it does not approach the object from the sidelines" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276). It is only through understanding the relation of an utterance to another utterance, both in its current “discourse environment” and with prior text[s] (Tannen, 2007, p. 101) that an utterance can be understood. When in conversation an utterance occurs as a part of the dialogue, it is as a “continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it” (p. 54), meaning that the context is as important as the utterance itself—the utterance will never stand alone. This is significant when talking about Socratic seminar; each idea, each utterance, is within the context of that particular Socratic seminar, in that particular classroom, on that particular day.

While there is an abundance of Vygotskian-influenced scholars who emphasize the necessity of classroom community, Gee (2004) problematizes the concept of community, instead arguing that the word “community” suggests belongingness and membership and a labeling of people. Gee explains, “If we start with the notion of a 'community' we can’t go any further until we have defined who is in the community and who is outside the community” (p. 78). If we exclude some people from the classroom community, but then we claim that everyone in the classroom is in fact fully engaged in that “community,” Gee argues, we are failing to acknowledge the flexibility of a community. Gee suggests that we replace the word “community” with the word “spaces.” Such spaces Gee refers to as affinity spaces, as places where people may interact and benefit from these interactions. He explains:

What people have an affinity with or for in an affinity space is not first and foremost the other people using the space, but an endeavor or interest around which the space is organized. [Where] … people relate to each other primarily in terms of common endeavors, goals, or practices. (p. 85)

Affinity spaces are spaces where both individual and distributed knowledge are encouraged, and there are “many different forms and routes to participation” (p. 87). These places/spaces/communities are significant in the ways in which a variety of types of participation are accepted. The reason that “affinity space” might indeed be a more
appropriate term than “community” to describe the Socratic seminar is because the students were bound together in that use of Socratic seminar as a “practice.” While a specific practice governs the ways Socratic seminar is conducted, some of the students suggested in their interviews that what they valued about their involvement in Socratic seminar was that they were starting to have an affinity with the other students in that space.

**Dialogue**

Central to this study is the presence, or absence, of dialogue within three Socratic seminars. It is necessary, then, is to fully define what dialogue is, and what it is not. I will also argue that where dialogue is truly present, so are examples of higher-order critical-thinking skills, as I think it is difficult, if not impossible, to engage in dialogue without using higher-order critical-thinking skills. While dialogue may quite appropriately fall under the umbrella of discourse, not all discourse is dialogical. By discourse I am referring to Gee’s (2014) definition of “language-in-use” (p. 20)—that is to say, language as it is used in context.

**Not Debate**

Much of what dialogue is can be explained by contrasting it with what is termed “non-dialogue,” which may comprise “attitudes such as aggression, hostility, prejudice, sectarianism” (Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 677). In the classroom, debate or argument are examples of non-dialogue since, unlike dialogue, they are undertaken “to win” (Tannen, 1998, p. 5), rather than as a real means to develop greater understanding. When students are encouraged to take a side, as in a debate, there is rarely much encouragement given to them to explore the multifaceted nature of the given issue (p. 11). The ultimate aim to “win the debate” seems to prevent true understanding from occurring. Tannen defines
argument as the antithesis of dialogue; while the intention of argument is to distort and win, dialogue aims to listen and understand (p. 5). Key, then, in dialogue, is the commitment toward a common understanding (Wells, 2000). Dialogue must lead to collaborative meaning making; hence, both the individual and the group’s understanding should be enhanced through participation in the dialogue (p. 58).

No Consensus

I acknowledge that dialogue is unlike debate, as rather than pitting “opposing” groups or sides against each other, it is concerned with such factions interacting in valuable and productive ways (Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 679). Because dialogue is not debate, this does not mean that “opposing” groups must reach a consensus. Indeed, true dialogue, says Wells (2000), must be open to allowing any belief to be criticized. Nikulin (2006) is at pains to point out that “dialogue does not result in, nor even necessarily presuppose, a negotiated middle ground between opposite positions” (p. 142). Matusov and Duyke (2009), drawing on Bakhtin, see dialogue as a “good argument,” that is to say, “not necessarily one that wins others over and establishes a new consensus; the ideal argument is one that urgently generates an infinite number of responses in its actual and potential audience” (p. 291). Another way to understand the idea of no consensus is to see it as a place where multiple perspectives are welcome. Fecho and Botzakis (2007), using a Bakhtinian framework, suggest that a dialogic classroom is one where knowledge is understood to be “tentative and remains open to further inquiry” (p. 553), and thus a variety of perspectives are permitted to “share space” (p. 553). The conclusion to a dialogue might be in “a remarkable discovery yet still in disagreement,” (Nikulin, 2006, p. 162). Although dialogue should be composed of participants who are open to other perspectives, it does not need to reach a consensus; indeed, this should not be the intended goal of dialogue.
**Unfinalizability**

Connected to this lack of consensus is the idea, which Nikulin (2006) introduces, of “unfinalizability.” This means dialogue is never complete; it can never be said to be finished. This idea that dialogue does not end is also supported by Matusov and Duyke (2009), who explain, “Genuine dialogue does not have a final endpoint—all endpoints are temporary and even arbitrary” (p. 85). This unending nature of dialogue suggests that dialogue is discussion that is rich, deep, and open to going in different directions depending upon the participants and context. Dialogue does not promote easy answers, and so cannot be easily finished.

**Collaboration**

Moffett (1968) describes dialogue as a “verbal collaboration” (p. 72). Dialogue is a grappling of ideas, where thoughts are started by one person and finished by another; where the individuals in the group have gained something more than if they had worked alone. Dialogue can be a way for the individual speaker to either personally explore an idea, or collaborate with other individuals to explore an idea (Britton, 1970). Matusov and Duyke (2009) declare that dialogue is an experience where all participants learn from one another (p. 86). Fecho and Botzakis (2007) believe that dialogue must be collaborative, since “one perspective begs the need for other perspectives. One utterance seeks the company of other utterances” (p. 553).

Lave and Wenger (1991) explored the concept that, during an apprenticeship, learning occurs through collaboration and participation, rather than in isolation (loc. 140). Specifically, they explain:

> It seems typical of apprenticeship that apprentices learn mostly in relation with other apprentices. There is anecdotal evidence … that where the circulation of knowledge among peers and near-peers is possible, it spreads exceedingly rapidly and effectively…. The effectiveness of the circulation of information among peers suggests … that engaging in practice, rather than being its object, may well be a condition for the effectiveness of learning. (loc. 1021)
Discourse facilitates these learning experiences and occurs "whenever people interact under conditions of LPP [legitimate peripheral participation]" (loc. 190). Gee (2001a) argues that he believes that “Discourse” constitutes the “ways of being in the world” (p. 526) and is acquired through apprenticeship style events, but cannot be acquired through specific teaching.

Bruer (1994) reports that not only does the novice benefit from verbal collaboration, but the more advanced “apprentice” also benefits. He explains, if there is taxing thinking to be undertaken, the skilled thinkers can literally take on the role of “expert” and demonstrate such thinking. When challenging work is undertaken, the individuals in the group can share the cognitive burden of thinking, so just as one person is flagging, then another person can pick up an idea and take it further, or while one person struggles with a concept, then another is able to rephrase or explain it with examples or experiences that the “struggler” had not considered or possibly experienced.

When (most) people talk, they are trying to make sure the listener understands them. In dialogue, it is not just about the listener understanding, but also about making sure that what is spoken is relevant to the discussion at hand. Wells (2000) breaks down the process of effectively contributing to a discussion in the following ways:

[First the speaker must] interpret the proceeding contribution(s) in terms of the information it introduces, as well as their own stance toward that information; compare that interpretation with their own current understanding of the issue under discussion, based on their experience and any other relevant information of which they are aware; and then formulate a contribution that will, in some relevant way, add to the common understanding achieved in the discourse so far by extending, questioning, or qualifying what someone else has said. (p. 74)

When observing dialogue, it may appear effortless, but these steps that Wells outlined above involve such a variety of cognitive moves that when skillfully done, the participants will engage in such a way that it will result in a collaboration that develops a greater understanding of the topic itself.
Tannen (2007) likens joining a conversation to rhythm and music. She says that in order to enter a conversation, it is as if the participant is “joining a line of dancers” (p. 33). The joiner must know where the group “have been [and] ... where they are headed” (p. 33). These subtle cues, and attentiveness to the other participants’ involvement, are “crucial for conversational outcome” (p. 33).

**Co-constructing Knowledge**

Knowledge is something that is “reconstructed and co-constructed in the course of dialogic interaction” (John-Steiner et al., 2000, p. 35). Discussing ideas both transforms the ideas, and generates new thoughts (Wells, 2000, p. 73). Internalization, then, is both a social and an individual process (John-Steiner et al., 2000, p. 38). John-Steiner et al. believe that collaboration results in the participating individuals making the other collaborative members’ ideas a part of their own knowledge. In order that talk is truly collaborative in nature, it must, argues Wells, be based on the following criteria: a commitment to work toward a common understanding, the use of questions to allow evidence to be shown, the expansion of valid propositions, and the openness to allow any belief to be subject to criticism (Wells, 2000, p.73).

Wells (2000) explores the reason student dialogue may be discouraged in some classrooms. Drawing upon Freire, Wells suggests that teachers often discourage discussion due to the misguided belief that knowledge is a commodity that is stored, “either in individual minds or in texts and other artifacts” (p. 67). When this misconception occurs, the classroom can be a place where the teacher believes she must transfer her knowledge (like a package) from the closet in the back of her mind into the students’ minds. Such a teacher will then endeavor to prevent student conversation, fearing that student talk is little more than a distraction from the task at hand. Alternatively, when knowledge is believed to be co-constructed, there is no passive recipient; student dialogue ceases to be a distraction, but rather becomes a necessity.
When students are participants in high stakes assessments and teachers have a responsibility to prepare them for such tests, then there may be some validity for a belief in such theories of knowledge being a commodity.

Since Socratic seminar clearly has a focus of collaboration of peers, it is relevant to consider what research has found about peer collaboration. Many studies have found a connection between peer collaboration and high performance of cognitive levels (Bos, 1937; Bruner, 1985; Chiu, 2008; Light & Glachan, 1985; Rogoff, 1990). Importantly, these studies found that performance levels were significantly higher when students collaborated than when they worked independently.

**Equity/Democratic Discourse**

Fecho (2011), drawing upon Freire, sees dialogue as existing only in places where there is an “intersection of love, humility, and faith” (p. 23). Fecho asserts that true dialogue only occurs where the “playing table can be leveled” (p. 23). It seems to me that dialogue is most apparent in spaces where the space is organized in such a way as to be deliberate, mindful, and democratic. Dialogue must be characterized by a willingness and openness to hearing and encouraging all voices within the group. Nikulin (2006) also refers to the dialogic being a space where “every participant in a dialogue is equal to the other participants … as a person who has a voice and who is capable of being engaged with the other” (p. 160). Dialogue may not be a space where certain voices are ignored or ridiculed.

**Listening**

When considering dialogue, it is necessary to recognize the vital role that listening, as well as verbalization, plays in successful and meaningful dialogue. A 1966 study, by Horrsworth suggested that listening is not a specific skill, but is rather more similar to the abilities needed to read. Bakhtin (1996) presented listening as being an active interpretation and said that the listener’s understanding works with the speaker to create a
shared meaning (p. 68). The listener and speaker are equally responsible to work together to create meaning together (Hanks, 1996, p. 13). This theory treats listening as a transaction, much as Rosenblatt (1965) presents reading as a transaction. When describing the reader’s role in reading, Rosenblatt explains, “[The text is] merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols” (p. 24). Similarly, talk could be said to be just sounds until a listener transforms them into a set of meaningful utterances. While verbalization is the part of the dialogue that is heard, that may be transcribed, that is not to belittle the importance of the silent, but engaged listener. It is indeed possible that “students who are quiet during class discussions may be doing important mental work” (Townsend, 1998, p. 76).

**Critical Thinking**

In order that one might participate in dialogue, I would argue that a number of components of higher-order critical-thinking skills must be utilized. Freire (1970) claims, “true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking” (p.92).

Lambright (1995) argued that “critical thinking is at the heart of Socratic process” (p. 32), both in the intent to “give voice to rigorous thinking about possible meaning” (p. 32) and in the practice of dialogue. Successful dialogue requires the participants to engage critical thinking skills in order to effectively "listen carefully to what others have to say, enter the frames of references or perspectives of others, delve beneath the surfaces of statements, suspend judgment initially and biases always, expose assumptions, and discover implications and consequences" (p. 32).

In *How We Think*, Dewey (1910) makes it clear that all thoughts are not equal in helping the individual to reflect, deliberate, and develop deeper understandings. Dewey uses the term “reflective” thinking to differentiate between the thoughts that flit through our mind and those thoughts that are more substantive in nature. Dewey explains that this
reflective thought is characterized by an “active persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge” (loc. 109). This type of reflective thinking encourages individuals to “hunt for additional evidence, for new data” (loc. 199). In Socratic seminar, this “hunt for additional evidence, for new data” occurs through dialogue with other people. One of the most effective ways for participants in dialogue to uncover this information is through the use of questions in order that they might understand the ideas and perspectives of the other participants. When students engage in questions that are reflective, thoughtful, and insightful, this may be an indicator that the individuals in the dialogue are truly engaging in reflective/critical thinking.

I believe most people possess higher-order thinking skills. However, their possession of them does not always translate into them being used. A “good thinker” is defined by Tishman et al. (1993) as one whose overall tendency is to explore, inquire, seek clarity, take intellectual risks, and think critically and imaginatively. Tishman et al. refer to these tendencies as “thinking dispositions,” the argument being that these good thinking dispositions ultimately lead to “good thinking.” These dispositions are key to my definition of critical-thinking skills and will inform my subsequent analysis of them. They include:

the tendency to be open-minded, to explore alternative views; an alertness to narrow thinking; the ability to generate multiple options ... to wonder, probe, find problems; a zest for inquiry; an alertness for anomalies; the ability to observe closely and formulate questions.... The disposition to clarify and seek understanding ... the drive to set goals, make and execute plans, envision outcomes; alertness to lack of direction ... the urge for precision, organization, thoroughness ... the tendency to question the given, to demand justification; an alertness to the need for evidence; the ability to weigh and assess reasons.... The disposition to be metacognitive. (p. 148)

While observing and analyzing the three Socratic seminars for this study, I noticed when and where these types of critical thinking skills were exhibited. Evident in Tishman et al.’s (1993) discussion of critical thinking is the necessity of asking questions. Similarly, hooks (2010), in her book entitled Teaching Critical Thinking, extols the
virtues of asking questions as a way for critical thinkers to ensure clarity. While we might infer from Tishman et al. (1993) that such virtues as “asking questions” and “seeking clarity” might be most commonly observed when people are involved in meaningful verbal discourse, this is certainly not spelled out. On the other hand, hooks (2010) specifies that “conversation” is the antidote to “passive learning” (p. 44), and she presents conversation as an important place where “serious and rigorous thought” occurs (p. 47).

Literature Review of Studies on Socratic seminar

How-to Guides

Many of the studies surrounding Socratic seminar are concerned with the K-12 classroom and seem to be practical guides on ways in which to implement Socratic seminar into the classroom (Ball & Brewer, 2000; Copeland, 2005; Moeller & Moeller, 2002; Tredway, 1995;). Other studies specify how any why Socratic seminar can be implemented in a variety of different settings including Science classrooms (Chowning, 2009); an elementary inclusion classroom (Chorzempa & Lapidus, 2009); a high school Mathematics classroom (Koellner-Clark, Stallings, & Hoover, 2002), and a business ethics class (Morrell, 2004).

Advocating for Socratic Seminar

Alongside the “how to” and “why” guides on Socratic seminar are the studies that trace the various ways in which Socratic seminar has impacted students. Kohlemeier’s (2006) one-semester study in a suburban 9th grade history class with “predominantly White, middle class students” (p. 42) found that the use of Socratic seminar increased the students “capacity for historical empathy” (p. 51). Styslinger and Overstreet’s (2014) study of a middle school English class participating in Socratic seminar reported that engagement in the Socratic seminar led students to more effectively consider
counterarguments in their written work. Koellner-Clark, Stallings, and Hoover (2002) stated that students who participated in Socratic seminar mathematics classroom in a high-school had a better understanding of “the concept of function…than students who had not participated in the seminar” (p. 687). Brown’s (2016) analysis of youtube footage of Socratic seminar explored the ways that Socratic circles (seminar) led to discourse that was the basis for critical literacy and argumentation practices (p. A93).

A three-year study of a middle school in North Carolina By Chesser, Gellatly and Hale (1997) argued that paideia seminars (which are also sometimes referred to as Socratic seminars) were responsible for a 16% increase in students performing at or above threshold in statewide writing tests (p.43). Similarly, Styslinger and Overstreet’s (2104) study of a middle school English class participating in Socratic seminar reported that engagement in the Socratic seminar led students to more effectively consider counterarguments in their written work.

Comparing Socratic Seminar with another Instructional Technique

Some of the studies of Socratic seminar compared Socratic seminars to other instructional techniques. Walsh-Moorman’s (2016) study compared traditional face-to-face Socratic seminar with online Socratic seminar amongst AP English students. She appreciated the “sense of community” (p. 72) in the face-to-face seminar, but she found the online version resulted in greater numbers of references to the text and a “democratizing power…with no voice dominating” (p. 72). Roberson’s (2013) dissertation compared high school English student motivation towards learning when they participated in Socratic seminar versus students who were taught English through lecture and the results were inconclusive.

Strengths and weaknesses in Socratic seminar

Nesselrodt and Schaffer (1993) studied two schools that were identified as Paideia schools. The focus of this study were two schools that served “at-risk students” students,
with a “large percentages of economically disadvantaged children in urban areas.” (p. 17) The study was conducted in third grade classrooms, and found a mixture of success, with students sometimes “exchanging views and asserting their own opinions about events in the text.” (p. 11) But at other times the students lack of understanding of the stories meant that the seminar was more focused upon comprehension.

Polite and Adams’ (1997) one-year study in a predominantly White “urban and working-class” (p. 257) middle school in Tennessee explored whether the use of Socratic seminar had “significantly affected students’ and teachers’ attitudes towards learning” at the school (p. 257). The study found that Socratic seminars were useful in promoting higher order critical thinking skills, helped with conflict resolution and were useful in enhancing student interest in certain types of learning (p. 256). But this study also found that teachers seemed to have “much confusion regarding the advantages of seminars over traditional class discussions” (p. 265).

**Teacher as Facilitator**

The percentage of talk time any individual receives in a group is dependent upon a number of factors, including: the situation; the assigned, perceived, and chosen role of the individual in the group; and the individual’s status in the group (Ervin-Tripp, 1968, p. 194). Arguably, the more speaking opportunities the student takes, the more they “learn” (Cohen, Lotan, Scarloss, & Arellano, 1999, p. 84). The teacher’s role is significant in ensuring that, as far as possible, there are “equal-status relationships within the groups” (p. 85). The necessity for teacher intervention is reiterated by Wilkinson and Calculator (1982) and Pinnell and Jagger (2003), who found that the more effective a student’s verbal technique was, the more successful the student was in securing his or her goals.
In classrooms where students are encouraged to be collaborators rather than competitors (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991), classroom talk can be a way to help develop “group solidarity” (Myers, 1996, p. 26). The teacher has a responsibility to try to help create such an environment, if she contends that collaboration is an important component of her beliefs about learning. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1998) provide specific guidelines for college-level instructors to ensure the right conditions are present in order for students to collaborate effectively (Johnson et al. use the word "cooperation" rather than “collaboration,” but the outcome and conditions they describe are equally valid for collaboration). They explain that it is the instructor’s job to ensure that these five elements are present: “positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing” (p. 26).

Freire (1970) expressed concern that educators were dominating the classroom discourse. He argued that the education system perpetuated the misconception that students are empty buckets who are waiting to be filled by the teacher. An alternative to this banking method, Freire suggested, was that students should be encouraged to articulate their own interests and concerns. An unusual, and perhaps extreme, example of a teacher who was a facilitator rather than a knowledge distributor is Rancière’s (1991) study of a teacher who did not even speak the same language as his students, and yet because this teacher put the appropriate conditions in place, these students were said to have succeeded academically.

Nystrand (1997) identified that the reality in most schools is that the majority of the students for the majority of the time are expected to listen. Nystrand argued that a more effective way of teaching is the teacher taking on the role of, moderating, directing, probing, and analyzing (Nystrand, 1997, p. 17).

If a teacher is encouraging students to be pro-active in the learning process, does that mean the teacher is sitting back and doing nothing? Indeed, Delpit (2006) suggests that not all students may feel positive about peer collaboration. She explains, “What it
feels like to people who are old enough to judge is that there are secrets being kept, that
time is being wasted, that the teacher is abdicating his or her duty to teach” (p. 31). This
concern that the teacher is refusing to teach and indeed is not sharing their expertise may
be a real concern for some students. Delpit, herself, explains that students may not
understand the value of peer collaboration if the teacher has failed to explain the rationale
to the students (p. 31). There is clearly a necessity, then, for the teacher to prepare both
the students and the space where the Socratic seminar is to occur. Once the discussion is
underway, the teacher must be attentive to the seminar that is unfolding and intervene if
the situation dictates. After the discussion is over, the teacher must debrief the students
on some of the noteworthy events that occurred during the seminar. These are important
ways the teacher is able to ensure that, although she may be temporarily silent, she has
indeed fulfilled her role of “teacher” by ensuring that these conditions help the students
get more from such a Socratic seminar than they might from a frivolous conversation
alone.

Gee (2017), too, would argue that the teacher should not allow the students to “just
get on with it.” And indeed, the teacher as facilitator is hardly abandoning her students.
Gee argues that the best teaching today, along with using multiple technologies, includes
“good forms of social interaction and participation to design good learning experiences so
that learners can know, do, and become” (loc. 2945). The best teaching, then, is when the
teacher provides opportunities for students to successfully “network.” This face-to-face
experience of networking, facilitated by the teacher, is one that Socratic seminar indeed
offers. Gee, drawing upon Nielsen (2012), talks about networking as bringing together
“diverse people and smart tools in the right ways to solve hard problems beyond the
grasp of any one person, skill, or method” (Gee, 2017, p. 187).

The idea of a teacher temporarily relinquishing control and turning the floor over to
the students is explored through Fecho and Botzakis’s (2007) interpretation of Bakhtin’s
discussion of Carnival. The turning over of the floor to the students during Socratic
seminar is “a semichoreographed upheaval of the status quo” (p. 554). While Socratic seminar/Carnival is only temporary and the teacher will again hold the floor, “things are never exactly the same” (p. 554).

A plethora of studies have espoused the effectiveness of peer group collaboration on student performance. At the higher education level, Foldnes (2016) studied the effects of cooperative learning, which he defines as “when students work together in a group to reach their learning goals through discussion and peer feedback” (p. 39) in the “flipped” college classroom. Foldnes found higher end-of-term exam grades when students worked together than in the classroom when they worked independently. Another study involving struggling elementary school readers found when using peer collaboration, along with other strategies such as internet access, the students' “affect and attitude toward learning began to change for the better” (Henry, Castek, O’Byrne, & Zawilinski, 2012, p. 302). Indeed, Johnson, Johnson and Smith’s (2000) comprehensive review of cooperative learning found that studies concerned with cooperative learning overwhelmingly reported that learning as part of a group was more effective than learning alone.

In peer-to-peer dialogue, students explore “differing viewpoints and perspectives” (Gee, 2004, p. 55). This is in contrast with teacher and student discussions whereby the differing social statuses might impact the students’ ability to examine the logic of an argument. Among peers, the students may feel less constrained in examining one another’s logic than they would if questioning the teacher (Rogoff, 1990, p. 174). Other studies have found that these spaces where the teacher did not participate seemed to allow for students' more open discussion (Barnes & Todd, 1977; Finkel, 2000; Pinnell & Jagger, 2003) than those where the teacher was a verbal participant.
Tying it Together

The site for my study, the Basic English community college classroom, can be a place of promise or of disappointment. I hoped by researching the opportunities that a dialogue rich, collaborative environment might provide that I could understand better what such spaces might have to offer to these students.
Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this observational case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016) was to examine what happened to student discourse when a class of community college students used Socratic seminar in their Basic English class to discuss literature. I wanted to explore the students’ use of the Socratic seminar both through my own observations and the students’ own articulations. More specifically, this inquiry addressed the following questions:

1. What are the characteristic features and affordances of the discourse that takes place in a Socratic Seminar conducted within a community college Basic English class for nine enrolled students in that class who participated regularly in an assigned Socratic Seminar?
   - To what extent is the discourse of the Socratic seminar, which was organized to promote and sustain dialogue, seem dialogical, and to what extent does it seem to foster or tolerate other forms of discourse, and what seems to be accomplished in the Socratic seminar?
   - How do different contextual conditions appear to affect the types and qualities of the discourse that transpires?

2. How do these nine students perceive and describe their experience of the discourse of the Socratic seminar in which they participated?
• How has their experiences of Socratic seminar differed from their previous experiences with classroom discussions?
• How do the students feel about their experiences in Socratic seminar?
• What do the students believe they have lost and/or gained from their involvement in Socratic seminar?

I employed an observational case study approach in order to examine how these students both experienced Socratic seminar and performed during Socratic seminar. This study is best defined as an observational case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016), since most of the data-gathering was obtained through observation, with the interviews supplementing these observations. Case study methodology is an appropriate method for this study because I had a clear, identifiable case—that is, the occurrence of Socratic seminar in a specific class—and I wished to undertake an in-depth study of these events (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). Since the use of Socratic seminar was already one of the activities my classes were engaged in, this study can readily fall under one of the criteria of case study as being “noninterventive” (Stake, 1995, p. 12).

School Context

This study was conducted in my own classroom at a community college located in a city in the Northeast. This class was appropriate for my study for the following reasons: the students were all identified by the college as being Basic English students, and since the study was occurring in my own classroom, I had an element of control over the type of Socratic seminar I was choosing to research.

The college where I conducted my research has a diverse student body. The numbers speak for themselves: over 50% are Latino, 16% African American, 11% White, and 8% Asian American. Over 33% were born outside the United States in over 105 different countries, and 40% are over the age of 26 years old (according to the college's
While I would never know the specifics of who might be in a class, in my last four years of teaching at this particular community college, I typically had classes with students who identify as African American, Latino/a, and recent migrants from South and Central America, Africa, and Asia. In addition, while some of the students were recent high school graduates, there were always two or three students who had taken a break from formal education and would be in their 30s or 40s. For some students, this meant they had dropped out of high school and completed a high school equivalency; others graduated from high school, but had not taken any college classes until they enrolled in community college. In this study, none of the students had attended college, but in previous classes, I have had students who had enrolled in a college and then dropped out of that college and later enrolled in this community college. In each of the classes I have taught at the college in this study, I have had at least two students per class who are parents, and in two of the classes, I taught students who were grandparents. Some students were full-time, while others were working full-time and studying part-time. I also had a few students who told me they had become students because they were receiving funding due to a disability.

Such diversity adds to the value of this research project, since previous research on the Socratic seminar in English classes has focused largely on homogeneous groups of students. Walsh-Moorman (2016) studied an ethnically homogeneous group of high school AP English students; Chorzempa and Lapidus (2009) had a rather more academically diverse group, since they were studying an inclusion class, although the age ranges would probably not have been that broad considering they were all elementary school students; Copeland (2005) dealt with Socratic seminar (circles) in a largely White rural high school; and Styslinger and Overstreet (2104) explored an ethnically diverse but relatively narrow age range in an 8th grade class. In addition, there appears to have been very little research on Socratic seminar with adults. Socratic seminar has been studied at
the undergraduate level, with advanced undergraduate students (Casteel & Bridges, 2007), and advocated for within the business ethics classes (Morrell, 2004).

There are many more studies that are concerned with the use of the Socratic method with college students, while Socratic method or Socratic inquiry, which also adopts Socrates as their namesake, are very different from Socratic seminar. Socratic method/ inquiry involves the professor directing the conversation by asking specific students questions. “Additionally, the students are sometimes randomly selected to respond to the questions. When a student is selected she may be the focus of a prolonged, focused exchange with the professor” (Mintz, 2009, p. 484).

**Participant Selection**

Initially, I thought that I would use convenience sampling, as I was not sure how many members of my class would be willing to participate in the study, but, in fact, I had a class of 18 students, all of whom agreed to participate in this study. I decided to choose a group that would represent the diverse nature of the students in my class from age, race, and ability, to personality. For that reason, I decided to use “purposeful selection,” as my sample size was somewhat too small to use random sampling. Maxwell (1996) advised against random sampling with a small sample, explaining that "simple random sampling is a poor way to draw a small sample, due to the high likelihood of chance variation. Most of the advantages of randomization depend on a reasonably large sample size to make such variations unlikely” (p. 71). Specifically, I wanted to use purposeful sampling to “adequately capture the heterogeneity in the population” (p. 71). To that end, I gathered demographic data on my class and then sorted them into two groups of similar types. There was one exception to this: there was one student who had been absent for many classes and rarely spoke up in class. I decided not include her in the group I wished to study because I was concerned that she was unlikely to be present or, if present,
unlikely to participate verbally. The group I chose to construct for the Socratic seminars I wanted to study were nine specific students, although the composition of the group was never identical from one seminar to the next due to student absences. The table overleaf shows the composition of the members of the class and the group I studied. All the demographic data that I have used were obtained through student self-identification; hence, one student who had African-born parents referred to herself as Black, while the other Black students identified themselves as African American.

Heeding Mazzei’s (2013) concern that when engaging in research it is neither possible, nor desirable, to separate the different voices “from the milieu in which [they] exist” (p. 734), I attempted to recognize the participants simultaneously as individuals and also representative of a collective. Therefore, my analysis of the data sometimes discusses specific students, and at other times discusses the seminar overall.

I explained to my classes that as a part of our course we would be using Socratic seminar; and as a part of my own research, I wanted to examine what happened to the students’ discourse when they were engaged in Socratic seminar. To that end, I requested the students’ permission, in writing, to video record, audio record, and transcribe their Socratic seminars. Since the entire class consented to be a part of the study, I decided to video record all the students and interview all of them about their experiences in Socratic seminar. I explained that the interviews would last not more than 30 minutes and each person that agreed to be a part of the study would be asked to commit to being interviewed twice. I decided not to reveal to the class which group I would be using to write about, for a few reasons. Initially, I wasn’t sure who I would be using for the study, and then as I continued to collect data, I thought I might use some of the data I collected from the second group of students in subsequent analysis. In addition, I believed it was better for the dynamics of the class if all students felt as if their participation in Socratic seminar was equally valid, and I thought they may not feel this way if I said I would be only using the experiences of one of the groups of students.
Table 1. Demographic Data of Students in the Class Involved in This Study

<table>
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<th>Number of students who identified as such in the Research group</th>
<th>Number of students who identified as such in the Non-studied portion of the class</th>
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**Methods**

I used a multi-method approach, using interviews, video and audio recordings, observations, and field notes. Using a variety of methods is recommended by Yin (2003) as a technique to try to bring “depth” to a case. Indeed, I found that each of these
techniques highlighted different aspects of Socratic seminar that may have been difficult for me to notice if I had only utilized one method. For example, I would not have been aware of the various reasons students gave during their interviews for why they asked questions if I had only observed them in Socratic seminar.

**Interviews**

I used a semi-structured interview, employing Spradley’s (1979) technique. Spradley advocates that the interviewer prepared certain “grand tour” questions. Grand tour questions are questions that encourage the interviewee to describe the features of a particular scene. The intention is that, rather than being fixed on specific topics in the interview, the focus, instead, is upon the answers the interviewee provides and to ask clarification questions about these answers to invite such additions as elaborations, specific examples, and explanations for certain language choices. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes.

While conducting these interviews, I was aware of the power dynamics in terms of my position as the students’ professor, but I both presented and believed that I was a “learner” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 132). I made these sentiments apparent to the students by expressing gratitude that they had agreed to help me to have a better understanding about their experiences in Socratic seminar. Through my style of teaching, whereby the class was a place where the students and myself shared our own experiences, and because we met three times a week, I believe I had already built some rapport with these students before the interviews. Because of the frequency and types of discussions we had already engaged in before the interviews themselves, this may have made the students feel more comfortable with talking to me than they may have had they been interviewed by a researcher they did not already know.

As Scheurich (1997) noted, the power dynamics within any interview are present, but these power dynamics are not unilateral, and the interviewee may find ways to resist
and subvert the interview. For most of the students, I felt confident that they were trying to help me understand their perspective, which I perceived was evidenced by their detailed answers and willingness to clarify their answers. In addition, utilizing Spradley’s (1979) concept of grand tour questions, which uses words such as “describe” and “could you tell me about…,” helped to prevent me from asking leading questions, which may have led to more uniform answers.

Unfortunately, two of the students, Jo and Leah, were unavailable to do their interviews until our final class meeting, which was during our end-of-semester celebration. This led, I felt, to these two students being in a hurry to be finished with their interviews; this seems to be reflected in the brevity of their answers compared to the other students’ answers. Nevertheless, I think that interviewing was still an appropriate way for me to understand what the experience of Socratic seminar was like for these students. The interviews seemed to give me an opportunity to attempt to “put [the students’] behavior into context” (Seidman, 2006, p. 10) and to understand the students’ perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) about Socratic seminar. This methodological approach allowed me to hear directly from the students and helped me construct a sense of how the students felt about their experiences during Socratic seminar rather than for me to make assumptions based on my observations of the Socratic seminars.

I interviewed all the students twice. In the first interviews, I tried to understand what the students’ experiences with reading challenging texts were and the ways in which they had been taught to work with challenging texts. Although I have not used the results of that interview in this study, since my research has taken a different angle than I was initially expecting, these interviews were helpful in allowing the students to have the experience of being interviewed, and so may have encouraged them to feel more relaxed in the second interviews. The second interviews were lengthier than the first interviews and intended to both explore the students’ prior experiences of class discussion and
further investigate their experiences and feelings toward their participation in the Socratic seminars.

These interviews were all informal and open. As with such types of interviews, these interviews were not identical. In some instances, the students seemed to need greater clarification, while in other interviews I wanted to understand more about what the students appeared to be alluding to. The broad topics that were addressed in the second interviews were:

- What was the student’s experiences of class discussion prior to this class?
- What did the student think happened to them when they engaged in Socratic seminar?
- What did they notice about their own and their classmates’ behavior during Socratic seminar?
- Did the student think that Socratic seminar helped him/her to understand literature? How, and why?
- Did the student think that Socratic seminar helped him/her to engage with their classmates differently compared to when they hadn’t used Socratic seminar?
- Did Socratic seminar change his/her opinion of himself/herself as a student?
- What did he/she believe were the differences between classroom discussion and Socratic seminar?

**Observations**

I was both the instructor and the researcher in this study. Just as Corsaro (1981) found himself being both “observer and participant” (p. 119) and Henstrrand (2006) conducted her research as a “practicing teacher” (p. 3), I was aware of the duality of my roles. The actual observations I undertook for this study had very similar conditions to our usual classroom activities, since when the students would begin their discussion in Socratic seminar, I rarely intervened.
This model, whereby the teacher remains peripheral to the discussion part of the Socratic seminar, has been a component of many schools of thought on Socratic seminar. There is a long history of teachers engaging in the role of facilitator in Socratic education: as promoted by Adler (1982), who has long been considered to be the pioneer of modern paideia education; also encouraged by Lipman (1976), whose work on critical thinking is integral the Socratic seminar; and traced by Mintz (2006), who has concerned himself with the history of Socratic education.

During the Socratic seminars, I would make field notes to record the students’ seating arrangement and to have a written record of the events that unfolded during the seminars. After the class, I would transcribe the seminars and then compare the field notes with audio and video recordings. These video and audio recordings helped me capture many things that my field notes did not reflect. Since the students remained in one place during the course of the Socratic seminar, I set up the camera on a tripod and left it to record the students while they were talking. I also used an audio recorder as a way to help capture speech that was not caught on the video camera’s microphone. This combination of recording devices proved particularly helpful for decoding what some of the students who spoke particularly quietly or quickly had said.

The students participated in Socratic seminar once a week from September to December 2017. Of the seminars the students participated in, I recorded three in total: the students’ first, middle, and last seminars. I used my field notes to examine what happened to the students’ discourse during the use of Socratic seminar over the course of a semester, and I used these observations to inform my second round of interviews with the students themselves. I paid special attention to how and why the discourse appeared to change from one session to another and what seemed to be accomplished in the discourse.
Pilot Studies

Prior to this study, I had undertaken two pilot studies through which I was able to observe, analyze, and interview students about their experiences in Socratic seminar. These pilot studies gave me an insight not only into my students’ experiences of Socratic seminar and some of the types of things that happen in Socratic seminar, but also into my own methodology.

I noticed during these pilot studies that even with my experiences of observations, the use of a video recorder was invaluable in capturing the actual discussions. This was apparent when I would recall what had happened in the Socratic seminar with the help of my notes, and yet when I watched and listened to the Socratic seminars again, I found there were many things students had said that I did not have a written record of. I learned from this experience, so there were times in this study when my notes indicated that I had a certain impression of the discussion, but by taking the time to closely analyze the actual transcripts, I was also able to capture the contributions of students whose speech was not necessarily as loud or as forceful as other students, and this led me to have a clearer picture of the seminar. This was certainly the case in the final seminar, where my notes indicate that I had construed the seminar as disappointing, but my analysis of the transcripts suggested that I had overlooked the contributions of one of the quieter members of the group, Willy, whose participation was significant to the discussion that unfolded.

During the pilot studies, I found that one of the themes that emerged during both the observations and the interviews was that the students began to turn to one another as a source of support. This was both apparent in the ways the students interacted in the seminars and in the sentiments they expressed in the interviews.

These pilot studies also helped me clarify my thinking about what it means to study the students as individuals. Since one of the principles of Socratic seminar is that of
collaboration and the discussion itself is dynamic, I did not find that by isolating each student and comparing them to each other I was doing justice to what happened in the seminar; instead, I found that a holistic approach to the discussions was truer to what I had observed.

At times during the pilot interviews, it seemed as if my students did not appear to be answering the questions I thought I was posing. While my initial response was to feel disappointed that perhaps my questions weren’t specific enough, I also found that even these answers to the questions that I thought I wasn’t asking were often useful and interesting in other ways. One explanation for the interviewee answering a different question from the question asked may have been that the students were engaged in an act of “resistance;” that is to say, the interviewee may have been choosing to “assert his/her control over the interview” (Scheurich, 1997, p. 71). This does not make the interview invalid, but these unanswered questions became places where I could reflect upon whether these were acts of resistance, and if I concluded that they were, why this may have occurred.

**Data Analysis**

To answer my first inquiry question, with regard to the features and affordances of the discourse that takes place in a Socratic seminar, I used video recording of the Socratic seminars, observational notes, memos, and portions of my interviews with the students. My second inquiry question, which was concerned with the students’ own perceptions of their experience of discourse in the Socratic seminars, was explored through student interviews.

I originally intended to simultaneously collect and analyze data. Wiersma and Jurs (2009) suggest that, by using such an approach, the researcher may start to notice some themes that can then be used in the next part of the study. The reality, though, was that by
the time I collected the data and transcribed the recordings, it was nearly time for me to collect the next round of data, so I did very little analysis until after I had finished collecting all of the data.

The types of data I collected during the study, aside from the actual recordings and transcripts of the seminars and the interviews, have been field notes and memos. Field notes can be defined as simply notes that are made in the “field”; in this case, it was while I was observing the Socratic seminars in the classroom itself. These notes were primarily jottings where I detailed the seating arrangement, what was said, and by whom. Memo writing can feature many types of writing, according to Corbin and Strauss (2008), such as headings, raw data, regular updates, and conceptual details (p. 123), but should be primarily used, suggests Maxwell (1996), as a way both to document and facilitate the researcher’s thinking. I found it was most useful to use memo-writing in the following ways: after the seminar, but before I listened again to the recordings, I would write down anything that seemed particularly significant about that seminar; once I had transcribed the seminars, I would write other memos, which were narrative versions of the seminar; these memos would help me start to notice certain themes; and once I had coded for specific themes, I would then organize my thoughts further into more memos, which would discuss these themes across the seminars.

Coding is a common way for qualitative researchers to analyze their data. Coding, as defined by Corbin and Strauss (2008), is “extracting concepts from raw data and developing them in terms of their properties and dimensions” (p. 159). The specific raw data I used were the transcripts of the seminars and the interviews. The ways I developed these codes were slightly different for the seminars than for the interviews: for the Socratic seminars, I focused upon the definitions of dialogue and critical thinking I outlined in Chapter II and identified examples of dialogue, and when examples of non-dialogue seemed to occur. With the transcripts of the interviews, I tried to identify sentiments that were articulated across the interviews, and then I connected these ideas to
what I saw happening in the seminars. For example, Jessica mentioned in her interview that she used questions for clarification. I then looked back in the Socratic seminar transcripts to see if I could find any examples of her using questions in this way. I used my field notes and memos alongside the codes and transcripts to try to ensure that the examples I had highlighted were kept in context. This helped prevent my research from becoming “context stripped” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 79).

I noticed that many of the codes I had developed, which I initially had intended to identify one component of the discourse, were actually examples of a number of different components of the discourse that was occurring. One such example was the use of a clarifying question. A clarifying question could be considered to be an example of dialogue, but it also could fall into the category of higher-order critical-thinking skills, and also may be an example of students working collaboratively in their zone of proximal development with their “near-peers” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, loc. 613). This led me to look at all of my codes and consider the ways in which these categories that I had intended to be so distinctive in fact overlapped.

**Validity and Reliability**

There have been concerns raised about the reliability, and therefore the validity, of qualitative research due to the difficulty in replicating such studies (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009, p. 246). Nevertheless, I undertook a number of actions to try to ensure internal validity. I focused on nine students in order to have enough different perspectives on the same issue. I also used purposeful selection to ensure that I had a group that represented the diversity of the class.

I could never really know whether the students were being candid with me in the interviews. I am also aware that since I have a “position of power” within the classroom, this may have influenced the ways in which my students responded in the interview;
therefore, I tried hard to be both self-reflexive and mindful in the ways I conducted the interviews. Thus, I chose to conduct the students’ second interviews after I had turned in their portfolio grades, as I thought this may have helped the students feel that they could be more honest in the interviews without jeopardizing their grades. In addition, I tried to keep a balanced tone in the interviews in order to avoid focusing only on the successes that might prove any pre-conceived notions that I had about Socratic seminar. The students I interviewed seemed to be satisfied by my explanation that I wanted to interview them to help me better understand their experiences in Socratic seminar, and in general, they seemed quite talkative and forthcoming about their experiences.

I have continued to work with a writing group of other doctoral students that in the past I have found to be very helpful “critical friends” (Horvat, 2013, p. 108). As a group, we have met regularly and read one another’s work, challenged findings, and asked good questions. Specifically, I talked with these students about ways in which I could design a study that would honor my theories of pedagogy while allowing for opportunities to interrogate the ways in which students functioned during Socratic seminar. And finally, throughout the study, I have used the transcripts of the seminars and the transcripts of the interviews together to try to see if they supported or were in opposition with one another.

**Positionality**

While my position as a White British doctoral student in English education might suggest that I have little in common with my students at the community college, who were Latino/a, Black, White, and biracial, I found heeding Milner’s (2007) call for the researcher to be self-reflexive with regard to “racially and culturally grounded questions” (p. 395) to be a useful place to start. By taking the time here to make explicit some of my own lived experiences, this has helped me recognize how my background has guided both my own research and my relationships with the participants.
In the USA, I am both privileged as a White woman and yet, in certain situations, I am also an outsider as a non-citizen and migrant. I have some understanding of some of the experiences of my foreign-born students, but I accept that as an English-speaking British woman, the warm reception that I have received from many Americans may be quite different from that which some of my students may have experienced. When I have travelled to India, as the only non-Indian in my husband’s Hindi-speaking family, this has given me a greater understanding of some of the challenges and emotions some of my ELL students have had and, at times, continue to face. The significance of my biography, just like anyone else’s, is that my individual interpretations are “not culturally neutral, but is influenced by the beliefs, values, knowledge, and experiences of the researchers who do the interpreting” (Siddle Walker, 1999, p. 236).

While I have been analyzing the data, I have also had the opportunity to audit a class. My membership in this class has also made me more aware of the type of participant I would most likely be if I was a student in a Socratic seminar class. This has led me to identify with students Tannen (2007) defines as “high-considerateness” speakers, although when I was teaching the class, I felt I was more similar to the “high-involvement” speakers.
Chapter IV

BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY AND FINDINGS, PART I

Socratic Pedagogy

When thinking about Socratic seminar one may immediately turn to the apparent source of this pedagogical method, Socrates himself. A number of scholars have convincingly argued that although Socrates may indeed be the eponymous hero of Socratic education both Socratic education and indeed Socratic seminar has little to do with Plato’s version of Socrates. Socrates’ name has been used due our contemporary perception of Socrates as a passionate and skillful teacher rather than to any specific teaching methods he may have employed or championed (Fullam, 2015; Schneider, 2012). With that said, Mintz (2009) has taken pains to point out specific examples of Socrates with his “students” and the way certain moments in his “teaching” could be seen to be the foundation for certain types of “Socratic” educational practices. While I accept Mintz’s point it seems to me that although there were certain examples where Socrates allowed his “students” to explore ideas his method was more akin to what I will term that of “Socratic inquiry” than Socratic seminar.

Historical Context

Socratic inquiry. In the 1800s a professor of law C.C. Langdell introduced case study into law schools and had students explore these cases through what was referred to as “Socratic inquiry” (Kimball, 2009, p. 38). This use of the Socratic method or Socratic inquiry continues to be primarily confined to law schools and while the asking of
questions was central to the Socratic method, it was the teacher, not the student, who would “ask questions and [then] demand to know the student’s reasoning” (Kimball, 2009, p. 145). This form of Socratic inquiry, still used today, encourages students to be ready to defend their reasoning, but has been accused of being intimidating to many students (Mintz, 2009). A common principal between this Socratic inquiry and the other forms of Socratic education is that both are, “directly opposed to lecturing” (p. 479), and focus upon actively engaging students through questioning. My study is concerned, not with Socratic inquiry, or Socratic method, but with what I am terming Socratic seminar.

**Socratic seminars.** Socratic seminars were first developed, at the undergraduate level, in the early 1900s by John Erskine at Columbia University. Professor Erskine was particularly concerned with teaching undergraduate students and proposed a two-year program in which students would read roughly 50 “great books.” He employed a method that focused on discussion rather than lecture—an approach to pedagogy that he called, “the most natural of all methods” (Schneider, 2012, p. 27).

In 1937, the term Socratic seminar is first recorded as being used by Scott Buchanan, the dean of St John’s College, who referred to the class discussions as Socratic discussions and the teachers as leaders (Strong, 1996, pp. 5-7). In the early 1970s, Matthew Lipman founded Philosophy for children, which was a movement to introduce philosophy to children. Lipman wrote a book called *Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery* and created a curriculum to accompany the book, in order to fulfill this aim. A major component of this curriculum was that the teacher would facilitate student led discussions (Reed, 1992, p. 149). Teacher facilitated discussion, rather than teacher dominated discussions, continues to be a major pedagogical stance in Socratic seminar.

Mortimor Adler’s (1982) *The Paideia Proposal* was published as a guide to teaching practice in public education. This proposal was significant in that it introduced Socratic seminar into the K-12 classroom. A key component of Adler’s proposal was that schools should not be focused upon, “knowledge of facts and formulas” (p. 27), but
rather skills, therefore the teaching should be less didactic and more “akin to ... coaching” (p. 27). Adler specifically discusses the “Socratic mode of teaching” (p. 29), whereby the teacher is encouraged to take on the role of, “one of the participants, not the principal performer” (p. 54). He also claims that through such Socratic discussions, compared to other types of teaching, students are able to think more clearly, bring ideas to fruition, and be more reflective (p. 29).

The teacher in the Socratic space has, argues Strong (1996), created the circumstances in which the students develop increasingly accurate means of determining, for themselves, whether or not their interpretation of a given text is plausible (p. 11). Indeed, while every Socratic classroom is “hardly the same” (Schneider, 2012, p. 26), what is similar is that the students physically face one another in circular classroom seating and “the students’ ideas become central to the dialogue” (Mintz, 2009, p. 484). The teacher’s responsibilities include preparing the students and the classroom and continuing to reinforce the principles that facilitate this dialogue.

**Principles of Socratic seminar.** The way in which I prepare my students to use Socratic seminar is by introducing the students to the principles of Socratic seminar. These principles, that Dicker adapted from her reading around dialogue, empathy, listening, and compassion, are introduced to the students through a workshop approach. Specifically, these principles introduce the notions that Socratic seminar is undertaken by being collaborative, inclusive, and seeking understanding through questioning. In addition, I focus on the ways in which Socratic seminar encourages deeper thinking through a willingness to reject easy answers. Strong notes that there are three prerequisites for Socratic Practice to occur:

- Socratic construction of meaning
- Interpersonal skills
- Taking ideas seriously/Applying ideas to life (Strong, 1996, p. 9)
Senge (1990) identifies three different conditions that should be in place in order for there to be meaningful dialogue during Socratic seminar. Senge’s conditions are: assumptions must be suspended, participants must consider one another as colleagues, and a trained leader must facilitate the dialogue. While Senge’s and Strong pre-requisites, or conditions, are not identical they certainly overlap; both are concerned with the ways in which the students interact (as colleagues and seriously); the use of Socratic practice (whereby participants assumptions are suspended and students engage in a dialogue to construct meaning); and finally both are concerned with the actual process of the seminar (Senge with adults in a work setting suggests that Socratic seminar requires a trained leader while Strong is focused upon middle and high school students and suggests that Socratic seminar may run effectively if all the other principles are adhered to, and the students have “good” interpersonal skills). While it can be inferred that both Senge and Strong anticipate critical thinking as being a necessary component of Socratic seminar, Lambright (1995) explicitly states that critical thinking is at the “heart” of Socratic seminar. Lambright explains that effective Socratic seminar can only be achieved through careful listening, entertaining others’ perspectives, digging below the surface, suspending judgment, and exposing assumptions (p. 33). These three descriptions of successful Socratic seminar all place the onus upon the leader to provide guidance to the participants to take their involvement with Socratic seminar seriously and to adhere to the principles laid out.

**Practical implications.** As a teacher/facilitator of Socratic seminar I aim to get to the heart of these principles through the ways that I introduce and implement Socratic seminar. Initially I present the principles of Socratic seminar through a workshop approach that I have adapted from my sister Jane Dicker’s work. The workshop begins by focusing upon a famous athlete and then it asks the students to figure out why that athlete is so successful. From there we notice that the individual has had help from a wide variety of support systems. This helps to reinforce the idea that success is a collaborative
effort. The next step is to draw a contrast between the competitive, individualistic, and argumentative style of debate and the collaborative intention of Socratic seminar. After the differences between these two types of group “talk” are explored, the students are introduced to the principles of Socratic seminar which they are asked to read aloud. The principles that they are asked to read aloud, and which are subsequently explained, are from Dicker’s workshop and read as follows:

1. Changing your mind can be a sign of mental flexibility- the beginning of wisdom
2. Everyone has value
3. Everyone has a unique perspective- this is welcome
4. Everyone has a right to speak
5. Everyone has a right to learn through listening
6. Active listening is a gift that benefits the speaker and the listener
7. Doubt leading to genuine questioning is key to learning
8. Teamwork is the beginning of development
9. Genuine open-ended questions may benefit all
10. In Socratic seminar disagreement is welcome
11. Successful disagreement in Socratic seminar relies on respectful disagreement
12. In order to truly disagree with another, you must first fully understand their viewpoint
13. To understand another person’s perspective ask them questions
14. In Socratic seminar agreement is welcome
15. Ideas come through teamwork
16. Ideas belong to everyone in the group
17. Doubt may be the beginning of wisdom
18. That which is spoke during Socratic seminar is confidential
19. Honesty is the foundation of learning
20. Socratic seminar must be conducted in a spirit of love. If conducted in a spirit of malice it is doomed to fail.

Finally, I explain the practicalities of how Socratic seminar is run for the students. The model I use is based upon Copeland’s (2005) description of Socratic seminar. I divide the students in the class into two equal groups. One half of the class is asked to discuss a topic, this will typically be in response to an open question about a piece of literature that the class has read. The other half of the class that are not discussing the text first are each assigned a student in the discussion group whom they must observe. The
discussion is timed and when the time is up, (typically 15-30 minutes) these observers provide public verbal feedback to the participants.

The feedback, as outlined by Dicker, must be specific and refer to the principles of Socratic seminar: that is with regards to evidence of a participant’s active listening, own verbal contributions, and their use of questions. I required the outer circle to observe for these three sets of behaviors only until the students are doing them effortlessly. At the point when these behaviors appeared to have been acquired, the students are informed that new behaviors are being specifically observed for- the subsequent behaviors that are being observed for are determined by the teacher and informed by her aims for the class. The key is that the students continue to develop a set of behaviors that encourage critical thinking skills. The observer must provide positive feedback, an area for improvement, and another positive note (in that order). The groups then change role.

While Socratic seminar provides a specific format for collaborative dialogue there are a variety of acceptable ways in which students may participate such as: listening, asking comprehension questions, asking clarifying questions, asking hypothetical questions, quoting from the text, offering critical analysis from the text, offering their own experience, observing other students, making notes on the seminar, posing solutions, and posing suggestions.

**Types of Socratic seminars.** Socratic seminar has many variations. Indeed, asserts Schneider (2012), “classrooms in which Socratic method is ostensibly employed are hardly the same.” (p. 26). This may result in classrooms where you may have teachers who are the center of the classroom, quite obviously guiding the discussion, but in other Socratic classrooms the teacher may be found at the margins, very rarely speaking. (p. 26). Is it possible, one might ask, that this can be termed Socratic seminar if there is little or no verbal contribution from the teacher? Indeed, there is a precedent for this type of Socratic seminar; a variety of experts in the Socratic field advocate the silent teacher as a way to enable the students’ voices to become the focus of the dialogue (Adler, 1982;
Fullam, 2015; Lipman, 1976; Mintz, 2009). In fact, it may be a long-misunderstood belief that the teacher is taking on the role of Socrates, but rather Socrates is, argues Mintz (2009), “a model for its students” (p. 485):

Socratic teaching hopes to create an environment where students speak directly to one another, probe each other’s comments as Socrates would have, and create an understanding of the topic by communally building upon agreed premises. (p. 485)

Ball and Brewer (2000) do not advocate the use of the inner and outer circle on a regular basis, citing students as generally disliking the format “feeling [that they have been] excluded or punished” (p. 23). Ball and Brewer advocate for the whole class being in the inner circle for the entire time. In my experience though, students when given the opportunity to participate in both the inner and the outer circle appreciate the feedback that they receive from their peers, as well as finding the smaller inner circle provides them with an opportunity to more easily get involved in the dialogue. I also have found that the use of specific individual peer feedback is often more valuable than my attempts to provide all the feedback. These sentiments are similar to those of Copeland (2005), who suggests that the reason that students take their peers more seriously is empowering as they then want to “make improvements happen” (p. 82), Copeland also believes that such criticism from a teacher may result in the student feeling, “judged and graded on their performance” (p. 82).

The use of this feedback helps the observer and the participant to continually reflect upon whether the principles of Socratic seminar are being adhered to. In addition, I have noticed that the students in the outer circle are able to learn both about the structure of engaging in dialogue and pertinent information with regards to the text being discussed. This is evident when the second group are asked to dialogue, and they frequently make references to points that were discussed by the first group.

**What might a “successful” Socratic seminar look like?** When observing the students engaged in Socratic seminar I have tried to understand what the students are
accomplishing and how this is happening. One of my concerns, as a teacher of English, is to ensure that my students arrive at a plausible or what Rosenblatt (1968) calls a “warrantable” understanding or interpretation of the text under discussion. Strong (1996) warns that many students have been taught to believe that “everyone’s opinion is equal” (p. 54), and that what follows from such thinking is the mistaken idea that a careful, thoughtful analysis is no better than a hasty, mindless rant. Hence, Strong claims that students must be taught to exercise critical judgment and “learn to listen to diverse hypotheses, within themselves and from other students, and to discern the plausible from the implausible” (p. 13).

I would point out, however, that a discussion that yields, what may be judged by a literary critic to be, a misinterpretation of the literature does not automatically invalidate the dialogue that transpired to produce it. Postman and Weingartner (1967), drawing on Dewey and Bruner, suggest that misunderstandings may not be a failure, if students, “learn how answers are produced, how knowledge is generated, how learning is conducted” (p. 70). Strong (1996) also urges teachers to accept the process rather than to simply focus on the “results.” Strong’s argument is that the experience of exploring and analyzing texts is the most effective way for students to learn how to analyze texts. It is while trying to understand the text that the students figure out the kinds of strategies that might best help them to interpret it. Therefore, while I am certainly interested in the students’ interpretations of the literature I have concerned myself with focusing upon the types of strategies that they employed to better understand a more difficult text. For example, when the text was challenging to the students, what specifically did they do to try to better understand it? Did they re-read it? Paraphrase it? Ask questions about the text? Ask questions of one another?
Profiles of the Students

For this study I observed, transcribed, and recorded three Socratic seminars from a series of six Socratic seminars that were part of a twelve-week course. I also interviewed all the students from this same class to better understand their perspectives about their participation in Socratic seminar. I chose these three particular seminars, out of the six that the students had engaged in, to more closely analyze because they were from the beginning, middle, and end of the course. In addition, the stimuli for these seminars were all different genres and topics.

As a way to provide a clearer sense of the students involved in the Socratic seminars and the differences between the three seminars I have provided a brief description of each of the students and an overview of each of the seminars. The descriptions reflect the things that I found distinctive about different students. For example, in some of the descriptions I mention the student’s physical characteristics, because those students seemed especially concerned with their appearance. In addition, I have referred to students’ either by race or by ethnicity depending upon how they identified themselves. I have also provided a brief overview of the texts that were studied for each Socratic seminar and anything about each seminar that stood out to me as different from the other seminars. All the names used are the student chosen pseudonyms.

Rose

Rose, a 19-year-old Black student, was one of the most conscientious students in the class. She always completed her work ahead of time and often asked if there is anything she could do to improve it. Rose usually sat with Jessica and another student, Christine (also from the class, but in the other group). In discussions about the class text, “Like Water for Chocolate,” Rose explained that her family is from East Africa and they have different traditions from other people that she knows in the USA—she was talking
specifically about weddings. Rose was proud of her fluency in French. Rose intends to become a nurse.

**Pete**

Pete, a 19-year-old Puerto Rican student, nearly always sat with Lillian, and Ronald and Mangekyo (from the other group). He was a very sensitive, and often a very open character. In one essay that he shared with the class, he talked about his struggles with depression. Pete had a very approachable attitude and would regularly volunteer to answer in class. Pete frequently talked about his girlfriend who lives in Canada.

**Jessica**

Jessica, a 29-year-old White student, was the oldest student in the class. Jessica had two children and got married during the semester. She was the person who organized the food at the end of the semester potluck. Jessica told me that she had dropped out of high school due to a pregnancy. Jessica was friendly with Rose and Christine and was not afraid to speak her mind. Jessica has a particular dislike of Alex (from the other group), whom she called immature, and in one instance she shouted at him for making too much noise in the computer lab.

**Josh**

Josh, an 18-year-old African American student, was a very friendly, well-organized, and reliable student. He told me that he had an IEP at school and found reading and writing difficult. Josh didn’t seem to have one particular friend in the class, but appeared to be comfortable with anyone he sat with. He could be quite playful and seemed to enjoy a teasing relationship with some of the female students. When discussing our backgrounds as part of a unit on autobiography, he shared that for many years he lived in a “large project” where everyone knew him and his family. He often talked about taking care of his 2-year-old cousin outside of class time.
Leah

Leah, a 19-year-old African-American student, always made a lot of effort with her appearance. She changed her hairstyle most months and was always perfectly made up. Leah told me that as part of her alternative high school experience she had studied cosmetology. Leah was quite friendly and playful with Josh, but didn’t seem to talk to many of the other students. Leah had quite serious scarring on one of her arms and told me that this was because she got angry one day at high school and punched a mirror. When asked if anyone wished to share their journal entries Leah nearly always volunteered to do so.

Victor

Victor, a 21-year-old Mexican American student, was quite a quiet student, who didn’t seem to have any specific friends in the class, but usually sat with other male students. He told me that he was interested in working in the clothing business and that is why he was pursuing an associate’s degree in business. He would ask for help with his essays and would seek clarification if he didn’t understand something. He missed the first week of classes because he registered late for the class as he said that he was out of the country when it was time to register.

Jo

Jo, an 18-year-old African American student, often sat alone in class. Jo told me that she knew Rose and Renee (from the other group) from high school. She frequently would change her hairstyle and made an obvious effort with her appearance. She was often late to class, and she told me that this was because she had to drop her younger sister off at school, before she came to class. Jo would work quickly on assignments and when finished would start to check her phone. Jo would often volunteer to speak up in class or share her journal entries.
Lillian

Lillian, an 18-year-old student of Hispanic and Asian descent, was firm friends with Pete, Ronald, and Mangekyo. Lillian was quite talkative in a small group, but fairly quiet when we were in a whole class discussion. At the beginning of the semester when introducing ourselves to the class, Lillian explained that the one thing that surprised people about her was that she was a lesbian. Lillian told me that at high school she had an IEP and required extra help. She also said that she had attended three different high schools.

Willy

Willy, a 19-year-old African American student, was probably the most introverted member of the class. Willy rarely interacted with other students in the class unless asked to do so. Willy would talk to his classmates only if it was a requirement of the lesson, or if they started talking to him first. One day, Willy arrived late to class wearing a t-shirt that said, “late on purpose” on it. Willy rarely laughed or expressed any strong emotions in class.

The Focal Seminars

The three Socratic seminars I decided to record and transcribe fell approximately at the beginning, middle and end of the semester. I had originally intended to begin each seminar with a question of my choice, but then in consultation with my advisor, Professor Blau, I decided that I would not impose my question upon the discussion, but rather allow the students to discuss what they felt was of importance with regard to the text.

I decided that it would be interesting to see the students work with different genres and topics, therefore, I decided to have the first seminar on Maya Angelou’s poem, “Caged Bird.” The second seminar was on Sandra Cisneros’s autobiographical essay, “Only Daughter,” and the third seminar on Gretel Ehrlich’s essay about her trip to a
glacier in “Chronicles of Ice.” The three writers are all women. Angelou died in 2014, but at the time of this study, in 2018, Ehrlich and Cisneros are still alive. Angelou was an African American writer, Cisneros a Mexican American writer, and Ehrlich a White American. I chose “Only Daughter” and “Chronicles of Ice” from the anthology, *Readings Plus*. This anthology is a book that the college required the students purchase for this class. I chose to include “Caged Bird” as I wanted the students to also have the experience of discussing a poem, and the class anthology books and textbooks did not include any poetry. I also chose ethnically diverse writers as I believed that it would help to make the texts more culturally relevant. And finally, I chose texts on different topics to try to ensure that the texts would appeal to a variety of student interests.

The ways that we read these three pieces of literature was to adapt a method that Blau (2003) models in *The Literature Workshop*. I asked the students to first read the text to themselves. After everyone had read independently, I then asked the students to read a portion of the text aloud in a “jump-in-reading” (p. 128), where students who wanted to read would jump in and read aloud. Next, I asked the students to go back to the text and underline and identify anything in the text that “moved us, touched us, or resonated in any way” (p. 129). Students were told to read the line that they were “moved” by out loud, and if someone chose their line, they could, and should, still read aloud the line they had chosen.

After completing this activity, the students were instructed to annotate their text by: underlining anything that they felt was important, to write any questions that they had, and to make notes on anything else that they felt was significant. The only time I changed the way we did this activity was with the reading of “Chronicles of Ice.” Before we read “Chronicles of Ice,” I gave the students a list of words and definitions of those words that I thought they may not be familiar with. We read through the words together, and the students offered suggestions of the ways the words might be used in a sentence. This vocabulary list also indicated the line number where the word was found in the essay. I
believed that this was necessary for this particular text, as there were a number of words in this text that, if the students did not understand them, would have been quite difficult for them to have made much sense of the text. Then we proceeded in the same manner as previously outlined, with the reading in silence, read aloud, jump-in, and annotation exercise.

**Socratic Seminar One (10/05/2017)—“Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou**

While the students, overall, seemed to be familiar with Angelou, the genre of poetry was not something that we had previously explored within this class. In our previous lessons, though, the students had read and discussed various songs that they had chosen. The students that participated in this seminar were seated in the following arrangement:

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Pete       Rose
Victor     Jessica
Josh       Christine (from group 2)
Jo         Leah
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Willy and Lillian were not present for this seminar, so I included Christine in this group in order to ensure that both groups had equal numbers. In the second and third Socratic seminars, Christine was not in the focal group. While Christine did not participate verbally in this seminar, she did appear to be attentive. The final seminar of the semester was the only seminar that Christine verbally participated in.

While the students were annotating their copies of the poem, Jo was looking up background information about the poem and poet on her phone. I did not comment upon Jo’s decision to do this, and in fact during the seminar, there were mixed reactions to Jo’s additional research. At one point during the seminar, Pete reflected that this additional information had helped him to understand the poem better, but another time when Jo read
aloud some analysis of the poem that she had found on the internet, nobody verbally responded to it. In subsequent seminars, Jo did not “google” the texts prior to the discussion in the Socratic seminars.

Socratic Seminar Two (10/27/2017)—“Only Daughter” by Sandra Cisneros

The text for this seminar was concerned with the author’s relationship with her father. Jo was absent for this seminar. Here were the seating arrangements for this seminar:

Willy    Leah
Victor       Pete
Lillian       Josh
Jessica   Rose

We had also been reading the novel *Like Water for Chocolate* as one of our class texts, and at one point during this Socratic seminar, the students started to talk about whether “Only Daughter” and *Like Water for Chocolate* were connected to each other. I intervened and told the group that these texts were not about each other. The reason I did this was at that moment I felt that this was a vein of thought that might be somewhat circular and unproductive; in retrospect, I could have allowed them to figure this out for themselves, and perhaps they would have gained something more than my interruption may have allowed for.

This seminar also had an unusual situation in that this was the only time I have taught Socratic seminar and someone from the outside group has stopped the inside group’s discussion to provide additional information. The focal group were talking about why the father referred to his daughter as a son, and there seemed to be a few different theories about why this might be, when Ronald from the outside group raised his hand and said, “Can I say something?” When I nodded, he went on to say, “The thing is what he meant to say was, *Yete mon siete hijos*, which in Spanish means to have seven kids.”
Lillian in the focal group, also a Spanish speaker, agreed, “yeah.” Ronald continued, “But in English you would refer to it as seven sons.” This event was quite interesting to me for a few reasons. Since this type of intervention did not occur again, it suggested to me that Ronald had found the text, and the discussion engaging, perhaps because his knowledge of Spanish made him an “expert.” His intervention also suggested that he felt that as a Spanish speaker he was best able to help his classmates understand the nuances that perhaps neither the text itself provided nor the group appeared to be comprehending. Throughout the rest of this particular Socratic seminar, whenever the students talked about the father referring to the daughter as a son, they would refer back to Ronald and his explanation.

Socratic Seminar Three (11/17/2017)—“Chronicles of Ice” by Greta Ehrlich

This seminar was the one that I was most concerned about as I realized that the vocabulary of our focal text was more challenging than in the other seminars. It was also apparent to me that it was a topic, the melting of a glacier, that none of the students had ever expressed any particular interest in. Leah and Victor were absent for this seminar which I felt must have impacted the dynamics of the group as these two students may have brought a bit of enthusiasm and pace to the seminar that at times this discussion seemed to lack.

Here was the seating arrangement for this Socratic seminar:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jessica</th>
<th>Lillian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Willy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo</td>
<td>Pete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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There were many pauses in this seminar as students spent time looking over the text, perhaps to grapple with some of the language they may have been finding difficult.
Josh did not speak at all during this seminar. Willy, who was one of the quieter students, spoke five times during this seminar, and this is interesting when compared to the second seminar, when he spoke only twice. I wondered whether the slower pace of this last seminar, due to the more challenging material, may have been a better pace for Willy, hence his more frequent verbal participation.

I was not able to video record this seminar; only the audio recorder was working.

Examples of Dialogue in the Socratic Seminars

Throughout the Socratic seminars, there were times when the students engaged in dialogue. I have identified the components of dialogue and given examples of what it was and where it could be found in the three seminars. In order to help to make this information more manageable I have divided the components of dialogue into different sections. This does not mean that these examples of dialogue are all necessarily discreet and separate packages, but rather they often do bleed into one another. At times, I have tried to make these overlaps apparent.

Co-construction of Knowledge Shown Through Questioning

One of the components of dialogic interaction is that of co-construction of knowledge. One of the ways that knowledge is co-constructed is through the use of asking questions. Indeed, Wells (2000) posits that, within dialogue, questions are important in facilitating the expansion of ideas and the opportunity to generate new thoughts. Questions are not always dialogical, indeed at times, as in the case of IRE questioning they can be interpreted as anti-dialogical or non-dialogical. Questions that are especially dialogical are those that Tishman et al. (1993) call “good thinking,” and are typically those that are used, to explore, inquire, and seek clarity.
I noticed that throughout the semester that when engaged in Socratic seminar some students asked more questions than others. All the students, at some point throughout the three Socratic seminars, asked some questions. One student, Leah, asked as many as eighteen questions in one of the 20-minute seminars. That is not to claim that all of the questions that were asked were of the same quality or even that all of them necessarily promoted co-construction of knowledge, but just to show that question asking was indeed integral to these Socratic seminars.

One type of question that was frequently employed was where a student appeared to be seeking clarity by asking for help in understanding something in the text. An example of this was when Rose in the first seminar stated, “I gotta line that I didn’t really understand.” Or Pete, “there is one part in the story that is kind of odd if you read it … I really don’t understand.” While technically these are declarative statements and not questions, they are undoubtedly utterances designed to seek clarity.

Other types of questions were those that served to inquire about relevant facts in the text and to contribute to the dialogue by confirming or testing the statement of another participant in the discussion. An example of such an inquiry was when Leah’s asked, “How old is she?” with regard to Cisneros’s age in “Only Daughter,” which may be seen as an attempt to interrogate Jessica’s previous interpretive statement that Cisneros’s father was, “disappointed” that she [Cisneros] “is not married yet.” In this context, Leah appeared to be inquiring whether Cisneros’s father should indeed be worried about his daughter being unmarried, or whether her age indicated that she was too young for a father to be concerned about this.

Sometime dialogue was promoted through other types of questions, such as Victor’s very open-ended, thought-provoking, and exploratory question, “Is there such a thing as freedom?” While this question was connected to the theme of freedom in “Caged Bird,” it would appear to be primarily a philosophical question moving the discussion dialogically beyond the strict boundaries of the text. Pete refined Victor’s more abstract
inquiry, however, by wondering generally whether individuals can ever really achieve freedom. Jessica and Victor responded to this question by referring back to the poem, “Caged Bird,” as a test case of whether an individual can ever really be free.

Pete: …but freedom, I don’t think anybody is really really free.

Jessica: Yeah like even in the third part it says, “the caged bird sings with a fearful thrill” so he is still kinda like afraid to be free.

Jo: Yeah...

Victor: I thought it was kinda like

Jessica: That is what it kinda seems like he wants to, but he’s kinda a little bit he doesn’t really know what is out there

Victor: I thought that when he says that he sings that was his only freedom just singing right? Cos, he is caged up and he can’t really fly anywhere, he is singing

Initially, Jessica seemed to be suggesting that the bird is fearful of being free, while Victor posed the idea that it was not that the bird is afraid of being free, but rather that the only freedom he had was through his singing. So, although Victor was the one who proposed a very abstract question, that seemed to be removed from the particular concerns of the text, the dialogue in which he is a participant allowed him to move from an abstract question to a closer reading of the text and to an interpretation of particular lines that intrigued and puzzled Jessica.

The use of follow-up questions generally indicated that the students were seeking clarity with respect to a classmates’ claims. For example, after Jo has explained that she believed that the poem “Caged Bird” was concerned with slavery the discussion drifts into other interpretations of the poem, but Leah’s question to Jo, “Why do you say it is about slavery?” both revived the interpretive inquiry and asked her to clarify her position. Jessica also asked clarifying questions, sometimes as a one-word question. In this exchange about Cisneros’ father’s wish for grandchildren, Jessica sought clarification of Leah’s question:
Leah: Why did he want her to have a kid?

Jessica: What?

Leah: So why did he want her to get married though?

This simple use of the word, “what,” was important, as Leah appeared to assume that Cisneros’ father wanted her to have children, but in the context of the text, there was no mention of her father wanting her to get married in order to have children. Jessica’s use of “what” encourages Leah to wonder why he wanted her to get married, rather than to assume he intended that she marries in order that she has children. And while initially this question about why he might want her to be married was flippantly dismissed as “a cultural thing” the students did later revisit this topic and considered other reasons that the father might want his daughter to be married.

Some of the questions the students used seemed to be rhetorical devices in order to promote a speaker’s own perspective. Interestingly, these questions were frequently composed by a number of students. The collaborative nature of these questions suggests that although the questions themselves may not strictly speaking be dialogic in nature, the ways in which the students constructed these questions was collaborative. Rose started off a question, saying: “Do you think that her father cares about her education or,” and then in unison both Rose and Leah chime in together, “just wants to get her married?” Although framed as a question, a few moments before this question was posed Pete and Jessica had already arrived at the conclusion that the father wanted to get the narrator married in order to try to relinquish his responsibility for her. In Pete’s and Jessica’s words:

Pete: Maybe he didn’t want a girl maybe that’s why he wants her to get married, to…

Jessica: He wants to ship her off to another man, not be responsible for her anymore.
This belief that the father did not want to be burdened by the daughter and may have had preference for his sons was fairly well accepted by the group as connoted by this later exchange with regards to the father’s response to the daughter’s graduation:

Jessica: Yeah, it says when he graduated from medical school he fulfilled my father’s dream of study hard and use your hands, use your head instead of your hands, so like he got all the props and everything for doing that, but when she graduated, he just like alright whatever.

Lillian: Yeah whatever.

For most of the students, when they were most comfortable with the topic and seem to find the reading more accessible, they had far more questions than when they were confronted, as in the last seminar, with a topic and a text that were more challenging, and perhaps not a topic that they found so easy to relate to. The exception to this generalization was Jo. In the first seminar, Jo seemed fairly confident in her interpretation that the poem was about slavery and she did not ask any questions at all. In the final seminar on “The Chronicles of Ice,” Jo asked three questions about the meaning of the text, including one that asked, “What is he comparing to the workplace to? What had that got to do with glaciers?” This suggests that the normalizing of questions within the Socratic seminar may have encouraged Jo to feel confident enough to state her confusion. It may be significant that it was in this final seminar that we saw Jo utilizing questions, while in the first seminar that she did not ask any questions.

Overall, the text that seemed to have been most challenging, in terms of content and style, the essay about the melting glacier, “Chronicles of Ice,” generated the fewest questions, only 9, compared to 21 questions that were asked during the second seminar about “Only Daughter” and 16 in the first seminar, which was about “Caged Bird.” I would suggest that the students may have found it difficult to put into words that which they did not understand, but when they mostly understood something it was easier for them to identify the subtler nuances of possible interpretations that it raised for them.
Additionally, it should be taken into account that the student who had typically asked the most questions, Leah, was absent during the last seminar, so it is possible that her presence and absence had the biggest effect upon the numbers of questions asked.

In the interviews, the students themselves brought up the topic of using questions in Socratic seminar. Rose specified that she asked questions sometimes because she “didn’t understand” or at other times to gauge the other students’ perspectives to “see how they think or feel about the passage.” Similarly, Jessica mentioned that she asked questions as a tool to better understand another person’s perspective. Leah also specified that she asked questions so that, “we understood it better.” Victor and Pete explained that they saw questions as a strategy that they employed to help promote discussion. Victor specified that he would use questions “in order for the quietness to go away”; he also believed that other students asked questions to “make them [the other students] participate.” Victor explained that he was motivated to ask questions at the beginning of each seminar because “the first time I did, I got good feedback.” Lillian mentioned that questions helped her to begin to verbally participate in the Socratic seminar. She explained, that while at first she was silent, “eventually I started to ask questions.” The other students, Josh, Willy, and Jo, did not mention questions in their interviews, and indeed during these three seminars these three students used questions far less than the other four students; Jo only asked questions in one of the seminars, Willy asked just one question is each seminar he participated in, and Josh asked three closed questions in total.

Collaboration

Dialogue is collaborative, that is a place where all participants learn from one another (Matusov & Duyke, 2009, p. 86), and where both the individual and the group’s understanding is enhanced through participation in the dialogue (Wells, 2000, p. 58). I was keen to see if, beyond the use of questions, which I would claim are one type of collaboration, there were other ways in which the students collaborated.
The students’ discourse during the seminars and interviews suggested that they had embraced the idea of collaboration. Gee (2017) explains that humans have a deep need to, “matter to others and to society, to feel that they are valued participants in their own society” (loc. 2701). Indeed, Socratic seminar presented opportunities for the students to help one another access the texts. Victor explained that Socratic seminar was a place where they would, “help each other understand what we were talking about.” This idea of “helping” one another was apparent when students offered suggestions of word choice. In this exchange, Pete is introducing the idea of the caged bird as being metaphorical:

Pete: I think this poem can really go for anybody, I don’t think she was actually talking about like a caged bird, obviously, he could have been a bird but….

Josh: It was probably like an expression she used

Pete: Like an expression to it

As you can see, Josh offered Pete the word “expression” as a way to discuss this idea, and Pete’s repetition of the word “expression” suggests that he had accepted this word.

Similarly, students also frequently worked together to articulate an idea. This collaborative talk was most apparent was when the students would finish one another’s sentences. An example of this occurred towards the end of the first Socratic seminar. This is the exchange:

Rose: I gotta a line that I didn’t really understand it says, “the fat worm’s waiting on the dawn bright lawn.”

Jo: I think she is saying, free birds have access to the sky, worms and all that like

Victor: freedom, sky,

Leah: I dunno at some point they …

Jo: talking about the free bird

Pete: yeah, she is talking about the free bird, she is basically describing people who don’t have responsibilities, like what does a bird eat? Worms.
Jo: worms
Pete: so, they have all this freedom to eat whatever they want,
Victor: fly wherever they want
Leah: fly around
Pete: yeah fly wherever they want, so she is describing people who don’t have her responsibilities, like what she is going through right now.
Josh: (inaudible)
Jo: and she says the caged bird her shadow shouts on a nightmare scream while the free bird is eating worms on a sunny day.

Here is the same exchange as a response to Rose’s question, but without the lines being separated into sections for the different students:

I think she is saying, free birds have access to the sky, worms and all that like, freedom sky. I dunno at some point they talking about the free bird, yeah she is talking about the free bird. She is basically describing people who don’t have responsibilities, like what she is going through right now and she says the caged bird her shadow shouts on a nightmare scream while the free bird is eating worms on a sunny day.

This tight collaboration in the finishing of one another’s sentences involved five of the eight students present, but when read without the line breaks it does indeed read like a monologue representing the developing interpretation in the consciousness of a single reader. This particular exchange also seems to be significant in terms of what Tannen (2005) calls the style of participation in a conversational event. Tannen identifies two major styles of speakers, the “high-involvement” style and the “high-considerateness” style (p. 183). This particular exchange seems to involve students who epitomized this high-involvement style. Tannen describes “high involvement” speakers as exhibiting these features with regards to their pace of speech:

a. Faster rate of speech
b. Faster turn taking
c. Avoiding interturn pauses (silence shows a lack of rapport)
d. Cooperative overlap
e. Participatory listenership (Tannen, 2005, p. 41).
While we can’t hear “pace” in a written transcription, it can be seen in the syntactic tightness or continuity of what seems to be a stream of speech representing the stream of consciousness of a single thinker or speaker. In my observation of the seminars and subsequent listening and viewing of the Socratic seminars, the speed, or pace, of the seminars was very noticeable. The “high involvement” style of collaborative conversation would explain why this particular group of five students in this exchange appear to be speaking in one voice. Tannen argues that such speakers use these, and similar techniques, as a way to, “show solidarity, enthusiasm, and interest in others’ talk” (p. 98). Tannen contrasts this type of speaker with the “high-considerateness style” whereby the individual exhibits their solidarity with the speaker by allowing them to speak uninterrupted.

Another example of collaboration may be seen in the first Socratic seminar when Pete posed the initial question, “What do you think it means when it says, ‘the caged bird stands on the grave of dreams, his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream?’” There is a marked silence as the students all stopped to reread the poem’ then Josh offered, “like somebody died.” Leah repeated the words “Somebody died” and then added, “and he having a dream of them?” Rose changed the word "dream" to "nightmare," when she says, "I think he is surrounded by his nightmares,” and then she added on, “like what frightens him the most.” Victor connected the ideas of death and dreams and said that “…his dreams were dead, because he was caged up…..” Pete, who initially posed the question, concluded this section by summarizing these points. Significantly, within this summary, he included the specific phrase “dead dream,” which seems to have been adapted from Victor’s phrase, “his dreams were dead.” This exchange suggests that the students are not only listening closely to one another, but also that they are collaborating to create meaning. Pete, in his interview, confirmed that for him one of the main strengths of Socratic seminar was that of collaboration; he says, "Doing Socratic seminar was actually good in a way because it teaches us how to have a conversation, without having
an argument at the end of it, it just build on, it lets people find out more about the passage together than just by yourself."

One of the ways that the students would show that they recognized the collaborative nature of the seminars was by giving credit in the course of the discussion to the person that they felt had helped them to develop an idea. Hence, Jo prefaced one of her ideas with, “Like Pete says,” and then later Pete acknowledged Jo’s contribution in helping his understanding of the poem when she had read the biographical information. In the third Socratic seminar, Jessica and Pete credited each other with helping them to notice something:

Pete: dang I didn’t even think about that

Jessica: I didn’t til you read that paragraph out loud.

While acknowledging each other’s contribution was a formalized part of the feedback at the end of each discussion, the students’ positive affirmations within the dialogue itself were a way in which they seemed to promote and celebrate their collaborations.

**Different Perspectives and Equity**

The importance of equity within the dialogic space has been recognized as a vital component of true dialogue (Fecho, 2011; Nikulin, 2006). While I recognize that true equity is difficult to achieve, even in these circumstances where the students are all ostensibly at the same academic level, differences due to age, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status make equity a difficult goal to attain. Indeed, Cohen’s (1984) study in elementary school bilingual classrooms, along with her literature review of ethnically diverse classrooms in the 1970s and 1980s, found that there are certain characteristics that confer on specific individuals a higher status than others, and “as a result, higher-status individuals will be more active and influential than lower-status in individuals in the group task” (p. 172). The tendency for this to occur, if left unchecked, is an area that
the principles and the reinforcement of collaborative behavior within Socratic seminar attempts to redress.

The tone of the seminars was quite cordial. Indeed, in their interviews, Rose, Victor, and Leah specifically mentioned that they felt “comfortable” speaking up in Socratic seminar, while Jessica, Josh, Lillian, and Pete alluded to feeling at ease as they got used to the format of the Socratic seminar. This “comfort” may have been due the inclusion of the principle, “Everyone has a unique perspective—this is welcome,” from the pre-Socratic seminar workshop. Willy explained, “If other people had their own perspective, beside you, I could say that it could help you out,” while Lillian, along a similar vein, spoke about her understanding of the text improving because of the different voices: “I feel like I would understand a lot more what the story was about, it wasn’t just I would read the book and that was it, you get me? I feel like everyone’s opinion mattered and that helped a lot.” Pete said, “I learned also when somebody gives their opinion it kinda opens your eyes to a different opinion, a different view of the story.” Josh, too, extolled the virtues of different perspectives: “It helped me to understand it a little better, ‘cos I heard other people opinions about how they see the story, so I see different stories from a different point of view, more than just mines.” When I questioned Josh about whether discussing the text with the teacher would be enough to gain another perspective, he explained that Socratic seminar was better because he got to hear more perspectives rather than “just mines or the teachers.” Leah, Jo, and Jessica also mentioned that the variety of perspectives were helpful in their understanding of the texts.

**Disagreement/ No-consensus**

While collaboration does indeed seem to suggest cooperation, and perhaps cooperation implies consensus, the dialogic experts (Bakhtin, 1986; Matusov & Duyke, 2009; Nikulin, 2006; Wells, 2000) all, ironically, seem to agree that dialogue does not equate with reaching a consensus.
Although the students were open to different perspectives and, in Jessica’s words, this meant that when someone spoke, others “didn’t jump on you if you had a different opinion,” it did not mean that they always agreed. In the second seminar, Josh began a line of thought that the reason that the narrator’s father referred to her as a son was because she “dressed like a boy.” The group fairly directly challenge this interpretation, and Pete asked, “Why would you say that?” Josh’s circular response was that because she was a girl, but her father referred to her as boy. Jessica and Lillian referred back to Ronald’s (from the outer circle) explanation that “it translates into English as sons.” Josh still doubted this theory, and eventually Jessica noted in a somewhat frustrated tone, “It doesn’t say that.” This was one of the more direct disagreements in the seminar.

In the first Socratic seminar, the disagreement was less overt than in the previous example. There were two main interpretations of the poem. One of the theories was that “Caged Bird” was written as a metaphor for slavery—this was introduced by Jo:

I think it’s about slavery, that is the first thing that came to my mind when I read it, ‘cos like, because she state how a freed bird leaps, or whatever- and a caged bird is like tied down, and being that, during that time, like that is basically how the slaves were being treated.

This is partially, begrudgingly, accepted by Pete, whose main theory is that this poem could be applied to anyone who feels trapped in their situation, “like in marriage or something.” He conceded that “it could be about slavery too.” Victor also made the connection that this could be a poem that they might all identify with, “and the bird in the cage being tied, we might feel like that sometimes.” While not accepting that slavery is the sole interpretation, Pete acknowledged it was possible for this to be a valid interpretation. After some deviations, Leah asked Jo to explain, “Why do you say it is about slavery?” This question reintroduced the topic of slavery which seemed to have been dropped. Jo offers biographical information about the poet as evidence—“she is a Black poet”—and a misunderstanding about when the poem was written, suggesting that Angelou was a slave and that is why she had written it, “during those times that slavery
was going on,” but then she goes on to propose that the caged bird might be “how the slave may have felt.” Similarly, to Pete, Jo also conceded that the opposing theory may have merit. She used Pete’s phrase that this poem could “go for anybody.” The students clearly explore their different perspectives without completely disregarding their classmates’ views. There is certainly no final consensus upon the “correct” interpretation of this poem.

In the interview, Rose talked about how hearing her classmates’ perspective meant that she “got a glimpse of the input of what everybody thought about the reading” I asked her whether this made her think “that what they thought was better than what you thought?” Rose denied that this was the case and said that the different perspectives while giving her “something to think [about]” and allowing her to get “an understanding in different aspects” she would still believe “in what I believed in.” If this is true it suggests, that at least for Rose, she did not feel that she had ensure there was a consensus in the group. Indeed, she seems to suggest that she was able to simultaneously entertain more than one different perspective. The ability to entertain multiple perspectives is frequently espoused as an asset in the English classroom (Langer, 1998) and an attribute of good thinking (Tishman et al., 1993).

**Unfinalizability**

Dialogue is never complete or finished (Matusov & Duyke, 2009; Nikulin, 2006), and while these Socratic seminars had an endpoint that was somewhat dictated by the stopwatch (typically 20 minutes, after which time I would allow the students to address any last pressing topics that they had), this endpoint could indeed be understood as “arbitrary” (Matusov & Duyke, 2009, p. 85). However, within the Socratic seminars themselves, where students revisited topics addressed in the seminar, and when students discussed these topics at later dates, such as in the interviews, it was evident that for these students the topics discussed in the seminars were neither resolved nor finished and
remained alive for further dialogue. It would be both arbitrary and an undermining of the process of dialogue to neatly wrap it up with an official and formal ending— that states that the topic is now closed. To do so would suggest that certain sentiments spoken were the correct and final word on the subject, while leaving it unfinished and unending, allows and certainly encourages such topics to be revisited and further explored. It might be necessary for some students to be introduced to the idea that while Socratic seminar is sometimes an initial process where they might start to explore the class texts, it doesn’t mean that it is the ending place of the exploration. In my experiences with Socratic seminar, I have not encountered any obvious resistance from my students to the idea that this twenty-minute discussion is not the ending place and that we would continue to dialogue about the texts through future talking and writing.

In the third seminar about “The Chronicles of Ice,” Pete first introduced the idea of the glacier’s connection to history, he explained that the glacier, “has history behind it, and as it melts that history fades away, that history disappears.” This topic appeared to have had an insignificant impact upon the group as there was a sudden switch in the discussion to the purpose of the trip and then the topic changed again this time to the seasons. Then, just as abruptly, Jo returned to the discussion of the glacier’s connection to history, she expressed confusion about how glaciers were connected to history—she wondered aloud, “they use glaciers to capture stuff … like have records of like history….?” With a switch in topics again the group discussed climate change and farming communities. At this point, Pete connected this discussion of rural communities back to the historical nature of the glacier, “she is trying to explain how the glaciers have a history, and that history back then people didn’t work in corporate places, people lived off the land.” In Pete’s interview, he also made reference to this seminar, and while he misremembered what was actually said in the seminar, he went on to extend the dialogue by discussing the importance of history and the iceberg. This is what he said about the third seminar in the interview:
I just thought that it was just about icebergs, but then Jessica said if you read from the first to the last part of the passage it talks about the life of the iceberg, in the beginning it is like a brand-new iceberg, in the middle it is melting, a whole bunch of history is leaving. And when she said that I realized it isn’t just about an iceberg it is about the history behind it, every iceberg is frozen for millions of years and once it melts, the history is gone. It’s just water now everything has gone, and when she said that it just opened my eyes to that too, I realized this isn’t just about an iceberg, it is also about history too, what an iceberg actually means and what the author is trying to tell us. This is like history, it is important that we keep them, this is like our last view of the past.

This suggests that although the “Chronicles of Ice” Socratic seminar was over the dialogue had actually continued, at least for Pete, as he continued to wrestle with both the ideas from the text and from the discussion.

**Listening**

One of the major components of dialogue is that of listening. Bakhtin (1996) explains it this way: “Every concrete act of understanding is active…. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other” (p. 282). This suggests that a student would actually need to respond if their listening resulted in an understanding of what was being spoken. A response, of course, does not need to be verbal, but to be identified as an example of listening must be a conscious and deliberate response to what was spoken. Listening is one of the more difficult aspects of dialogue to evidence, although, much of what this study has previously documented, with regards to other aspects of dialogue, allude to listening being an integral feature of the success of dialogue.

One way in which the students seemed to suggest to the speaker that they were both listening, and perhaps in agreement with them, was through the use of, “allo-repetition (repetition of others)” (Tannen, 2007, p. 63). Here is an example of allo-repetition from the second seminar: in this example, Leah had expressed confusion about who was lonely in “Only Daughter,” and Jessica explains why she believes that Cisneros was lonely.
Jessica: No that is saying she was lonely because she had six brothers.

Leah: So, she was lonely.

This repetition of “she was lonely” but the emphasis change by Leah shows that while Jessica has focused upon the reason for the loneliness the important piece of the information, for Leah, was who was lonely.

Another way that listening was audibly evidenced was when the students finished one another’s sentences. In this example, Jessica explained that when she heard Pete read a passage about the father it had changed her perspective:

Jessica: cos now if I am thinking about what you said, when you read the thing, like

Lillian: practically dying

Jessica: he was practically dying

First, Lillian finished Jessica’s sentence, then Jessica repeated Lillian’s words. It was as if Lillian was listening so closely to Jessica that she knew what she is about to say, then Jessica repeated the phrase “practically dying” that Lillian had used indicating an acceptance of Lillian’s contribution. Victor and Pete also engaged in sentence finishing and repetition of the other speaker, but this has a different effect than when Lillian and Jessica did it. This exchange occurred during the first seminar, toward the end:

Pete: Like uh, uh the fifth line “the caged bird stands on the grave of dreams, his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream?” the ways she is describing things it is really deep, I remember Ronald said one part something, oh right here, “the caged bird sings of a fearful trill of things unknown” all these ways she is describing the poem really opens up and makes you think—wow like you see the,

Victor: Yeah, you see the message

Pete: Yeah, you see the message or you see where she is coming from, and the way she is describing it too.

Victor: Yeah.

Victor finished Pete’s sentence by offering the word “message,” and Pete accepted the words by repeating Victor’s phrase, “Yeah you see the message,” but then Pete suggested
that this wasn’t what he meant by adding, “or you see where she is coming from.” This decision to initially accept Victor’s suggestion, indicated that this was not merely a student who was echoing the words he hears without thinking, but rather someone who was actively trying to understand and articulate his thoughts. Tannen (2007) argues that this type of repetition, where the responder repeats “with a split-second delay” (p. 93), which she refers to as “shadowing” is an automatic function, and therefore does not show that the responder is intending to do anything. I would point out that in these examples, when the initial speaker had their sentence finished for them by another speaker, the repetition of the words that the “interrupter” used suggests that the initial speaker had accepted this interpretation of where their sentence was going. In the case of Pete and Victor, Pete initially seems to be “shadowing” or automatically repeating Victor’s words, but within a very few seconds Pete corrected the misunderstanding of the point that he was attempting to make.

**When It Wasn’t Dialogic**

If co-construction of knowledge, asking questions, being collaborative, non-consensus, listening, equity, and unfinalizability are all examples of dialogue, then non-dialogue must be the opposite of these. There are two types of non-dialogic discourse that I would like to explore. Anti-dialogical discourse is discourse that appears to be working against dialogue; discourse expressing “attitudes such as aggression, hostility, prejudice, sectarianism” (Wiezbicka, 2006, p. 677) or any argumentative discourse designed primarily “to win” (Tannen, 1998, p. 5). There are other types discourse that are not against, nor in opposition to dialogue, but may still not meet the criteria of dialogue that I have laid out.

**Non-dialogue/anti-dialogue.** There were times, during the seminars, when the students seemed not to really listen carefully to one another, nor probe one another’s claims, nor respond to their questions. The students may not have been attempting to
quell opportunities for dialogue, but their discourse seem to have resulted in dialogue being abandoned. For example, in the first Socratic seminar, Jo began:

**Jo:** OK I wanna start, I wrote one little word over here, to me I think it’s about slavery, that is the first thing that came to my mind when I read it, ‘cos like, because she state how a freed bird leaps, or whatever- and a caged bird is like tied down, and being that, during that time, like that is basically how the slaves were being treated.

**Victor:** how they felt?

**Jo:** a caged bird

**Pete:** I think just, I think like this song could really like go for anybody

It seems as if both Victor’s question and Jo’s initial statement warranted some clarification, but Pete seems to put a stop to this by introducing a new angle, “like this song could really like go for anybody.” When Victor spoke again, it was in support of Pete’s claim, “and the bird in a cage being tied, we might feel like that sometimes” Josh, while initially supportive of this claim “Word,” didn’t try to interrogate the ways in which “we might feel like that sometimes”; instead he began another line of thought about birds not singing.

Similarly, in the last seminar about “Chronicles of Ice,” there were many times when a topic was introduced by a member of the group and rather than anyone taking up the topic, exploring it, or asking the initial speaker for clarification another speaker would speak on something fairly unconnected. In fact, in this seminar there were seven different topics introduced, but of these, only one, which I have referred to as “the significance of the glacier” topic, was discussed more than once. All the other topics introduced in this seminar, apart from the one initiated by Lillian about the conclusion of the text, had between zero and three rejoinders. It appears as if the challenges of this text, along with the absence of Leah and Victor, resulted in a somewhat disjointed and stilted discussion. In addition, one of the participants, Josh did not speak at all during this seminar.
Another time that I have interpreted the group as not engaging in collaborative work, and perhaps being somewhat aggressive in a way that emphasized inequity, was in the first seminar when Victor redirected Leah’s question to Josh. Here is the exchange:

Leah: What do you think it means when he, she says, his wings were clipped, and his feet were tied?

Victor: Josh?

Laughter

Josh: that was for me?

Leah: yeah

Josh: Hmm. To tell you the truth I don’t actually know but, I think that they was tied in the pain or whatever, I’m gonna give it that is my best answer, so they was tied they was going through it, their emotions,

Leah: do you know what I asked you?

Josh: no not really

Leah: I said his wings were clipped, and his feet were tied what do you think that means?

At this point, I interrupted the exchange, as I felt that Leah was taking on the role of chastising teacher and putting Josh into the role of bad student. The initial request for Josh to answer the question was met with laughter, and seemed to lay the ground for what was going to happen next. Leah’s response to Josh’s answer, “do you know what I asked you?” didn’t sound to me like a genuine question. I saw this exchange as an attempt to position Josh as being less competent than Leah. Although it was Leah who had had said she wanted to know what this phrase meant, I interpreted her showing, through her putdown of Josh, that at least she understood her own question, which she seemed to imply meant that she knew more than Josh did.

Another place where I found a lack of dialogue was in the second seminar when the students discussed why the father referred to Cisneros as a son rather than as a
daughter. Josh didn’t appear to listen to his classmates’ theories and persisted in his line of thought that she was “dressed like a boy” despite there being no evidence to corroborate this. Indeed, other students, including Ronald, Victor, Pete, Lillian, and Jessica, offer text-based evidence to the contrary, but Josh was reluctant to let go of this idea. It is only at the point that Jessica speaks in quite an authoritarian voice, “it doesn’t say that, do you get it now?” that Josh let the topic drop.

In this same seminar, Willy asked a question that not one of the group attempts to engage with:

Willy: I have a question: Is it true that everyone tries to impress their parents, like their father mainly?

Pete: no

Jessica: no

Murmuring no

Victor: I feel like that is old school.

Jessica: that is another cultural thing too,

Victor: yeah, yeah, yeah—we just focus on our education.

This rush to a consensus and a failure to explore this question indicates another time where the students didn’t allow themselves to use dialogue to explore a potentially interesting topic.

**Other Types of Meaningful Discourse**

There were other types of discourse present that while not anti or non-dialogue may not neatly fall under the category of dialogue. These other types of discourse may perform other roles in the seminar, and I will explore what these types of discourse were and what their effect on the seminar may have been.

**Use of humor.** The students would often have moments of humor and laughter in the Socratic seminars. Humor has been documented as having important social functions,
in terms of “establishing and maintaining close relationships … and coordinating mutually beneficial activities” (Martin, 2007, p. 114). In addition, humor can be used to have a “coercive function” (p. 119) as a way to enforce, “social norms.” And finally, laughter is a “communication signal” that intends to “convey the message ’This is play’” (p. 121).

On one occasion, Pete was explaining that the poem “Caged Bird” has vivid images. He seemed to be struggling to find the right word, “so like all these little descriptions makes the poem stand out, makes it more readable, you’ll think that’s a good representation, that’s a good phrase, it makes you want to read more of it.” Then Jessica offered the phrase, “It gives you a good visual,” which Pete repeated, “Yeah visual, oh that’s the word.” This moment brought laughter to the group which suggested that they all recognized that Pete had been so long-winded because he was struggling to find the right word. Tannen (2007) notes that repetition is frequently employed for comedic effect: “Humor is a common function of repetition with a slight variation” (p. 71).

Jessica also used repetition for humorous effect, but perhaps to indicate irony. In this section Josh was explaining why he thought that Cisneros’s father had referred to her as a son:

Josh: but she kinda still a girl but she dress up as a boy

Jessica: she not kinda a girl, she is a girl

Jessica’s repetition of “kinda girl” emphasized the use of the word “kinda” showing that Jessica has decided that this word is the word that she has taken exception to. This is shown when she then repeated the phrase without the word “kinda” and states, “she IS a girl.” This use of humor seems to be an example of humor being used as an attempt to enforce the norms of the group which includes ways of discussing gender.

In the first seminar, Victor asked Christine (a student who remained silent for the seminar), “Christine do you like this poem?” Christine, Victor, and the rest of the group
laughed. This could have been a genuine attempt by Victor to draw Christine into the discussion, but her subsequent laugh, and the laughter of the group, both allowed the question to remain unanswered and established the precedent that a person would not speak unless they want to.

Self-disclosure

In the course of the semester, these three Socratic seminars were not representative of the types of self-disclosure that the students chose to use. While during many of the other seminars students often chose to connect their own experiences with the texts these three seminars only had one personal self-disclosure. In this one example, Pete connected his own experience of leaving high school with the poem “Caged Bird.”

I mean I like this poem because I can see myself in this poem, because a couple of years ago (clears his throat) I didn’t drop out of high school, but I left high school early, but I left only for the intention, I felt like I was stuck, I felt like I wasn’t moving anywhere, I felt like I was just wasting my time. Two years later, I finally decided to go to college, when I see this phrase, “the caged bird stands on the grave of dreams,” that really relates to me you know, because I have dreams, and I do.

This decision to reveal personal information may have been a way for Pete to both explain his connection to the poem, and as a way to explain who he was to his classmates. This type of self-disclosure in other seminars typically led to others revealing information about themselves and may have made the conversation seem more honest and safe and so serve to advance the conversation.

Summary

These students, as a collective, found opportunities to utilize the space that Socratic seminar seemed to offer them, to engage with one another in meaningful dialogue. Their dialogue, at times, seemed to push one another’s thinking and promote greater understanding of the texts that they were exploring. The collaborative nature of the
students’ engagement with one another was apparent in the ways in which as a group the students frequently spoke in ways to affirm one another and to assist each other with their articulations of ideas that they were grappling with.

The three seminars were different in both their stimuli and student composition. For this reason, perhaps, the last seminar was not, necessarily, a better example of dialogue than the first seminar. With that said, there were examples in the final seminar of students, who previously hadn’t, asking questions. The final seminar also saw increased participation by a student who previously had lacked verbal involvement. But this final seminar also included a student who had previously verbally participated remain silent. The variety of stimuli used in these seminars suggests that while texts that are more obviously accessible result in livelier faster paced discussions there can also be a benefit to a more challenging text which may result in a slower discussion, which in turn might provide opportunities for quieter or “high-considerateness” students to participate.

When non-dialogue/anti-dialogue occurred, these indicate a time that the students were not adhering to the principles of Socratic seminar. This suggests that repetition and reinforcement of these principles needs to continue to be a central component of the implantation of the Socratic seminars.

While this chapter has been primarily concerned with my interpretations of the Socratic seminars the following chapter is concerned with the ways in which the students, themselves, interpreted their experiences in Socratic seminar.
Chapter V
FINDINGS PART II: INTERVIEW DATA

In a series of interviews, I asked a range of questions to learn about how the students experienced the Socratic seminar. The two main questions that tried to tap their experience were “Could you tell me about your experiences of Socratic seminar?” and “Could you tell me about the kinds of things people/you do in Socratic seminar?”

Previous Experiences of Classroom Discussion

None of the students interviewed had had any previous experience of Socratic seminar, and most of them explained that they also had a limited experience of classroom discussion. The most recent type of formal education that all these students had participated in was at the high school level. None of the students in this study, and in this class, had been to college before; therefore, all of their discussion surrounding prior class discussion was focused upon their experience in their high school classes. My questions about their past experiences were focused upon their English classes, although in retrospect I could have expanded this question to also consider their experiences of classroom discussion in high school in general.

Both Pete and Jessica blamed their lack of classroom discussion on the type of high schools they said they had attended. Pete explained that they didn’t have discussions at high school because, he believed, he “didn’t go to a really good high school.” Jessica held her teachers responsible for the lack of discussion: “We didn’t really do many class
discussions, ‘cos our teachers weren’t able to control the classrooms.” Leah attended an alternative high school and believed that class size was the reason there wasn’t much opportunity for discussion. She explained that since there were “only seven kids in one class, so we didn’t really have class discussions.” Lillian thought the reason she had not had been exposed to class discussions at school was that the most recent high school she had attended had a practice of having the students all read different books. While I never asked nor alluded to the question, “Why do you think that there weren’t class discussions in your previous schooling?” these four students all took time to explain why they thought their high schools had not provided spaces for class discussion.

There were some students, such as Lillian and Victor, who said that while they had not experienced Socratic seminar and classroom discussion in high school, they had, at times, participated in small group discussions. Rose, Leah, and Jo all said they didn’t have discussions at all in their high school English class. Rose said, “In high school it was never a discussion; they would teach the lesson and that was it.” Pete described the extent of classroom discussion as reading out the answer they had prepared for homework:

So, she would mostly give us a worksheet that we would take home on the chapters that we were reading and then write them down on the worksheet, coming back to class she would basically read the sentence off, go through the worksheet and choose who to answer it.

Josh also mentioned that, while the class discussions at high school were “not a lot,” they would sometimes discuss questions they had written answers to, but typically any talk was dyadic: “It was just me and another student or just me and a teacher.”

**Differences Between Previous Classroom Discussion and Socratic Seminar**

The students reported that, while overall they had not really experienced much discussion in their high school English classrooms, they were still able to extract some of
the main differences between whatever classroom discussions they had been a part of and Socratic seminar.

Willy and Lillian believed that Socratic seminar was different, and easier to verbally participate in, compared to other types of class discussions because everyone was talking about the same topic. Willy explained, “In Socratic seminar I think it is more easy to talk out, because we are all on one topic of the same idea.” This idea that Socratic seminar was somehow easier for them to participate in because of this single topic is an interesting one. In reality, the students did not stick to one topic, although they did remain primarily centered on the one text that was the focus of each particular seminar. Lillian’s explanation for why Socratic seminar was easier for her than high school discussion was this: "We would all read the same book, it wasn’t like we were all over the place, we would all read one passage and we would all understand that same passage—it made it a lot easier for me to understand." In typical IRE questioning, the teacher maintains the pace, and perhaps for these two students (Lillian and Willy), who had both characterized themselves as “shy,” this pace and apparent switches in topics may have appeared be too fast. Lillian and Willy may also fall under the category of “high-considerateness” (Tannen, 2005, p. 42) speakers. Such speakers use “strategies that [express] (or put the signaling load on) the need not to impose” (p. 42). This style of speaker could find it difficult to speak when the pace is very fast. High-considerateness speakers may be “disconcerted by the rapid pace and overlap … to the extent that it made it difficult for them to participate” (p. 100). This is not to say that the pace in Socratic seminar was necessarily always slow, but unlike in IRE, where the teacher controls what is discussed and when it is discussed, in Socratic seminar the students would often choose to return back to the same topic. In addition, there were times during the Socratic seminars that the pace was probably slower than a teacher led discussion and the students would fall into silence while they considered a question, or reread a passage.
Victor explained that one of the ways that Socratic seminar was different from his experience of discussion at high school was that in Socratic seminar he felt confident to speak up. Victor gave two reasons that he felt able to verbally participate in Socratic seminar, one was that now he was at college he believed people were “more mature” and the second reason that he gave was due to “the feedbacks I got.” This use of public verbal feedback seemed to have played a role in increasing Victor’s confidence in his desire to speak publicly. Victor mentioned later in the same interview that he tried to be the person that spoke first in the Socratic seminar because “the first time I did I got good feedback, so I wanted to start it in every conversation.” While feedback was a part of Socratic seminar, none of my questions specifically mentioned it, and Victor was the only one who made reference to feedback.

Pete suggested that one of the challenges of Socratic seminar was that it was not a debate. He explained, “Normally we are used to contradicting each other proving each other wrong, having an argument.” This “new” way of talking was significant to Pete, who said that he believed that this was the point of Socratic seminar:

The point is to figure out what the passage is about, build more on the information of the passage, and that was what made it kinda more difficult because there were times I see other students or other peers they would want to argue, and trying to stop that was the point of it. So, doing Socratic seminar was actually good in a way because it teaches us how to have a conversation, without having an argument at the end of it, it just build on, it lets people find out more about the passage together than just by yourself.

While Pete referred to this type of collaboration as “more difficult,” he also suggested that this type of “conversation” was “good in a way.” It seems that Pete was saying this type of collaboration was difficult because it was new, and therefore something that “teaches us,” and yet it was also what made Socratic seminar both challenging and rewarding. Pete did not say that the teacher taught the students how to do Socratic seminar, but rather that Socratic seminar itself taught them, suggesting that Pete saw the experience of participating in Socratic seminar as the “teacher.”
Rose explained that the substantial difference between her other experiences of being in a classroom and Socratic seminar was that she found Socratic seminar to be more engaging. She described it this way:

Because if the teacher is just putting something on the board and just talking, like and not engaging with their students, it is like nothing done, like when I was with you, like we’ll all read it, like we’ll take turns reading it, then after that we’ll talk about it in the Socratic seminar, so I got more out of it, and my understanding of the story or the passage got better.

Leah, a student who, when not involved in Socratic seminar, would easily become distracted by her phone, explained she liked Socratic seminar because “I was involved.” The format of Socratic seminar required that students were actively engaged, and this seems to have been both demanding and yet somehow motivating.

**Re-reading**

Jo said she would approach a text differently when in Socratic seminar, compared to when she was not a participant in Socratic seminar. She said if she was engaged in Socratic seminar, she would “read over it [the text] again” and google it. But if she was outside of Socratic seminar, she would “just google,” but not reread it. This suggests that in non-Socratic situations she would lean on the “expert” Google, but during Socratic seminar, she didn’t feel the need to use Google. This is an interesting point, as while the decision to call on extra support, through the use of technology, is not a bad one, it is certainly a different approach when some individual tries to figure out the meaning of a text by re-reading rather being “given the answer.” Jo didn’t say she would talk to others as a way to understand a text, although it appears as if when she was involved in Socratic seminar, at least in the last seminar, she did indeed ask for help to understand it.

Pete said that during Socratic seminar, it was necessary to “look back at the passage [because] you don’t have the teacher to tell you, that’s wrong, that’s wrong, that’s wrong, this is right.” So, while Jo, outside of Socratic seminar, may have relied on “google,” Pete appears to be suggesting that he may have relied on the teacher. Victor
also said that his strategy to understand the difficult texts in Socratic seminar was to “just re-read,” but he also mentioned that his classmates in Socratic seminar were an asset in helping him, so he “asked questions to my classmates to get a better understanding.”

Willy explained that he believed students would have two reasons during Socratic seminar to re-read the text. One reason was to help someone else understand the text, “one who knew, would go back to the story and re-read it, explain it to them,” and the other reason was so that they could engage with others in discussion. He said, “[We] would re-read the story to find a question to ask.” Jessica said that she would re-read the text as a way to consider the points that had been raised during the seminar: “If one of the other students would say something about the text that I wasn’t thinking …I would look back at the text and I would see -oh maybe that is what it is.” Two of the students that seemed to be less competent readers than the others in the group, Josh and Lillian, did not mention re-reading as a strategy that they would undertake during Socratic seminar, while the three most competent readers, Pete, Jessica, and Willy did mention it. Victor, Leah, and Rose would fall somewhere in the mid-range in terms of reading competency, and two of them referred to re-reading, while one did not.

**Silence**

There were moments of silence during the Socratic seminars, which seem to have been disliked by some of the students. Victor specified that he would sometimes speak, “in order for the quietness to go away because there would be quiet moments and I wanted it to disappear.” Indeed, during certain Socratic seminars I have facilitated, there have been times of silence, and students have turned to me and asked that I let the Socratic seminar end.

For some students, the silence may have been construed in a positive light. Willy talked about silence as a time of productivity when the students would closely analyze the text; he explained, “And pretty much it would be silent at some time and that would be
when people would re-read the story to find a question to ask.” He also explained that he would sometimes remain “silent” until “I find something really interesting to get the whole conversation started,” and then he would “ask questions when I didn’t understand a part of the stories.” Jo also seemed to interpret silence as productive. During the interview she was explaining that during Socratic seminar people would be thinking, and so I asked her, “How did you know they are thinking?” She responded that she knew this because of the silence, “like sometimes we would have a silence for about five minutes where everybody was just trying to think of something to say, or a point to prove from the passage.” Differences in interpretation of the meanings of silence are attributed by Tannen (2005) to the speakers’ style. Tannen states that one of the reasons that high-involvement speakers “introduce new topics [is because they] … cannot tolerate the alternative to this strategy: silence” (p. 120). In contrast, the high-considerateness speaker might find “fast, expressive, overlapping conversation … odd…. Their lack of experience with such devices made it difficult to participate” (p. 121). Hence, for a speaker who has a “high-considerateness” style, silence would provide them with an opportunity to enter into the conversation, while the “high-involvement” speaker would indicate a failing conversation. In fact, Pete explained that he thought conversations would fail if the participants were shy; he said, “So being shy it hurts the conversation because if everybody is shy then nobody knows what to say everybody sits there kinda quietly.” In the final seminar, where two of the high-involvement speakers were absent and the text was challenging, the pace was slower, and we can see that Willy, a “high-considerateness” speaker, participated more than in any of the other Socratic seminars.

**Different Perspectives**

Most of the students mentioned that Socratic seminar was a place where each other’s different perspectives helped in their understanding of the texts. Josh explained, “It helped me to understand it a little better, ‘cos I heard other people opinions about how
they see the story, so I see different stories from a different point of view.” Jo also expressed a similar sentiment: “Everybody else looked at the passages differently—so getting a different response from everyone helped me to understand it more.” Leah said, “Everyone gave their own opinion and we understood it better.” One of the interesting pieces to Leah’s interview was that she hardly ever said “I” but nearly always said “we.” This use of the plural “we” suggested, to me, that she felt her experiences were typical of the other students in the Socratic seminar. Jessica also concluded that one of the benefits of Socratic seminar was that it “opened me up a little bit more to also seeing there are other ways of thinking about … the same texts.” This was quite an interesting statement from Jessica, who, as a few years older than the other students (29 years old), a mother of two, and recently married, often seemed to be given a higher status, both by herself and by the other students, as more knowledgeable and mature than the rest of the class.

At the beginning of the semester, the students were taught the principles of Socratic seminar. Three of these principles read as follows:

Everyone has value
Everyone has a unique perspective—this is welcome.
Everyone has a right to speak.

In her interview, Lillian explained that her participation in Socratic seminar resulted in her understanding the texts more than when she had participated in other types of discussions, and partly she attributed this to the concept that “everyone’s opinion mattered and that helped a lot.” Indeed, Langer’s (1998) eight-year study on English classrooms concluded that one of the identifying characteristics of classrooms where students think “richly and deeply about literature and use their imaginations as ways to explore possibilities and extend their understandings” (p. 20). She also identified them as places where “multiple perspectives are used to enrich interpretation” (p. 20). This suggests that the students were onto something when they felt that hearing multiple perspectives helped them to better understand the texts.
Listening

A number of the principles the students were introduced to before they participated in Socratic seminar were connected to listening. They read as follows: “Everyone had a right to learn through listening. Active listening is a gift that benefits the speaker and the listener.” Josh explained that when another person was talking the reasons that he would listen were "because she might have a good information that I might missed, or probably misread, or he probably saw it different from the way I saw it different, so I would just sit there, listen to the speaker, listen for more information." He then added after listening he would “probably add it into my book or my piece of paper, so okay my friend found this, from Socratic seminar when we was talking, and then I try to do it on mines.” This explanation, both about why he would listen, partly because he was concerned that he had “misread” but also because the speaker may have seen things differently, and then Josh’s assertion that he would incorporate these ideas into his own thinking suggest that while on a verbal level Josh’s participation may not have appeared dialogical, there is a possibility that his mental interactions with the conversations may have been moving in that direction.

Lillian also framed herself as being “an active listener most of the time,” especially if she “wanted to understand what the passage … was about.” Indeed, Lillian saw being an active listener as a stepping stone into verbally participating. She explained, “At first, I was an active listener ‘cos I was shy to talk or like say the wrong thing, but eventually I started to ask questions and putting my opinion out there.”

Talking to Different People

Nearly all the students mentioned that being involved in Socratic seminar led them to either know or talk to students that they would not have otherwise spoken to. Victor said that Socratic seminar allowed him to get “an idea of who [his classmates] … are.” Similarly, Pete mentioned that participation in Socratic seminar promoted the opportunity to “learn who the people in your class are.” Jessica also articulated that she may have
never spoken to some of her classmates if it hadn’t been for Socratic seminar. Rose said that the connections she made in Socratic seminar led her to develop new friendships. She explained,

When we was in the group we all put our opinions in and what we thought, but if it wasn’t for that, if it wasn’t Socratic seminar I don’t think we would have spoke as much as we speak now, we would have spoke about the classwork, but not like friendship wise.

Lillian, somewhat in contrast to Rose, said that while she had previously been friends with other students in the class, it was in the arena of the Socratic seminar that she was better able to consider them “in terms of academic wise…. Like I got to know a different side to them.” Similarly, Josh seemed to suggest that participating in Socratic seminar led him to see his classmates as competent and a resource to turn to. He put it this way: “‘Cos it’s good that you talk to your classmates in situations like this, when you have as essay, or probably like something to do.” Leah believed that Socratic seminar enabled her to enter into discussion with students that she ordinarily didn’t “get along” with; she explained, “Me and some students don’t really get along in class, but when we were in the circle, we all somehow talked to each other and give our opinions”.

Some of the students felt that Socratic seminar helped reveal that their classmates were more competent than they had previously thought. Pete detailed the people that he felt his opinions about had changed since their involvement in Socratic seminar:

Mangekyo, I thought that he was a quiet person, but after the first Socratic seminar I realized that he is not really a quiet person he is pretty intelligent, he has a lot to say, and when he puts his mind to it, I see that he is capable of anything. Same thing with Ronald well Ronald I knew already, but seeing Ronald in the Socratic seminar looking at him do it I realized that we had a lot in common, as we both like to speak a lot and a lot of the girls in the class too, I thought that they were very quiet but when they say things they are very intelligent too.

From this explanation, it is apparent that Pete had equated speaking with intelligence, and people that he had thought were “quiet” were actually “intelligent.” Pete also seemed to suggest that students who outside of Socratic seminar were “quiet” were able to speak up
inside the structure of Socratic seminar. For Willy, the change in his perception of his classmates was not from quiet to talkative, but rather from joking to serious. Willy put it this way: “It has changed my perspective of different classmates, ‘cos some of them they would seem like they are jokative, but they would come to a point that they are actually serious.” It seems that while Pete considers being talkative an asset, Willy seems to believe seriousness is an asset. In both cases, these qualities that Willy and Pete saw developing in their classmates were accurate descriptors of themselves. It is almost as if the involvement in Socratic seminar led these two students to see their classmates as more similar to themselves than they had previously thought.

We are Responsible

The way I conducted the Socratic seminar in this study was that, while I had prepared the students for Socratic seminar in the class time leading up to the Socratic seminars, the actual 20 minutes of discussion was student-led and had very little verbal intervention by me. In the interviews, some students gave examples of ways in which they seemed to feel responsible for the success of the seminar. Pete explained that he would prepare for the seminar by thinking about what would generate discussion. He explained that he learned that "it is good to look through a passage it is good to look through information, it is good to make questions because it keeps the conversation going and it makes people interested in what you are talking about." Josh also explained that his approach to the text was influenced by the knowledge that he was going to be engaged in Socratic seminar. He said that he would think, “OK I know we gonna do the Socratic seminar today, so let me start putting some ideas down so when we sit down in the middle I have something to give.” These sentiments suggest that some of the students held themselves responsible for the success of the seminar, and for figuring out what the texts were about. There was definitely an aspect to this type of Socratic seminar that could be likened to a performance, in that they wanted to ensure that what the rest of the
class experienced was a successful dialogue. While Josh was most concerned about having something “to give,” Pete wanted to use questions both so that the “conversation keeps going” and perhaps as a way to ensure that the other students are “interested” in his perspective. Pete also specifically mentioned that, if you don’t look for topics to talk about, “the conversation dies and people are quiet and nobody has anything to say any more.” This idea of the individuals being responsible for the flow of the conversation suggests that Pete was interpreting the success of the seminar as being dependent upon the group, who required the participation of the individuals. He took this seriously and said that before the seminar he would do the following:

What I like to do is to look through the passage and find any little question or detail that seems odd or sticks out -why do that? It’s because, one, it builds up a sentence, of a topic that everybody else can discuss too, by looking at it.

Both Willy and Pete talked about the responsibility to understand the passage resting on their shoulders, because the teacher wouldn’t just give them the answers. Pete explained that the dynamics of the group were different without the teacher verbally intervening:

So, in Socratic seminar everybody in the group doesn’t know what the answer is, it is not like the teacher- the teacher knows, so she is just waiting for her students to get to the right answer so she can explain it. In Socratic seminar nobody knows, everybody is kinda on the same page when it comes to reading the passage or reading the story, so you have to figure it out yourself, so you have to look back to the passage, you don’t have the teacher to tell you, that’s wrong that’s wrong, that’s wrong, this is right.

Willy also talked about being responsible for their own understanding. He explained that instead of relying on the teacher, they “had to do our own questions, and what we did understand and what we didn’t understand, and helped anyone else who didn’t understand the story.” Willy seems to suggest that not only is he responsible for his own understanding, but also for that of the group.
Changes

Most of the students explained that the ways that they felt that they had changed during the course of seminar was that they became more and more confident about actually participating in the Socratic seminar. Josh said that while initially he had felt “a little nervous, but then as we started doing them it started getting a little bit easier.” In the end he said he “liked doing the Socratic seminar.” Rose also said that while at first, she felt “shy to speak,” ultimately she believed that “even if you make mistakes, it’s better for you, you going to learn more,” and eventually she “felt comfortable” and “spoke about what I believed in.” Victor also talked about participating more, and Leah said she felt more confident to be involved in the class as a whole. “I’d go up to the board sometimes, I never did that in high school.”

Collaboration

A number of the principles that the students were introduced to before they participated in Socratic seminar were that of collaboration. Here are those principles:

- Team work is the beginning of development.
- Ideas come through team work.
- Ideas belong to everyone in the group.
- Socratic seminar must be conducted in a spirit of love. If conducted in a spirit of malice, it is doomed to fail.

The students recognized that one of the major benefits of Socratic seminar was the ways in which it lent itself to collaboration. Willy saw that the act of helping another person led him to having a better understanding, himself, of what the text was about. He put it this way:

Well, we are trying to help each other explain the story back and forth, so we are more knowing about the story, and if we missed out some small details that was important it can help out that someone explains the small can show the big story throughout the whole thing.
This suggests that, for Willy, he was led to reading the text more closely, in order to better collaborate with his group members. The act of talking, says Tannen (2007), is like a dance. Watching and waiting for the right moment to join the dancers is a helpful metaphor for interpreting Leah’s description of her initial silence. Leah explained, “It started off with them talking and then I found my way into the conversation and I felt comfortable.” This is reminiscent of a “cognitive apprentice” (Ding, 2008), who, while initially is on the periphery of the action, begins to take part.

**Critiques of Socratic Seminar**

The students also critiqued some of the aspects of Socratic seminar. One of the complaints that Pete made was that he thought that Socratic seminar was not very effective if the group had shy people in it. He explained,

> Being shy it hurts the conversation because if everybody is shy then nobody knows what to say everybody sits there kinda quietly, but being open minded, being able to just randomly say oh but what does that mean what does he mean by this opens other people to speak also. It opens up new topics, and new questions.

Although Willy’s claim that Socratic seminar highlighted for him that he is “not a talkative person at all, I am shy,” he went on to acknowledge that “in Socratic seminar I think it is more easy to talk out” compared to other types of class discussions. In actual fact, specifically in the final seminar, Willy’s verbal contribution was substantial.

Pete also complained that alongside with people being shy, if the student were “not looking into the passages, [this] causes the Socratic seminar to die down before it even starts.” The need for the students to have undertaken the task of reading the text before the seminar was quite important. In fact, in two of the seminars I have included in this study, there were incidents where students did not seem to have read the texts. In the second seminar on “Only Daughter,” Leah admitted, “So I was half asleep when we read it,” and in the third seminar, “Chronicles of Ice,” Rose confessed that she was reading something other than the text and so she didn’t know what “Chronicles of Ice” was about.
The fact that these two students had not read the texts properly meant that some of each of the seminar time was taken up with clarifying the basic events. This time of summarizing could also be interpreted in a positive light as, these simpler explanations and clarifications at the beginning of the seminars meant that the group was able to ensure that they all knew what the text was about before they entered into a more dialogical discussion. While I did not exclude these two students from the seminar, Ball and Brewer (2000) suggest that students who have not completed the reading should be sent away to complete comprehension questions. Although the fact that these students had not been properly reading the text was disappointing, in the actual context of these Socratic seminars, it appeared to have been helpful for all of the students to have heard, or been a part of, summarizing the text, before they moved on to weightier matters.

Unlike Leah and Rose, who seemed confident to verbally participate regardless of whether they had followed the text or not, Josh suggested that he would only verbally participate if he understood the text. Josh explained why sometimes he was willing to participate verbally in some Socratic seminars, while at other times he was reluctant: “Some was kinda OK for me to understand, and some really wasn't, some days I came in tired and I didn’t feel like talking at all, but then the ones I did understand and knew I had information about, I just talked out loud.” Even though I asked him whether he could participate even if he just had a question, he said he wouldn’t ask a question because “I knew there was going to be the information that I knew that I probably didn’t understand, was already probably gonna be said and explained.” This suggests that, for Josh, a student who said that he had always struggled with reading, he may have felt that he would benefit from listening rather than from participating. This also suggests that Josh may not have believed that talking would help him understand as much as listening could.
Summary of Findings from the Interviews

Most of the students expressed that they had not had many opportunities to participate in class discussions before they started college. The class discussions they had participated in seemed primarily to have been teacher-centered or debate. Perhaps, due to their lack of exposure to class discussion, the students felt that where they had initially felt uncomfortable, or shy, when participating in Socratic seminar, they felt more confident about contributing to the dialogue as the semester progressed.

The students’ participation in Socratic seminar was instrumental in encouraging them to re-read the texts. The students suggested that hearing multiple perspectives helped them better understand the texts. The students identified that benefits of listening to one another were: they might find out new information, have a misreading corrected, and as a stepping-stone into their own verbal participation.

The students discussed the ways in which Socratic seminar led them to develop different ways of both viewing and interacting with their classmates. These changes were as follows: they developed friendships, believed their classmates were competent and intelligent students, and saw them as more similar to themselves than they had previously thought. They also said that one of their roles within the seminar was to help one another better understand the text.

Some students saw silence as a signal that the seminar was failing, while other students, best characterized as high-considerateness speakers, were most comfortable with pauses and silences and spoke more frequently when the seminar had more moments of silence. The students that discussed “shyness” seemed to believe that shyness inhibited successful dialogue. I would argue that while the seminars with a higher percentage of “shyer” students may have resulted in the seminar having more pauses, I did not interpret it as a weakness, but rather as different from the faster and louder seminars.
At the end of this study, I felt fortunate to have been given the opportunity to both work with these students and to explore Socratic seminar. This opportunity to truly reflect on the classroom I was a part of and the practices I have subscribed to has allowed me to slow down and rewind, and to think and to consider, which somehow in the rush of living can be difficult to do.

These students, in so many ways, were so different from one another, yet all were patient with me as I inquired and prodded them to answer my questions about their experiences in Socratic seminar. Their insights into their experiences within the Socratic seminar were invaluable in helping me gain some understanding of the ways in which they perceived their involvement in the Socratic seminars. It was their insights that I felt were the most exciting part of this study, as, while their thoughts sometimes confirmed my own thinking, at other times they challenged those beliefs I hadn’t realized I had been hanging on to.

**Summary of Findings**

My first question addressed the “the characteristic features and affordances of the discourse that takes place in a Socratic seminar” within the specific context of this community college class with these students of Basic English. I found that there were specific examples of dialogue occurring during these Socratic seminars. Within Socratic
seminar, these students, as a collective, were, at varying times, able to collaborate, co-construct knowledge, appreciate different perspectives, and be comfortable to remain without a consensus. These students achieved much of their dialogue by asking genuine questions, deliberately and actively listening to one another, and maintaining an atmosphere of mutual respect of one another.

There were times during the Socratic seminars that the discussion appeared to be anti-dialogic. Sometimes this was perhaps due to etiquette, that is to say, it may have sometimes appeared more amenable to appear to agree rather than to interrogate another’s meaning. The social pressure to exhibit good manners frequently influences individuals’ decisions about what and how to say things. “As Robin Lakoff (1973, 1975, 1976, 1990, 2001) has repeatedly shown, people more often than not do not say precisely what they mean … because there are important social reasons for not doing so” (Tannen, 2005, p. 4). Other times, the seminar did not appear to be dialogic when students attempted to put one another on the spot, perhaps for comedic effect. At other times, the students sometimes seemed to be more concerned with their own perspective rather than trying to understand one another, although there could be an argument made that in these instances the students could have been engaged in dialogue, but not necessarily with the other students present, perhaps with themselves!

Finally, the students seemed to be able to more effectively engage in activities that would fall under the category of dialogue when the text, while challenging, was something that they had a deeper interest in, compared to when they were discussing a text that they appeared to have little interest in. An important distinction to be made here is that, while some students appeared to thrive in fast-paced dialogue, others seemed better able to engage in dialogue when the context, and the other participants, allowed for a pace that was somewhat slower. Students also naturally engaged in other types of discourse that are commonly found in many types of conversation, which may not be
included under the definition of either dialogue, nor of anti-dialogue, including: repetition of self and others, and telling personal stories.

The second question I addressed in this study was that of how these nine students perceived and described their “experience of the discourse of the Socratic seminars in which they participated.” These students all indicated that Socratic seminar was not only a new experience for them, but indeed any type of classroom discussion was unlike most of their experiences of English in high school. Some of the differences they marked between the relatively few discussions they had experienced and Socratic seminar was that when participating in Socratic seminar, they were more collaborative, they felt more comfortable in speaking in a group, and they also had increased levels of engagement.

The students in this study all mentioned that they had found Socratic seminar helpful in terms of promoting their understanding of the literature they had read. A number of students specifically talked about their involvement in Socratic seminar leading to closer and more frequent re-readings of the text. Some students mentioned how asking questions of, and listening to, one another helped them understand the texts better. There was a general consensus that hearing a variety of perspectives was something Socratic seminar lent itself to, which other forms of classroom discussions may not have, and indeed this was an asset the students seemed to value.

While some of the students reflected that the moments of silence during the Socratic seminar led them to feel uncomfortable, other students found the silence a place where they could think about the texts.

Aside from the academic benefits, a number of students believed that involvement in Socratic seminar helped them connect with their classmates in ways they may not have otherwise done, such as becoming friends, getting to know the personalities in their class, or seeing each other as more academically competent than they would have otherwise believed. Another aspect of this type of Socratic seminar that a number of the students
commented on was that with the teacher’s silent presence, the students themselves had to both work out what the text was about and ensure the success of the seminar.

Two problematic features of the Socratic seminar were also revealed through the interviews. First, some students seemed to perceive quieter students’ presence in a seminar as something of a liability that could jeopardize the success of the seminar; and, second, just as with other forms of classroom discussion, some students reported that they were reluctant or unwilling to participate verbally if they felt they lacked sufficient understanding of the text under discussion.

**Limitations of the Study**

One of the limitations of this study was that while I tried to limit my influence over the students’ responses to the interview questions, there can be no getting away from the fact that I was their instructor and they were my students. In addition, the students knew that I believed Socratic seminar was a good thing for them; otherwise, there would have been no reason for me to commit so much of our lesson time to it. Therefore, there may have been times during the interview that the students chose to play up the assets of Socratic seminar rather than to emphasize its shortfalls. With that said, there may never be a perfect way to try to understand another person’s perspective, and an outside interviewer may have resulted in different potential problems. I tried to limit my influence over the students during the interviews by scheduling the interviews after my grades had been turned in, and by keeping my questions as open and neutral as possible.

Other limitations of the study were the number of participants and the duration of the study. With more participants, more examples of Socratic seminars in different circumstances, a wider variety of different types of texts, and with different types of students involved, I may have been able to develop a greater number of insights or hypotheses about the circumstances that influence different types of responses.
Of course, as with any qualitative study, this study looked at a specific group of students, at a specific place, at a specific time, and the experiences of these students cannot be understood to represent anyone else except these specific students, during this particular study, though it remains tempting to make recommendations about the use of Socratic seminar with basic writing students based on my study. Further research replicating or representing variant versions of my research project might authorize more confident generalizations and recommendations.

**Implications for Practice**

Thus, I will tentatively and with considerable caution say that this study suggests that Socratic seminar is a pedagogical practice that can successfully be implemented in the Basic English community college classroom. Both the interviews and my analysis of the seminars suggest that involvement in Socratic seminar for these students was not only helpful to their understanding of the texts studied, but also encouraged the participants to feel more connected to their classmates, be more active in their own learning, and gain confidence in their own abilities. It seems fair to say, then, that Socratic seminar is a practice that can benefit both the individual student and the classroom community, and that it offers social and academic benefits that are especially important and intellectually liberating for students who have been most marginalized and intellectually undernourished in their previous schooling. In this conclusion, I would be echoing Strong’s (1997) sentiment that Socratic seminars “are often most liberating for students for students who have not been successful in traditional school situations” (p. 39). I would add that groups, such as basic level community college students, that have long been served with a remedial education, with an emphasis of “drills and practice” (Grubb, 2002, p. 52), deserve and thrive when presented with opportunities that have long been granted to so called “advanced”-level students. These practices that we, as educators,
believe promote higher order critical thinking skills can indeed promote such thinking skills in all students, while resorting to rote learning and regurgitation of facts can do nothing more than further increase the gap between those classed as lower level and those considered to be more advanced.

**Recommendations for Research**

This study was focused specifically upon the discussion part of the seminar. I think it would be worth exploring the connection between what was said in the feedback sessions and how that influenced the students’ behavior in their future seminars, as well as how students’ feel about giving and receiving feedback.

I would also like to see how putting only students who appear to have a “high-considerateness” style of speech in a group together and to see how that would influence their participation in the seminar.

Finally, I could see the value in exploring to see whether there is a difference in the types of discussion that occur when there are different types of teacher participation in the seminar. For example, how does the dialogue change when the teacher sits in the inner circle and asks questions, versus when the teacher sits in the outer circle, or when the teacher is a member of the inner circle and contributes along the principles of Socratic seminar, as an equal with the students?
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Name:        Pseudonym:
Interview #    Interview Date

1. Background

1.1 Tell me how you came to be a student at this community college?

1.2 Can you describe to me what your previous experiences of class discussion were in the English classroom?

2. Experiences with Socratic seminar

2.1 Could you tell me about your experiences of Socratic seminar, in this class?

2.2 What were the differences, if any, between your previous experiences with class discussion and your participation in Socratic seminar?

2.3 How, if at all, does your involvement in Socratic seminar effect your understanding of the literature we are studying?

3. Behavior and Socratic seminar

3.1 Could you tell me about how people behave when they are involved in Socratic seminar?

3.2 What have you noticed about your own behavior when you are involved in Socratic seminar?
4. **Socratic seminar and Change**

4.1 Has Socratic seminar influenced the way you interact with your classmates?

4.2 Has Socratic seminar changed your opinions or feelings about any of your classmates individually, or about the members of the class as a group?

4.3 Has your experience in the Socratic seminar changed the way you think about yourself as a student?

4.4 Has your experience in the Socratic seminar changed the way you see yourself?
Appendix B

Informed Consent

**Protocol Title:** Socratic Seminar in the Basic English Classroom

**Principal Investigator:** Ruth Aman. Teachers College: 917-207-8544

**INTRODUCTION**

You are being invited to participate in this research study called “Socratic Seminar in the Basic English Classroom." You may qualify to take part in this research study because you are a member of my Basic English class. Approximately six people will participate in this study and it will take 1 hour of your time to complete.

**WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?**

This study is being done to determine using Socratic seminar in the Basic English classroom helps students to understand literature better.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed by the principal investigator. During the interview you will be asked to discuss your experiences in Socratic seminar. This interview will be audio-recorded. After the audio-recording is written down the audio-recording will be deleted. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will/will not be able to participate. The interview will take approximately thirty minutes. You will be interviewed twice. You will be given a pseudonym or false name/de-identified code in order to keep your identity confidential.

You participation in the first, fifth and last Socratic seminars will be vide recorded. The principal investigator will watch the video and transcribe it. During the Socratic seminar the principal investigator will take notes. Everyone will be asked not to discuss what is being spoken about outside of the Socratic seminar but it is impossible to guarantee complete confidentiality. Each Socratic seminar will take about forty five minutes.

The Socratic seminars will occur during regular class time and the interviews will be undertaken in our regular classroom at a time that is convenient to you.

If you don’t wish to be a part of the study then you will be put in a Socratic seminar group that is not video recorded. There is no penalty for not participating or withdrawing early if you choose to participate.

**WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**
This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than you would ordinarily encounter in daily life while taking routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. However, there are some risks to consider. You might feel embarrassed to discuss problems that you experienced during Socratic seminar. **However, you do not have to answer any questions or divulge anything you don’t want to talk about. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty.** The principal investigator is taking precautions to keep your information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing your identity, such as using a pseudonym instead of your name and keeping all information on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer.

**WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. Participation may benefit the field of teacher education to better understand whether and how to use Socratic seminar with Basic English students.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not be paid to participate. There are no costs to you for taking part in this study.

**WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?**

The study is over when you have completed the interviews and the last Socratic seminar has been filmed. However, you can leave the study at any time even if you haven’t finished.

**PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY**

The investigator will keep all written materials locked in a desk drawer in a locked office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio and video recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the video and audio-recording will be written down and the video and audio-recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym. The real names of the participants will be linked to the pseudonyms on one master document which will be kept in a password-protected folder on the principal investigator’s computer. Any hard copy material with identifying characteristics will be kept in a locked file cabinet at the home of the principal investigator and only accessible to that researcher. Regulations require that research data be kept for at least three years.

**HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?**

The results of this study will be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Your name or any identifying information about you will not be published. This study is being conducted as part of the dissertation of the principal investigator.
CONSENT FOR AUDIO AND VIDEO RECORDING

Audio recording and video recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission to be recorded. If you decide that you don’t wish to be recorded, you will not be able to participate in this research study.

_____ I give my consent to be recorded ____________________________________

Signature

_____ I do not consent to be recorded ____________________________________

Signature

WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY

___ I consent to allow written, video and/or audio taped materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College

________________________

Signature

___ I do not consent to allow written, video and/or audio taped materials viewed outside of Teachers College Columbia University ______________________________

Signature
OPTIONAL CONSENT FOR FUTURE CONTACT

The investigator may wish to contact you in the future. Please initial the appropriate statements to indicate whether or not you give permission for future contact.

I give permission to be contacted in the future for research purposes:

Yes ________________________   No_______________________
Initial                                                  Initial

I give permission to be contacted in the future for information relating to this study:

Yes ________________________   No_______________________
Initial                                                  Initial

WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the principal investigator, Ruth Aman, at 917-2078544 or at raman@hcce.edu or contact the faculty advisor, Dr.Blau at 212-678-7430.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu. Or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 1002. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.
PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS

- I have read and discussed the informed consent with the researcher. I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty to future student status or grades;
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his or her professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent document.

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study

Print name: __________________________ Date: __________________________

Signature: __________________________
Appendix C
Interview Transcripts

Interview-Willy

R: Tell me about how came to be a student at this community college?

W: I came because I was accepted and I wanted to do culinary, I also had got placed into basic classes, so I am hoping to move out of these basic classes and start working on culinary.

R: Tell me about your experiences of class discussions, prior to this class, in high school?

W: We had very few class discussions, we didn’t do it very often, when we would do it- we’d talk over the story, what we liked about it, wrote essays about t too, but we didn’t do exactly what we did here with Socratic seminar, we just talked about it, just give feedbacks about it.

R: so how would these discussions be conducted, what would happen?

W: so we would either have one on ones with the teacher or we would talk as a class with the teacher, so everyone would just give their own ideas, what they thought about it.

R: so how would it start- so when it was the teacher…

W: she would ask a question, and everyone would answer that question, and we’d all take off from there.

R: ok so she would ask a question, someone would answer it, would another person answer the same question or would she ask a different question?
W: someone would ask that person to explain more if they didn’t explain it, or she would ask a different question if the discussion would continue going on, not that same exact question as before.

R: Would the students direct questions to one another or were the questions all from the teacher?

W: sometimes the classmates would ask questions of their own, and sometimes the teacher would have them explain more or add their own question in.

R: Could you tell me about your experiences in this class with the use of Socratic seminar?

W: This was new to me, and it was kinda different.

R: so how did it usually work.

W: so we would sit in a circle, you would tell us, explain what you didn’t know about the story, and everyone would go on with it, their own perspective of it, their idea of it, and then later on we would talk about extra stuff, we’d just continue on the conversation, try to get the meaning of the story.

R: Did you find any differences, between class discussions and using Socratic seminar?

W: yeah it was completely different, instead of the teacher helping us out, we actually did it in our own and we had to do our own questions, and what we did understand and what we didn’t understand, and helped anyone else who didn’t understand the story.

R: so apart from the teacher not telling you what to talk about, or asking the questions, was there anything different in the ways that the conversations happened? Or the types of conversations that happened.
W: the types of conversations were actually pretty much the same for each one but, even thought it was a different story for each one, I could say that if other people had their own perspective of the story, beside you I could say that it could help you out, I can’t really say much about it.

R: When we did Socratic seminar did you understand the literature any differently than when you read it by yourself?

W: yes I did understand it differently, because at first I might have though the story was completely different from whoever else was sitting next to me, or across from me, so their perspective could have been that this person was having problems, but it could have had a deeper meaning like a deep sadness or something like that. They expressed their own perspective of the whole story, it was just…

R: Could you tell me what typically happened when people were involved in Socratic seminar?

W: The majority of time people stayed silent, they asked questions of what they didn’t know, and one who knew, would go back to the story and reread it, explain it to them, and pretty much it would be silent at some time and that would be when people would reread the story to find a question to ask,

R: What would you usually do when you are involved in Socratic seminar?

W: I would wait until I find something really interesting to get the whole conversation started, to have it go on for a period of time, but, I stayed silent, I did ask questions when I didn’t understand a part of the stories, but I would ask those people if they didn’t know a certain part or if they didn’t understand, or if they understood a part could they explain to me what they thought about it, ‘cos if I had
an idea of something in a different way, or this could have happened, they could
explain it to me, that it was a certain way that led up to those events,

R: Has Socratic seminar influenced the way you interact with your classmates?

W: it has, but I haven’t really changed much at all, I don’t really speak out much

R: hmm, but in Socratic seminar you would.

W: yes but that was only when we had the same topic, or the same idea, but
otherwise I am not that social.

R: Has Socratic seminar changed your opinion or feelings about any of your classmates
individually or about the members of the class as a group?

W: it has changed my perspective of different classmates, cos some of them they
would seem like they are jokative, but they would come to a point that they are
actually serious.

R: that’s interesting

W: sometimes I could say

R: Has your experience in the Socratic seminar changed the way you think of yourself as
a student at all?

W: it has it shows that I am not a talkative person at all, I am shy, I am trying to
break out of that kind of personality, I am trying to be more open,

R: would you be different in a class discussion versus Socratic seminar?

W: In a class discussion I can speak out on what I know and everything, but in
Socratic seminar I think it is more easy to talk out, because we are all on one topic
of the same idea,
R: so let’s say in the class the teacher says we are going to talk about “only daughter” this is a class discussion and I am going to ask you some questions- so that is one topic right? And if I say Socratic seminar and you are going to talk about “Only daughter” that is one topic – so just explain what you mean when you say one topic.

W: Well we are trying to help each other explain the story back and forth, so we are more knowing about the story, and if we missed out some small details that was important it can help out that someone explains the small can show the big story throughout the whole thing.

R: so that is in Socratic seminar, would the same thing happen in class discussions?

W: it would yes, but it may sometimes get off track with class discussions, ‘cos people tend to at on outside world scenarios to the story too,

R: so you felt that in Socratic seminar people stayed more focused on the text- is that what you are trying to say?

W: yes.
Interview with Josh

R: Tell me about how came to be a student at this community college?

J: At first my mother wanted me to go to the University, where she went, but I told her I wanted to go to here, just to start my two years off, because I wasn’t sure about college, that’s how come I ended up here this semester.

R: So before you were here you were in high school were you?

J: yes

R: So in your English classroom in high school, could you tell me about your experiences of class discussions- did you have discussions in class about the literature you were reading?

J: We had a couple of discussions about the literature we was reading, but not a lot.

R: so how would those discussions go?

J: the teacher would just give us a worksheet or something, with questions on it, you feel it in and then we talk about it amongst the class, what answers did you have, sometimes she might pair us up into a group, tell us to have a little group work, or have a little discussion on a novel or book we read, and that was basically it.

R: and would the teacher be involved in the discussion?

J: she would let us talk for about twenty minutes and then she would get involved, once you start coming back to the class.

R: Could you tell me about your experiences in this class with the use of Socratic seminar?

J: it was my first time doing Socratic seminar in my English class, at first I was a little nervous, but the as we started doing them it started getting a little bit easier,
you just have to it in the middle talk about what you had read, you could give
questions, give information, give details about something, and then basically it was a
reflection of what you read, how much you know so far,
R: and you said it got easier, why do you think it got easier?
J: ‘cos as you really start coming back in the middle, you like ok I know we gonna do
the Socratic seminar today, so let me start putting some ideas down so when we sit
down I in the middle I have something to give.
R: So I noticed in some of the seminars you were more talkative and some you were less
talkative, why do you think that was?
J: Some was kinda ok for me to understand, and some really wasn’t, some days I
came in tired and I didn’t feel like talking at all, but then the ones I did understand
an knew I had information about, I just talked out loud.
R: so you are saying some you didn’t understand, you didn’t feel like you could ask
questions about the ones you didn’t understand?
J: I knew I could ask questions but when the Socratic seminar happened I knew
there was going to be the information that I knew that I probably didn’t
understand, was already probably gonna be said and explained.
R: What are the differences, if any, for you, between class discussions and using Socratic
seminar?
J: my discussions at high school was just me and another student or just me and a
teacher, rather than me and a whole class, rather the class listening to us, the people
in the middle, so it was a little difference between that.
R: oh so the number of people involved was different.
J: yeah.

R: How, if at all, does your involvement in Socratic seminar effect your understanding of the literature we are studying?

J: it helped me to understand it a little better, ‘cos I heard other people opinions about how they see the story, so I see different stories from a different point of view, more than just mines,

R: but what about if the teacher just told you what the story was about versus doing Socratic seminar would that have...

J: that woulda helped but I think the Socratic seminar would help me better because I had other people giving their ideas, more than just mines or the teachers.

R: Could you tell me about how people behave when they are involved in Socratic seminar?

J: some people would listen, pay attention while the other speaker was talking, some people would probably just get up go do something on their own, they would mostly just listen to other people more than not engaging in the conversation,

R: What kinds of things would you do in Socratic seminar?

J: If somebody else was talking I would just sit there and listen, because she might have a good information that I might missed, or probably misread, or he probably saw it different from the way I saw it different, so I would just sit there, listen to the speaker, listen for more information, probably add it into my book or my piece of paper, so okay my friend found this, from Socratic seminar when we was talking, and then I try to do it on mines.

R: Has Socratic seminar influenced the way you interact with your classmates?
J: when it comes to Socratic seminar – it is all about just the literature more than just about anything else, ‘cos you might have people go off topic, off the literature what you read, then you try to help them get back on topic you try and help them bring them in in a certain way, giving them a different example, you gotta look at it this way, than looking at it your way.

R: but in terms of the way you would kind of connect with people in your class, did it change the way you connected with them, or did it change the way that you talked with them?

J: I think it was just kinda like an open area, not just on literature but also to your classmates, ‘cos it’s good that you talk to your classmates in situations like this, when you have an essay or probably like something to do, not just, oh no I’m not going to talk to that student, but you gotta talk to them ‘cos he is in your class, you’ll might be in a group together,

R: Has your experience in the Socratic seminar changed the way you think of yourself as a student?

J: the Socratic seminar, at first I was like, I’m not prepared for this, I don’t know how – what I am doing, and as we started doing it even more, I started getting used to it, I started liking it, and I think it made me okay- I liked doing the Socratic seminar.
Interview transcript - Jessica

R: Tell me about how came to be a student at this community college?

J: I ended up coming to this community college after dropping out, ten years ago, of high school due to a pregnancy, so I decided to come back to finish my degree so that I can start teaching,

R: Tell me about your experiences of class discussions, in high school, or your experience of them?

J: my experience of them, we really didn’t do many class discussions, ‘cos our teachers weren’t able to control the classrooms, so when we did class discussions they would get out of control a little bit, so mostly it would turn into people talking about whatever they wanted or just people sitting there not talking at all.

R: Could you tell me about your experiences in this class with the use of Socratic seminar?

J: it was actually really good- I liked that everybody in the groups got involved and they stated their opinions and they weren’t, they didn’t jump on you if you had a different opinion about whatever we were reading about.

R: Did Socratic seminar effect your understanding of the literature we had read?

J: it didn’t effect it, some of the texts it actually helped me to see a different point, like if one of the other students would say something about the text that I wasn’t thinking it help me, I would look back at the text and I would see oh maybe that is what it is, it just helped me kinda understand it in a different form.
R: So could you tell me about how people behave when they are involved in Socratic seminar?

J: for the most part everybody was pretty respectful, erm they listened, they spoke, they didn’t really jump on people for saying what they were saying, they understood everybody else’s opinions of the readings or what they thought of it,

R: How would you characterize your behavior during the Socratic seminar?

J: My behavior I would say would be about the same. I understood what people were saying, I listened to them, if I had a question about what they were saying, I just asked them I didn’t really, I wouldn’t get on them and be like “oh your wrong” I listened to other people’s opinions regarding the readings.

R: Has participating in Socratic seminar influenced the way you think of yourself as a student?

J: yeah it could have, it has opened me up a little bit more to discussion, and thinking about a reading, it opened up me up a little bit more to also seeing there are other ways of thinking about, like how many different ways you could think of the same texts or discussion, how many different ways you could think of what’s going on in it,

R: and would you say that it has influenced the ways that you interact with the other students, when talking about literature?

J: Yes,

R: how?
J: yeah well there are some students in the class that I wouldn’t really ever had discussions with if it wasn’t for those first or second ones they started to become conversations with the person
Interview with Lillian

R: Tell me about how came to be a student at this community college?

L: My counselor at high school helped me to apply?

R: and why particularly here?

L: It was the closest and most convenient for me.

R: Tell me about your experiences of class discussions, when you were at high school last year?

L: So the thing is I went to three different high schools, like in my first school they would have us read a paragraph and then the teacher would explain that paragraph so that we could comprehend what’s going on in the story- and in the other school they would just make us read and then make us do whatever they were telling us to do.

R: like what would they make you do?

L: Ok like give us a little summary what you think this means, and then my senior year of high school I went to … high and my teacher would have us read books, and after we read the whole entire book we would have to give a little summary about a three page about what the story was about.

R: so did the students talk in the class about the book?

L: no because everyone would have a different book.

R: would you talk in small groups?

L: sometimes she would put us in small groups, let’s say like in three, one group would read a certain book, another would read a certain book and another a certain
book, then we would get in discussion in our groups, but it wouldn’t be the whole entire class.

R: and what were the groups told to do?

L: we just had to talk amongst ourselves what the story was about, say I didn’t understand something I would ask someone in my group what was the story about, or we would ask questions among ourselves, it wasn’t like the teacher would give us questions.

R: how long would these discussions last?

L: for the whole class- which was about thirty or forty minutes long.

R: Could you tell me about your experiences in this class with the use of Socratic seminar?

L: I feel like we would communicate more about the story and stuff like that, like if I didn’t understand something I would understand when I was in the circle, because of how many questions were asked, so that is why I would always sit back, and I would be an active listener most of the time because I wanted to understand what the passage or what we were reading was about.

R: What are the differences, if any, for you, between these small group discussion in high school and using Socratic seminar?

L: Yeah it helped me a lot, I feel like I would understand a lot more what the story was about, it wasn’t just I would read the book and that was it, you get me? I feel like everyone’s opinion mattered and that helped a lot, I guess.

R: so was that different from what you had done in school in the small group discussions?
L: it was different, because in my school they wouldn’t really teach us, or make us get to know the book, the reader and everything, I’m not sure…

R: so are you saying it was different, but you are not sure why it was different, is that what you are saying?

L: Yeah, I don’t know how to put it into words, but I know it was different, if that makes sense.

R: was it different the way the conversation happened or was it different the way you understood the literature?

L: I think both, because we would all read the same book, it wasn’t like we were all over the place, we would all read one passage and we would all understand that same passage- it made it a lot easier for me to understand.

R: why because you had more people who had read the same thing?

L: yeah,

R: How, if at all, does your involvement in Socratic seminar effect your understanding of the literature we are studying?

L: yeah it made me comprehend what the story was about and everything.

R: why?

L: because when you would put us in a group people would always ask questions, and that would make me understand why the writer did what the writer did. So sometimes I just wouldn’t understand a little part of the book, and they would just answer it for me.

R: Could you tell describe a typical Socratic seminar in our class?
L: I feel like people didn’t know how to start it most of the time, like what do we say like to start it, and to end it- I feel like it is like an essay you don’t know how to start it, or to end it, and I feel like that is exactly what used to happen. In general I think we did pretty good, most people participated, I feel like.

R: and how would people participate?

L: they would either be active listeners, the ones who would always ask questions, the ones who would always add more into like, so we could understand more about what the story is about.

R: What have you noticed about your own behavior when you are involved in Socratic seminar?

L: at first I was an active listener, ‘cos I was shy to like talk or like to say the wrong thing, but eventually I started to ask questions and putting my opinion out there.

R: Has Socratic seminar influenced the way you interact with your classmates?

L: I feel like I got to know people more, in terms of education wise, it is different going out with them, and being and participating in class, if that makes sense. Like I got to know a different side of them.

R: and when you say education wise- what do you mean by that ?

L: like I said it is different hanging out with someone outside of class and knowing that side of them inside of class.

R: Has your experience in the Socratic seminar changed the way you think of yourself as a student?

L: I feel like it made me understand so much more that it made me want to improve myself- both in reading and writing.
Interview Transcript Victor

R: Tell me about how came to be a student at this community college?

V: (summary of what he said) **Took a year off, lot of people recommended he apply to college, unproductive year off- interest in clothing and making clothing.**

R: Tell me about your experiences of class discussions, in high school?

Talk about the basics paragraphing or whatever

R: no, no, did the teacher have you discuss the literature you were reading?

V: **no, no**

R: so tell me how the class would go.

V: **we would do a freewrite, then we would go into a textbook, read a little story from the book then we would talk about it.**

R: ok, so that’s the part- how would you talk about it?

V: **oh erm, we would go back to the text we would talk about the character, the setting**

R: so how would you talk about it, would she ask you questions? Or would you talk about it in groups?

V: **Yeah we would talk about it in groups.**

R: so she would put you into small groups?

V: **yeah**

R: and then she would- what would she say?

V: **err, to discuss it with one another to get ideas about what we had read, I’m trying to remember**

R: would she give you specific questions
V: yeah she would

R: so then you would talk about those questions then what would happen?

V: either that or the story would have a little short quiz, like we are doing right now [multiple choice] yeah that is it.

R: So we used Socratic seminar in our class, what were your experiences with the use of Socratic seminar?

V: err

R: could you describe your experience, what was Socratic seminar like for you?

V: it was good, I thought that I would forget everything, but you refreshed my memory and I remembered what we were doing.

R: So were there any differences for, between the small group discussions you would have at High School and using Socratic seminar- was that different in any way?

V: Not really it looked similar to me

R: so what were some of the similarities, who were they similar?

V: So here when we come in the classroom, we would start the same

R: I mean the socratic seminar- the half a circle having a discussion the other half watching.

V: oh ok, no it was really different, we never did that. It was more like all eyes on me, but it was good to speak in front of other people, because people don’t really do that, in my Highschool years I never really spoke in front of other people I would always be quiet, I was more comfortable here because the feedbacks I got was to speak more comfortably you know in a group, which I realized I didn’t in high school, it was easier here
R: easier to- oh ok, so they were different. So doing that Socratic seminar did it effect
the literature you read?

V: effect in a good way?

R: either

V: yeah it did in a good way I understood more of where we were reading, ‘cos at
high school I really didn’t understand, unless we kept talking over and over and
asking questions, but with this it made it easier for me to understand it

R: how do you think it did that? Why did it make it easier?

V: well, in high school a lot of people did speak up, or didn’t feel comfortable
talking in front of others, but here we were all comfortable talking to each other and
to help each other understand what we were talking about.

R: so you think that because more people were talking it helped you to understand?

V: and also we mature more, once you get to college people mature more and are
not really afraid to speak up, that too.

R: so do you think it was the fact that other people were talking that helped you to
understand the literature or was it the fact that you were talking that helped you to
understand the literature? Or was it both of those things

V: I’m going to have to say, it was both, yeah

R: Could you tell me about what were the typical things that would happen when we
were in Socratic seminar?

V: You would usually put half of the class inside the circle and the other half would
be listening to the other half talking about what the essay was about, or what they
were reading, and they would have one person listening to that one person to give them the feedback about what they have to do to improve, or what not to do.

R: so what kinds of things would people do in the inner circle, how would they talk?

V: err, well most of them would not talk, because they are probably not that comfortable talking, which is fine, and the other people would think they would know what they were talking about, but they not really sure what to talk about, and some actually did know and helped others to participate in the Socratic

R: how did they help?

V: they asked questions, or they asked the specific person who is not talking, or how did they feel, make them say something to make them participate, others would ask questions in order for them to understand, or answer or give their own opinion,

R: What things would you do when you are involved in Socratic seminar?

V: I would try to ask questions, I usually would try to start it, because the first time I did I got good feedback, so I wanted to start it in every conversation, and I would say something in order for the quietness to go away because there would be quiet moments and I wanted it to disappear.

R: Has Socratic seminar influenced the way you interact with your classmates?

V: yeah

R: how?

V: I just get a good personality when they speak, or when they talk, it gives me an idea of who they are.

R: Has your experience in the Socratic seminar changed the way you think of yourself as a student? How has it changed the way you see yourself?
V: yes, because like I said earlier, I was never very good at participating in high school, I was a shy kid, but after the Socratic I participate

R: so you are saying the reason you didn’t used to participate is because…

V: I was a afraid of being judged, or sounding stupid, but erm,

R: so why weren’t you afraid of being judged or sounding stupid, because in some ways someone is watching you, right..

V: like when someone is watching you you don’t want to sound stupid or pretend that you know what you are talking about

R: but I’m saying that in Socratic seminar you had one person particularly that was watching you, bit you are saying you still spoke more.

V: oh yeah

R: see that is interesting right, you were saying that you didn’t want to be judged and that is why you didn’t say anything, but in this one you had one specific person who was watching you, but you still spoke more

V: I guess it was confidence, when you don’t know what you are talking about you lack confidence, but when you know what you are talking about you don’t lack confidence you’re not worried about looking dumb or anything, you know exactly what you are talking about

R: so how did you know what you were talking about with the Socratic seminar – ‘cos they weren’t always easy right?

V: no they weren’t always easy, what I did I just reread and I just asked questions to my classmates to get a better understanding.
R: Ok so you could ask questions, so even if you didn’t know necessarily it you could ask questions- it was ok to ask questions

V: yes

R: ok thank you.
Interview with Rose

RUTH: Tell me about how came to be a student at this community college?

ROSE: Wanted to go into nursing, but didn’t do too well at high school- and wanted to start with an easier college then transfer.

RUTH: Tell me about your experiences of class discussions, prior to this class?

ROSE: In high school it was nothing like it was in college, in high school it was never a discussion, they would teach the lesson and that was it.

RUTH: so how would the teacher teach?

ROSE: She would have a do now- then the teacher would teach the lesson, then it was over, you can’t put your input on anything.

RUTH: Could you tell me about your experiences in this class with the use of Socratic seminar?

ROSE: at first I was really shy to speak, but then I got over that, it was a new environment, but even if you make mistakes, it’s better for you, you going to learn more, that is how it was, in Socratic seminar I felt comfortable I spoke about what I believed in, I spoke about the pieces, so

RUTH: How, if at all, does your involvement in Socratic seminar effect your understanding of the literature we are studying?

ROSE: It did effect my understanding in a positive way, because I understand more, because what I thought and what I believed about the reading, that was not what somebody else believes so I got a glimpse of the input of what everybody thought about the reading.
RUTH: so what made you think that what they thought was better than what you thought? Or did you not think that?

ROSE: No I didn’t think that, but it gave me something to think, like in “Only daughter” I thought he was talking just about his boys and he didn’t care about his daughter, but when I was with my group I thought he just wanted better for his daughter, I got an understanding in different aspects, I still believed in what I believed, but

RUTH: Could you describe for me what typically happened when people were in the Socratic seminar?

ROSE: Like say, if I started off I would say something then they would say what they thought the passage was about, and then of we didn’t understand the piece or there was something in the reading, they would say, ok this is what this means or what it doesn’t mean, or if we don’t understand it at all, somebody in the group would be like this is what I got out of it, so it was just a little bit of everything.

RUTH: Usually what did you do when you were in Socratic seminar?

ROSE: I would say like I didn’t understand it, it was like one piece about the ice I didn’t understand that, and then some of them also I would start off, or I would ask questions, or see how they think or feel about the passage,

RUTH: and what kinds of questions would you try to ask?

ROSE: like I would refer back to the text and I would say I didn’t understand what passage seven was about, or how do you feel about this person, or the character, or what do you think there… stuff like that.

RUTH: Has Socratic seminar influenced the way you interact with your classmates?
ROSE: **mmm?**

RUTH: Do you think there is anybody you wouldn’t really have talked to if you hadn’t had Socratic seminar- maybe that’s a better question.

ROSE: **Mmmm, yeah I think that I never would have got the relationship that I had with the other classmates, like Pete and them, because when we was in the group we all put our opinions in and what we thought, but if it wasn’t for that, if it wasn’t Socratic seminar I don’t think we would have spoke as much as we speak now, we would have spoke about the classwork, but not like friendship wise,**

RUTH: Has your experience in the Socratic seminar changed the way you think of yourself as a student, at all?

ROSE: **I can say yes, because like, it was a better understanding for me, it was a great tool to better understand the readings**

RUTH: So how do you think it made you understand more about the readings when you just had the teacher come and- you said in your previous class, the teacher would come and teach you and then leave, in this you as the students would talk, and you are saying that helps you understand more, why do you think it helps you understand more?

ROSE: **because if the teacher is just putting something on the board and just talking, like and not engaging with their students, it is like nothing done, like when I was with you, like we’ll all read it, like we’ll take turns reading it, then after that we’ll talk about it in the Socratic seminar, so I got more out of it, and my understanding of the story or the passage got better, so that’s why**

RUTH: so you are saying because of the engagement?

ROSE: **yeah**
Interview Transcript Pete

R: Tell me about how came to be a student at this community college?

P: I got outta high school 2 years ago and I realized just working isn’t going to support me in the long run so I decided to come to college and finish my four years in college.

R: so why this particular college?

P: This college was close to my house it is only like 15 minutes away and also I know that a lot of my teachers had told me to go to community college first, before you go to university, and I know that I was missing some classes as I’d been outta high school for two years so I came to finish first here.

R: Can you describe to me what your experiences of class discussions were in the English classroom in high school?

P: Well I didn’t go to a really good high school so I would say that my English teacher didn’t really have discussions more like reading from the textbook, and just giving us homework, the most we would talk about honestly was about what we were reading- and at the time the last book I read was the “Odyssey”

R: so how would – let’s say she would say we are going to talk about the book we are reading, how would that discussion go?

P: so she would mostly give us a worksheet that we would take home on the chapters that we were reading and then write them down on the worksheet, coming back to class she would basically read the sentence of, go through the worksheet and choose who to answer it.
R: So in this class we did Socratic seminar- could you tell me about your experiences of Socratic seminar?

P: I think Socratic seminar, when we first discussed about it I was actually really interested about it because it wasn’t like, how do I say, it wasn’t to prove somebody else wrong, it was to have a conversation about something, I knew it was going to be kinda difficult because normally we are used to contradicting each other proving each other wrong, having an argument you know, and Socratic seminar is a little more difficult because that is not the point, the point is to figure out what the passage is about, build more on the information of the passage, and that was what made it kinda more difficult because there were times I see other students or other peers they would want to argue, and trying to stop that was the point of it, so doing Socratic Seminar was actually good in a way because it teaches us how to have a conversation, without having an argument at the end of it, it just build on, it lets people find out more about the passage together than just by yourself.

R: and why do you think it is more difficult to discuss than to argue?

P: I think it is more difficult to discuss than to argue because to argue is a little more easy, for example it you were to argue the sky is blue somebody would argue no it is purple, so you would automatically argue back no it is blue you would give your reasons why, it would be a back and forth conversation, but to just talk about a topic is a little more difficult, I could think the sky is blue and somebody else could think the sky is blue and the conversation could just end there, but the point of it is to explain, why is the sky blue, how come it does that, is it because of the sun, is it because of this? And on that you build on it, that is also why it also depends upon
the person you are talking too to, because if the person is not a very talkative person
the conversation would end very quickly, so it is also good to help each other to
build and talk more by asking questions, by going back to the text, by going back to
the reason why, it makes the other person think of other reasons before you end
your sentence.

R: What are the differences, if any, for you, between class discussions is high school and
using Socratic seminar?

P: what happened in high school was different because, one we were just doing
worksheets, I felt like it was just more like you were obligated to do it because one
you got a grade on it and two it was a homework assignment, you would come to
class, it would be the same routine over and over again, you know it is about the
book, you know you have to answer the questions, so it kinda gets boring after a
while and you lose focus, with Socratic seminar it’s a little different because one it
was a different passage every time we did it, every time we talked, two it is different
people, so I am not accustomed to talking to only Ronald, or only to Lillian or only
to Josh, every time we’d go in it would be a different person, so you would have to
grow accustomed to talking to a new person you don’t know, or don’t think alike, so
I think that was what was very different about it- talking to a new person every
time.

R: so in your class discussion at high school would you do it as a class or in groups?

P: she would have us as a class doing it,

R: so she would say question 1 Pete what is the answer? Then what would happen?
P: for example if I had the question wrong, she would be like ok does anybody else have a different answer? And someone else would give another answer and so on and so forth.

R: so when someone would get the right answer then what?

P: she would say ok this is the right answer and why it was the right answer and how we came to that answer for example another we read I think was “Romeo and Juliet” why did Romeo go back to Juliet or why did they die? And somebody would say oh because they were it love, and if that was wrong somebody would say oh because they were from different families and they weren’t meant to be together she’d be like that’s right this is why, then we’d go back to the text and we’d look at it and see why.

R: so Socratic seminar is quite different from that.

P: yes so in Socratic seminar everybody in the group doesn’t know what the answer is, it is not like the teacher, the teacher knows, so she is just waiting for her students to get to the right answer so she can explain it, in Socratic seminar nobody knows, everybody is kinda on the same page when it comes to reading the passage or reading the story, so you have to figure it out yourself, so you have to look back to the passage, you don’t have the teacher to tell you, that’s wrong that’s wrong, that’s wrong, this is right.

R: so are you saying that the ways that you would figure out things in Socratic seminar was by looking back at the text or were there other ways?

P: there were other ways too, one mostly was look back at the text you find clues, but I also figured I learned also when somebody else gives their opinion it kinda
opens your eyes to a different opinion, a different view of the story, like for example one of the stories we read was the weird one about the iceberg and different changes

R: “Chronicles of Ice”

P: “Chronicles of Ice” that one- like it was about that I just thought that it was just about icebergs, but then Jessica said if you read from the first to the last part of the passage it talks about the life of the iceberg, in the beginning it is like a brand new iceberg, in the middle it is melting, a whole bunch of history is leaving, and when she said that I realized it isn’t just about an iceberg it is about the history behind it, every iceberg is frozen for millions of years and once it melts, the history is gone, it’s just water now everything has gone, and when she said that it just opened my eyes to that too, I realized this isn’t just about an iceberg, it is also about history too, what an iceberg actually means and what the author is trying to tell us, this is like history, it is important that we keep then, this is like our last view of the past,

R: Could you tell me the kinds of thing people would do when they were in Socratic seminar?

P: I think that a lot that I have seen is that when somebody doesn’t understand they kind of give up, they sit there and kinda wait until somebody says something I wanna say is logical, like for example if we read Chronicles of Ice again without anybody knowing what it was I would see that a lot of people would sit there and wait for somebody to say something or ask a question that kinda makes sense, like if I were to say this story is about icebergs then Josh or Ronald would say, oh yeah you can tell because in the first paragraph it says about icebergs, that is their way to add input into, but it is not really helping, so being shy it hurts the conversation
because if everybody is shy then nobody knows what to say everybody sits there
kinda quietly, but being open minded, being able to just randomly say oh but what
does that mean what does he mean by this opens other people to speak also. It opens
up new topics, and new questions, so I think shyness and not looking into the
passages causes the Socratic seminar to die down before it even starts.

R: What have your noticed about your own behavior when you are involved in Socratic
seminar?

P: So before I’m in the Socratic seminar what I like to do is to look through the
passage and skim through it- and find any little question or detail that seems odd or
sticks out why do that? It’s because one it builds up a sentence, of a topic that
everybody else can discuss too, by looking at it, like for example “Caged Bird” when
he says a “graveyard of dreams” he doesn’t mean an actual graveyard of dead
people he means people who have had dreams and didn’t succeed in it, somebody
could have just thought of it just as a graveyard, you know, if they just read through
it, but if you look through the passage you see it has more meaning than just a
graveyard of dreams, what he is explaining is that people loose dreams they forget
to do things or they have other things in mind, that’s a graveyard of dreams, so I
like to skim through the passage and see, ok so this makes sense, so this might be a
question, this might be something that we could build upon, just to keep the
conversation going, ‘cos if you don’t think that way the conversation dies and people
are quiet and nobody has anything to say any more.

R: Has Socratic seminar influenced the way you interact with your classmates?
P: I think it did, because if we didn’t do that I think half the people in our classroom I wouldn’t talk to I think I would stick to talking to the people I kinda know like Ronald and Makyenko, but doing Socratic seminar there were some laughing times, there were some times when somebody would say something and you would really be listening and focusing- and you acknowledge that person as one of your peers, so doing Socratic seminar is also a way to learn who the people in your class are.

R: if at all, has Socratic seminar changed your opinion or feelings about any of your classmates individually or the group as a whole?

P: In a way yeah, like Makyenko, I thought that he was a quiet person, but after the first Socratic seminar I realized that he is not really a quiet person he is pretty intelligent, he has a lot to say, and when he puts his mind to it, I see that he is capable of anything, same thing with Ronald, well Ronald I knew already, but seeing Ronald in the Socratic seminar looking at him do it I realized that we had a lot in common, as we both like to speak a lot and a lot of the girls in the class too, I thought that they were very quiet but when they say things they are very intelligent too. Like I said- it gets you to know somebody.

R: Has your experience in the Socratic seminar changed the way you think of yourself as a student?

P: I think it does because I think it has made me more intelligent, in that if I had to do it again, I would know what I would have to do, I would know my strategy to keep the conversation going, to make intelligent conversation, to make intelligent questions, it helps me in the long run too, for somebody who, let’s say for example I have to give a speech, you know instead of being quiet and not giving a good speech
doing Socratic seminar made me realize it is good to look through a passage it is
good to look through information, it is good to make questions because it keeps the
conversation going and it makes people interested in what you are talking about,
without having to contradict each other and the whole arguments, so it does help
have conversations with other people too, it helps you to become a lot more open.
Interview with Jo

R: Tell me about how came to be a student at this community college?

J: I was actually supposed to go to college in Florida, and I actually went down there for two weeks and I decided I wanted to come back to this state.

R: why?

J: the campus I was supposed to get into I was too late, I was supposed to get on to the waiting list, and my aunt lived in Florida but she lived too far from my school,

R: so do you regret that you didn’t stay in Florida?

J: I’m happy that I stayed up here.

R: Tell me about your experiences of class discussions, prior to this class- when you were in your high school English class?

J: we had a project about something we would like to change in their community like a park or stuff like that,

R: so did you have discussions in the class- like as a group?

J: it was more writing.

R: Could you tell me about your experiences in this class with the use of Socratic seminar?

J: I think it was good, probably I like talked more, and explained my opinions about the stories that we were reading, and I think it helped everybody else open up more.

R: What are the differences, if any, for you, between class discussions and using Socratic seminar?
J: yeah because we didn’t really have any
R: How, if at all, does your involvement in Socratic seminar effect your understanding of the literature we are studying?

J: It helped me a little
R: how?

J: everybody else looked at the passages differently- so getting a different response from everyone helped me to understand it more.

R: Could you tell me about how people behave when they are involved in Socratic seminar?

J: they would think.
R: how did you know they were thinking?

J: like the silence- like sometimes we would have a silence for about five minutes where everybody was just trying to think of something to say, or a point to prove from the passage.

R: What have your noticed about your own behavior when you are involved in Socratic seminar?

J: I would read over it again, or like searching the internet to understand it more.

R: would you do that if you weren’t in the Socratic seminar?

J: probably not read over, but probably just google it.

R: Has Socratic seminar influenced the way you interact with your classmates?

J: yeah, we had like a debate sometimes, sometimes people people in your group didn’t agree with what you were saying, and then someone in the next group would say it.
R: Has your experience in the Socratic seminar changed the way you think of yourself as a student? How has it changed the way you see yourself?

J: No.
Interview with Leah

R: Tell me about how came to be a student at this community college?

L: I filled out an application online because I wanted to go to school for criminal law and people recommended this college so I applied online.

R: Tell me about your experiences of class discussions, prior to this class, in your alternative High school?

L: we didn’t have classroom discussions really, there were only seven kids in one class, so we didn’t really have class discussions.

R: Could you tell me about your experiences in this class with the use of Socratic seminar?

L: I liked doing that because I was involved, like back in high school I wasn’t really talkative, and that made me talk and comfortable around people.

R: so why do you think that that made you comfortable around people.

L: because it started off with them talking and then I found my way into the conversation and I felt comfortable.

R: So in your high school class what kinds of things would you do?

L: The teacher would just give us an assignment on the board, we would do definitions, it was like basic stuff, just read do definitions,

R: How, if at all, does your involvement in Socratic seminar effect your understanding of the literature we are studying?

L: yeah, like it explained what it meant and then the questions that we asked, the students gave their own opinion and then we understood it better.
R: Could you tell me about how people behave when they are involved in Socratic seminar?

L: We would give our opinion and we would ask questions on what the article was about, on whatever we was reading, like on Tita we asked what do you think her religion is because we couldn’t find out what her religion was.

R: What have your noticed about your own behavior when you are involved in Socratic seminar?

L: I was asking questions mostly,

R: yeah – what kinds of questions would you mostly ask?

L: Why did Tita’s mom not want her to get married? And then the class answered that question.

R: Has Socratic seminar influenced the way you interact with your classmates?

L: yeah, because me and some students don’t really get along really in class but when we were in the circle we all somehow talked to each other and give our opinions.

R: Has your experience in the Socratic seminar changed the way you think of yourself as a student? How has it changed the way you see yourself?

L: yeah because I never was involved in- I’d go up to the board sometimes, I never did that in high school.
Appendix D
Transcripts of Socratic Seminars

Socratic seminar 1—Caged Bird—Maya Angelou

Jo: Ok I wanna start, I wrote one little word over here, to me I think it’s about slavery, that is the first thing that came to my mind when I read it, ‘cos like, because she state how a freed bird leaps, or whatever- and a caged bird is like tied down, and being that, during that time, like that is basically how the slaves were being treated

Victor: how they felt?

Jo: a caged bird

Pete: I think just, I think like this song could really like go for anybody

Students mumbling

Pete: I thought it was a song

Laughter

Pete: I think this poem can really go for anybody, I don’t think she was actually talking about a caged bird, obviously, he could have been a bird but…

Josh: It was probably like an expression she used

Pete: Like an expression to it- I could see this poem like compared to a lot of people, a lot of people probably feel like a caged bird, maybe somebody feels like they are tied down, in like marriage or something.

Jessica: huh haha

Pete: Or like, I dunno, maybe you are right about slavery, it could be about slavery too.

Victor: and the bird in a cage being tied, we might feel like that sometimes.

Josh: Word.

Josh: the birds don’t sing

Jessica: What birds don’t sing?

Josh: birds do not sing

Leah: they do sing

Josh:-they hum

Jessica: Oh …. in audible
Christine: I was gonna say that.

Leah: Why do you say it is about slavery?

Jo: Because…, the poet, like the time that she wrote this poem was during slavery, the type of person that she is, a black poet, during those times that slavery was going on happening, and she says, sing for freedom, the caged bird sings for freedom, so I’m just like, maybe she is just saying the poem, for the people how the slave may have felt. Like Pete say, it could go for anybody, like an artist who sings, when they get on stage they could feel like a caged bird, or just somebody in general.

Leah: What do you think it means when he, she says, his wings were clipped, and his feet were tied?

Victor: Josh?

Laughter

Josh: that was for me?

Leah: yeah

Josh: Hmm. To tell you the truth I don’t actually know but, I think that they was tied in the pain or whatever, I’m gonna give it that is my best answer, so they was tied they was going through it, their emotions,

Leah: do you know what I asked you?

Josh: no not really

Leah: I said his wings were clipped, and his feet were tied what do you think that means?

Ruth: So you can ask this as a general question you don’t have to put people on the spot, we are trying to be supportive

Leah: I’m sorry Josh

Jessica: a bird’s wings being clipped means that they can not fly, so he can’t go anywhere, his feet being tied means that he can’t go anywhere that way either- so he physically can’t move.

Victor: like when somebody is behind bars he can’t do anything – they are stuck basically-it’s messed up

Jessica: like think of a bird in your cage that’s like is in your home, like they can’t go anywhere

Leah: Oh I see

-Jessica: that’s what she is referring to in that.

Leah: It sounds like a bird that is on the street that is broken bird trapped in a cage.
Josh: A broken hearted bird
Leah: No like a bird with broken leg, trapped in a cage
Josh: but if he has his legs tied it is not broken
Jessica: It could be a reference to anything, it doesn’t necessarily have to be a bird, that is just the title of it, like a reference she is using, it could be a person, it could be anything.
Pete: You could think of it like somebody in prison too, somebody in prison is behind bars, it is not really referring to the age of the bird, but being trapped in prison, or being trapped somewhere that doesn’t let you do anything, that’s just how you describe it.
Josh: that’s the bird
Pete: That’s just like the bird in the cage
Jo: getting locked up, that do tie you down.
Leah: Do you think the bird died in this?
Jo: No I think the bird was set free
Inaudible
Leah: In the first paragraph
Jessica: It is not like physically, actually a bird she is talking about, like she is just using that as a metaphor a acknowledge that – she might not even be speaking about a specific person,
Josh: She might be speaking about herself
Jessica: She might be speaking in general- She might be speaking about herself- didn’t she just recently die? 5 years ago or something
Jo: hm hm
Pete: that’s what I say, this poem is, maybe this poem was made a long time ago, it could be a reference to anybody, this poem is very open- based, not talking about somebody specifically, but using the example of the bird in the cage a lot of people could relate to it. A lot of people could read this poem and thing, oh this poem really does relate to me, how I feel right now, maybe when I am working, this poem could mean anything, it really could be anything
Jessica: It could reference, somebody being stuck in a job
Pete: yeah,
Jessica: stuck in a dead end job, you don’t have an education, you don’t go anywhere, so you are stuck in your little cubicle for the rest of your life- like that is their cage.
Jo: So I had looked it and it had said in the poem the free bird has power and named the sky his own while acting on inborn, inborn impulses to fly low in the sky, the language and imagery surrounding the free bird is a (inaudible) and also indicated his authority and ownership in comparison with the free bird the caged bird lives with darkness pain and fear, so it is basically for anyone who is feeling down, or like….. basically

Victor: do you guys think there is such a thing as freedom? Just because this poem relates to being caged up, and it talks about freedom, what do you guys think- is there such a thing as freedom?

Pete: I think there is freedom, it’s just, I think freedom is really hard to achieve, especially like here, you know like with the economy, with like you know nobody is really ever free, everybody has responsibilities, everybody has to pay taxes, everybody has to go to school to get an education, to grow, but in order to grow and follow your dreams, maybe becoming an artist or a teacher, that’s kind of the freedom that you look for, or being able to buy your own car or house, that is a freedom, you are able to achieve, but freedom I don’t think anybody is really really free….

Jessica: yeah like even in the third part it says “the caged bird sings with a fearful thrill” so he is still kinda like afraid to be free.

Jo: yeah..

Victor: I thought is was kinda like

Jessica: That is what it kinda seems like he wants to, but he’s kinda a little bit he doesn’t really know what is out there

Victor: I thought that when he says that he sings that was his only freedom just singing right? Cos he is caged up and he can’t really fly anywhere, he is singing

Jessica: yeah…

Victor: like he said earlier you can’t really achieve freedom freedom

Jo: I think freedom is within, like everybody finds their own freedom during their free time like whatever people like to do during their free time, their freedom, so singing could be like …

Victor: yeah,

Pete: I really liked the metaphors in this poem too

Victor and Jo: yeah

Pete: like uh, uh the fifth line “the caged bird stands on the grave of dreams, his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream?” the ways she is describing things it is really deep, I remember Ronny said one part something, oh right here “the caged bird sings of a fearful
trill of things unknown” all these ways she is describing the poem really opens up and makes you think -wow like you see the,

Victor: Yeah, you see the message

Pete: Yeah you see the message or you see where she is coming from, and the way she is describing it too..

Victor: yeah

Pete: like I underlined , “and dipped his wings in the orange sun rays” I really like that piece because she didn’t just say, “oh the bird is flying up in the air where the sun is” she is like giving a good description of like what the bird, how it looks in the sun rays it is not really dipping its wings into the sun rays, you can picture it as the bird is flying in the air and the sun hits the birds wing, so like all these little descriptions makes the poem stand out, makes it more readable, you’ll think that ‘s a good representation, that’s a good phrase, it makes you want to read more of it.

Jessica: it gives you a good visual of it

Pete: yeah visual, oh that’s the word

General laughter

Pete: what do you think it means when it says, “the caged bird stands on the grave of dreams, his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream?”

Pause students all look at the poem

Josh: like somebody died

Leah: Somebody died and he is having a dream of them?

Rose: I think he is surrounded by his nightmares, like what frightens him the most, ‘cos he (inaudible…)

Victor: What I got from that was his dreams were dead, because he was caged up, he’d probably be dreaming about like flapping his wings, but he is caged up so…and his “nightmare scream” what I got from that too, was like that…. Oh damn I lost it… erm …

Pause

Pete: If you really look at it the first line “the caged bird stands on the grave of dreams” what I see too, is he had dreams but he can’t achieve then since he is caged up, you know, also the second part, “the shadow shouts on a nightmare scream” I think that is more like, when he is describing a shadow he is describing his inner self, that his inner self feels sad depressed, I don’t think depressed is the right word but, depressed now that it is caged up it really can’t do anything, he can’t follow the dreams, and like I said a whole bunch of times, this poem can mean anything, how many people can relate to it- how many people have had dreams, have had visions of the life and their future and that they can’t achieve
it – maybe because of family, and this does kinda relate to the story that we are reading, “Like Water for Chocolate” Tita can’t get what she wants, because she is caged up, she has to take care of her mom, so anyone who reads this poem can really relate to it, you see these phrases these parts that really pop out, you see what this poem goes for, just this “grave of dreams” people have thought that they can’t achieve their dreams, either family member, or sick, or anything, anything really can be a “dead dream”

Jo: So this poem I was reading, came from her book, the autobiography she wrote called, “I know why the caged bird sings” and it was this autobiography from when she was three, it was basically about her childhood or whatever, and how she became a mother at sixteen, and ermm, how she was challenged with racism and being a mother at a young age, and stuff like that, so I guess that is a little bit about why she wrote this poem.

Victor: (nodding) wrote this…

Victor: points at Christine- do you like this poem?

Christine: laughs

Group laughs.

Pete: I mean I like this poem because I can see myself in this poem, because a couple of years ago (clears his throat) I didn’t drop out of high school, but I left high school early, but I left only for the intention, I felt like I was stuck, I felt like I wasn’t moving anywhere, I felt like I was just wasting my time, two years later, I finally decided to go to college, when I see this phrase, the caged bird stands on the grave of dreams, that really relates to me you know, because I have dreams, and I do

(Signal goes off for end of seminar)

Pete: but during the years and the times that go I see myself getting closer to my dreams, so reading this poem, I really see my own life into it.

Leah: So I have a question, so do you think that because he childhood was messed up, and she had a daughter, and she had to focus on her daughter, and that she had to stop what she was doing to focus on her daughter,


Rose: not necessarily I think that she had to put her life on hold for her daughter – but if you want a better life for you and your child then that is what you would pursue, I guess maybe she was..

Leah: she couldn’t do it…

Rose yes
Jo: maybe she went through some stuff just to get where she, where she, before she died. She actually wrote a book so probably went through a couple of obstacles, being a young mother, before she where wanted to be in life.

Pete: You reading that biography of hers, and having a kid so early, maybe that is what she was a mother at such a young age she didn’t get to do the things she wanted to.

Jo: true.

Pete: so this poem relates to her, saying I feel like a caged bird, I can’t do anything, I have all these responsibilities now, and now I can’t pursue the dreams that I wanted to,

Jo: that goes back to her role during slavery

Josh: what this poem?

Jo: well not slavery, but racism, all that stuff..

Rose: I gotta line that I didn’t really understand it says, “the fat worm’s waiting on the dawn bright lawn” I didn’t really understand that.

Melissa ( from the outside group ) starts to answer – then put s her hand over her mouth- sorry my apologies.

Leah: which line is?

Jessica: first paragraph on the back.

Students look at the line, flip it over

Jessica: second to last sentence

Jo: I think she is saying, free birds have access to the sky, worms and all that like

Victor: freedom, sky,

Leah: I dunno at some point they

Jo: talking about the free bird

Pete: yeah she is talking about the free bird, she is basically describing people who don’t have responsibilities, like what does a bird eat? Worms.

Jo: worms

Pete: so they have all this freedom to eat whatever they want,

Victor: fly wherever they want

Leah: fly around

Pete: yeah fly wherever they want, so she is describing people who don’t have her responsibilities, like what she is going through right now.
Josh: inaudible

Jo: and she says the caged bird her shadow shouts on a nightmare scream while the free bird is eating worms on a sunny day.

Jo: done.
Socratic Seminar 2: “Only Daughter”—Sandra Cisneros

Rose: Like when we was reading the sentences out loud, I think it was like in paragraph 4 I was still confused after where it stated “after 4 years in college and 2 more in grad school and still no husband my father shakes his head even now and says I’d wasted all my education.” That I don’t understand where they trying to go with that.

Jessica: If in the beginning, closer at the top, I don’t know where it is, I don’t even see it, erm, it says that point of her going to school is to find a husband. Like not really more so for education, so she can find a husband so after that he is disappointed she is not married yet.

Leah: How old is she?

Jessica: She graduated college, the grad school, she’d be 29ish, I may be wrong maybe 27, 28.

Leah: And she has a daughter?

Jessica: no, she

Leah: Oh that was “caged bird”

Jessica: yeah yeah yeah, she has the daughter, she has six brothers

Victor: This was very confusing to me, because like I thought at one point they were talking about the daughter trying to get the father’s approval, and then like at one point the father was telling the kids do this, not this, I just don’t understand, I just didn’t understand what they were talking about.

Pause

Victor: Like what was the main point of the story

Jessica: I think like he’s like blue collar, what’s the – blue collar worker- is that like the lower class? He is like, when he is saying with his hands he is like a mechanic, something like that

Victor: No I understand that

Jessica: He wants them to be better than what he was.

Victor: Yeah

Jessica: To do something better than he has. If you see in one of the paragraphs, he says they had to keep leaving their houses to go somewhere else, so it is probably because he is not getting work, so he has to kinda go find another job, or he finds another job in a different area, so he doesn’t want them to have to live that type of life

Victor: yeah
Jessica: to have more structure
Leah: I have a question, so I was half asleep when we read it, so all I heard was that his wife passed away…. Did it, did she? And he is lonely, it seems like, but I think (inaudible)
Lillian: In the beginning, you know it says like oh like 7 years
Leah: It is in paragraph 42nd and he is talking about being lonely
Lillian: It is right here- in the third paragraph
Leah: since his wife passed away he wants to have a daughter
Rose: That is the same question I had
Jessica: No that’s not
Leah: This is what I am reading, but that aloneness, that loneliness, therefore…. Jessica: No that is saying she was lonely because she had six brothers,
Leah: So she was lonely
Jessica: She was the only daughter, they didn’t wanna play with here because she was female
Leah: why did he want her to have a kid?
Jessica: what?
Leah: So why did he want her to get married though?
Jessica: That sounds like a cultural thing more than anything
Victor: yeah
Pete: they are Mexican right?
Jessica: hm hmm
Pete: I feel like it is just in Mexico
Jessica: it is that’s why I am saying it is a culture thing
Lillian: that’s rude
Laughter
Pete: In “Like water for chocolate” it is the same way too.
Murmers of yeah
Leah: Do you think has to relate to “Like water for chocolate” this story?
Victor: Not really, it is not that strict, in like water for chocolate that is that strict
Pete: what if it is, from Like water for chocolate
Ruth: it is not from like water for chocolate
Laughter
Josh: they both was from Mexico right?
Jessica: yes
Victor: But it says the mother was American right?
Rose: In paragraph 11 he states I have seven sons, being only he has six sons and one daughter, why did he refer his daughter as a son?
Leah: err
Josh: may I say the word, cos she was probably er, er, I’m just saying
Leah: wow a dyke
Josh: you ain’t have to say she was a dyke
From the outer circle Ronald raises his hand
Ronald: can I just say something, the thing is what he meant to say was, Yete mon siete hijos, which in Spanish means to have seven kids
Lillian: yeah
Ronald: but in English you would refer to it as seven sons
Jessica: seven sons, ‘cos she even says that in one of the things she doesn’t think that he meant to say that he meant to say he had seven children. It says it in one of these paragraphs somewhere
Victor: see that is what I meant too, she felt like the black sheep because she was left out,
Leah: oh he did he corrected himself, not seven sons, six sons and one daughter
Victor: no, no she
Victor and Jessica: she corrected him
Leah: oh
Victor: that’s why she was probably like the black sheep
Josh: she just dressed like a boy, I would say,
Victor: shaking his head
Pete: why would you say that?
Josh: because she came out as a girl, but he counted her as a boy

General murmuring nah, nah

Pete and Jessica: what he meant to say was

Jessica: what Ronald said it translates into English as

Lillian and Jessica: sons

Pete: Maybe he didn’t want a girl maybe that’s why he wants her to get married, to

Jessica: he wants to ship her off to another man, not be responsible for her anymore

Josh: but she kinda still a girl but she dress up as a boy

Jessica: she not kinda a girl, she is a girl,

Josh: I’m just saying she dress as a boy though,

Pete: where does it say that?

Jessica: it doesn’t say that, do you get it now?

Josh: yeah.

Rose: Paragraph 6 – I think the story is more deeper than just her finding a husband, like she says she wants her father to introduce her as, “my only daughter the writer, not this is my daughter she teaches,” so I just feel like she wants to take her education and skills more seriously than trying to find a husband, do you guys agree with that?

Jessica: yeah like I think she wants to make that her education is more important than the fact she is not married, because that is not the ideal life that she wants,

Leah: what she experiences

Jessica: It doesn’t seem like it

Rose: another question is do you think that her father cares about her education or

Rose and Leah: just wants her to get married

Lillian: throughout the story I feel like he gives more props to the guys than the girls

Jessica: yeah because it even says, where does it say, her brother graduated from medical school, this is on the first page

Pete: page 15

Jessica: yeah, it says when he graduated from medical school he fulfilled my father’s dream of study hard and use your hands, use your head instead of your hands, so like he got all the props and everything for doing that, but when she graduated, he just like alright whatever.
Lillian: yeah whatever

Pause

Willy: I have a question, is it true that everyone tries to impress their parents, like their father mainly?

Pete: no

Jessica: no

Murmuring no

Victor: I feel like that is old school.

Jessica: that is another cultural thing too,

Victor: yeah, yeah, yeah- we just focus on our education.

Pause

Jessica: if you see at the very end, the last sentence, “of all the wonderful things that happened to me last year that was the most wonderful” that is her finally, feeling accepted by him

Leah: what she do?

Jessica: she wrote the story and it was translated into Spanish and she had him read it, like the last paragraph and a half it says she sat there waiting for him to read her writings, whatever, and that he asked where can we get more copies for the relatives, that is him showing that he is accepting it, that he is actually proud of her now, and that he wants to show off that she is a writer,

Josh: I think that’s true though

Laughter

Lillian: that’s real good

Josh: I really do

(9.44)

Jessica: why?

Josh: cos he is accepting the girl over a letter that she wrote it in Spanish and that he is giving it off to her relatives, that is a real true love right there

Laughter

Josh: He is a real person for that

Jessica: good point, (inaudible) 10:03
Josh: I’m just sayin..

Jessica: No I agree with you, he finally accepted her, that is showing love, not that he didn’t love her before, but now he is

Lillian: showing her

Jessica: showing her he loves her,

Pause

Rose: Like Jessica said “of all the most wonderful things that happened to me last year that was the most wonderful, so you think that he is satisfied with his, her book coming out? Or…

Jessica: I think she is more satisfied with her father, approving of her

Victor: yeah

Jessica: cos she has been writing, she’s been published, but I think she is more satisfied with the fact that he is proud of her..

Victor: he likes it- yeah

Jessica: that he likes it, he could have liked it more because of the fact it is about his home country, and that she wrote things that he could relate to, cos he even says, is this so and so and she says yes, he keeps reading, so he is relating to her writing, and she even says in the thing that he doesn’t write or speak great English, so he may not have really understood her writings previous to that, cos they were all in English and now that this one is translated into Spanish he can understand it,

Pete: there is one part in the story that is kind of odd if you read it, paragraph 18 it says, “there was a glass filled with milk on the bedside of the table there were several vials of pills and balled Kleenex and on the floor one black sock and a plastic urinal I didn’t want to look at but I did anyways Pedro Infantante was about to burst into song and my father was laughing” I really don’t understand it

Leah: It sounds like somebody overdosed or something

Pete: yeah

Jessica: well she wrote it after she said he recovered from a stroke,

Lillian: so he is probably taking meds

Jessica: so, and she said all his down time is laying horizontally, so it’s like he is probably like dying,

Leah: Oh

Jessica: like if he had a stroke, he is probably like still really sick
Pete and Lillian: yeah
Leah: her dad?

Pete: yeah
Leah: so he was laughing?

Jessica: at a show, he was watching a show
Pete: ok I see it now, like in bed basically, I see it

Jessica: Did you see above that on 16 you see her family is all there for the holidays and what not, and she goes down to say he is in bed, so he might not be well enough to partake in the family stuff, so she had to go in to see him

Pete: that makes sense. I kept reading that over and over again I couldn’t get it,

Jessica: In 17, right in the middle it says, although my father recovered from a stroke two years ago, he likes to spend all leisure hours horizontally and that is how I found him.

Pete: hmm,
Pause
Leah: so what was the main part of this story? I mean the main..
Lillian: the main idea?
Rose: she wanted to follow her education and her father wanted her to get married but
Jessica: that’s not what she wanted
Rose: hmm
Lillian: until towards the end he finally accepted her
Leah: why didn’t he like her anyways?
Victor: I don’t think he didn’t like her
Lillian: it’s just he had more preference for his six boys than for a girl,
Pause
Jessica: do you think he accepted her more so because he was dying, or because he actually cared?

Pete: well
Jessica: cos now if I am thinking about what you said, when you read the thing, like
Lillian: practically dying
Jessica: he was practically dying
Leah: both, I think
Pete: like, like like a sense of remorse,
Jessica: yeah kind of like I was a jerk to you your whole life, I wanna at least leave on a good term with you.
Mutters of yeah yeah
Pete: dang I didn’t even think about that
Jessica: I didn’t til you read that paragraph out loud- laughs
Victor: wait what was that?
Jessica: when you read the paragraph about how he had a stroke and was lying in bed and what not, I was saying does it seem like he is accepting her because he is like dying, and he wants to leave on a good note instead of having her feel like she was never accepted and feel like she was never have that answered
Leah: that’s good
Jessica: I don’t think we have anything else
Pause
Leah: oh, oh sorry
Jessica: no no go on
Leah: so this was written about her dad the whole time? ‘cos in the content it says everything she had ever written she had written for him, what you think she meant, by that question?
Willy: I think, looking at paragraph 7, everything I had ever written had been for him, to win his approval
Lillian: this is what the story, basically is about
Jessica: it is probably about her writings been more important to her than getting married.
Leah: and this whole time he didn’t notice her writings? He didn’t like err…
Jessica: he couldn’t read them, ‘cos they were all in English, like that’s another part, “I know my father can’t read English words, even though my father my father’s only reading includes the brown-ink Esto sports magazine from Mexica City” it’s like everything he read was all in Spanish
Pete: she never noticed that? She never assumed that maybe he didn’t like it because it was English, he can’t read it. It’s like trying to read Japanese, you don’t know, you say you don’t like it.
Jessica: yeah,
Rose: at least he coulda told her how he felt or something...
Leah: Was she Spanish?
Pete: yeah
Leah: so why didn’t she just like
Lillian: just translate it herself, right?
Victor: she probably did (inaudible 17.34)
Jessica: it is like the other part where it translates to my son, a lot of writings may not have been able to translate exactly to how it is being said, so he may not have understood, if it were translated.

Time up.

Socratic Seminar 3—“Chronicles of Ice”—Greta Ehrlich

Rose: I honestly wasn’t paying attention when she was reading it, ‘cos I was reading something else, but when I was I don’t understand what the text was about- could someone tell me what’s the text about?
Willy: I think, he was talking about how he travelled to, I think - Argentina, to see the polar caps melting and to see (inaudible) and how they fall, but it also builds itself back up, I think wen as fast as it falls apart throughout the climate change over the year, like go warm, I guess the accumulation rate is slowing down and now it falls apart, the whole text is about how the glaciers are melting, and (inaudible)
Rose: thank you
Jo: Well to me, I think the story just like explains what a glacier is, and the importance of it, well not the importance of it,
Jessica: it’s a reason
Pete: This story does describe what a glacier is, but you know in the story he explains it like, he explains it more than a glacier, he explains how a glacier became what it is, what was the story behind the glacier. For example at the top of page 104 he is always talking about “A glacier is not static. Snow falls, acrretes, and settles until finally its own weight presses it down.” So basically the weight the glacier is formed, and then on the next page, the page next to it, it is explaining how the glacier has its own story, how each glacier is like millions of years old, it has history behind it, and as it melts that history fades away, that history disappears so like he is not just talking about the physicalness of the glacier
he is talking about the story to why it is there, to how it got there to why it was formed, so in a way it surprises me you could talk so much about a glacier.

Pause-

Rose: do you all know what was his purpose of that trip? Was it to encounter glaciers or was it just a regular trip?

Jessica: He was just a traveler.

Jo: yeah

Willy: I think he just wanted to go to that place and see the

Jessica: yeah if you look at the beginning, it says he is “an avid traveler, having made trips to the Himalayas, which inspired her to write Questions on” and it just goes on about he would travel.

Pause

Jessica: (quietly talking to person next to her) look here he was a traveler.

Willy: It also goes on about how the weather changes majorly, as the book as so much as the floods, there may not even be winters, in certain areas in the world that usually have winters during the season

Jessica: yeah also explains there how a whole season is just gone

Willy: like a never sending summer

Jessica: hmm hmm

Pause:

Jo: in a paragraph 8, he says, “A glacier is an archivist and historian. It registers every fluctuation of weather. It saves everything no matter how small or big, including pollen, dust, heavy metals, bugs, and minerals. As snow becomes firn and then ice, oxygen bubbles are trapped in the glacier, providing samples of ancient atmosphere;” So I guess like, I don’t know like they use the glaciers to capture stuff, not capture something like-have records of like a story of how things, the weather-stuff like that.

Pause

Rose clears her throat

Jessica: I feel like in paragraph fifteen it pretty much explains why our climate is changing, like everyone is worried about “empire building and profit” and it is taking away from the “biological health of our planet.”

Pause
Jessica: he was pretty much saying it is the end of the world.

Willy: He also talks about there if is a chance to fix it- but he mostly says it could be beyond repair

Jessica: hmm hmm

Pause

Jo: in paragraph 16 they have like three questions, I don’t know if you all want to look at them?

Jessica: the second one he is pretty much asking why have we traded for crop living and all that for workplace stuff, instead of live off the land and all that.

Jo: what do you mean by… I understand workplace and farming and all that ( inaudible)

Pause

Ruth: could you just say your question again, I couldn’t hear it

Jo: about understanding workplace part, but I don’t understand what you mean by ceremonial lives, what do they mean by comparing the workplace to, what has that got to do with glaciers?

Pause

Pete: I think it is because he is trying to explain how the glaciers have a history, and that history back then people didn’t work in like corporate places, people lived off the land, people only used the land for crops, for like hunting and stuff, and now that we use gas and we use all this stuff that is harming the environment, it is basically saying why did we like, why did we instead of being the way we are, why did we get worse, how come we traded everything that was perfectly fine for everything else that is not fine, it is causing more harm to the earth if anything, so he is basically comparing to the glaciers and the story behind the glaciers to our lives now, I think that is kinda where it is coming from

Jessica: yeah why build more than you were living off of?

Pete: yeah

Jessica: Like you were perfectly content living on the land why did you need to go like do more to make it ...( inaudible 12.16)

Leslie: what do you guys think the writer ended the conclusion like that?- paragraph 17.

Pause

Jo: I guess he is saying like glaciers are getting warm and he kinda ended it all saying, “Perito Moreno is still calving and mving, grabbing snowflakes, stirring weather, spitting out ice water, and it makes me smile.”
Pete: yeah maybe he is just basically saying yeah everything is bad, but still like
Jo: but glaciers are still beautiful
Willy: so it is not all bad just yet.
Pete: It is crazy when he says on the same page, paragraph 16- “Is this a natural progression or a hiccup in human civilization that we’ll soon renounce?” right there he is basically saying is everything that is happening now supposed to happen? Or did we mess up somewhere? Did we mess up?
Leslie: oh yeah.
Jessica: and then it is going to go bad?
Pete: and later are we gonna regret – it is gonna be our fault that we are here now?
Jessica: huhum
Pete: that’s so – when you think about it it is pretty crazy- cos it is true like, you don’t think about it, but you see how time progresses back in the day we didn’t have phones we didn’t have computer technology and now we do, would it have been ok just to stay as we did? Nobody had phones, nobody had computers, (14min, 29 secs- inaudible) or is it good that we grew and advanced into more civilized technology based society? Maybe we could have kind of found a way to fix our situation- maybe in the future we will, and maybe it won’t be considered a hiccup that we caused global warming.
Jessica: hmm
Pause
Alarm indicates end of 15 minutes
Willy: I don’t know why but at the end of paragraph 5 he talks about two types of glaciers, there are warm glaciers and there are cold glaciers, “Cold glaciers don’t glide easily; they are fixed and frozen to rock. They move like men on stilts- all awkwardness, broken bones of sheared rock.” Why they talk about two different glaciers, I guess because of that how they form differently, he talks about cold ones are stiff and still, and warm ones slide in and move around constantly,
Pause
Jo: on paragraph 9 at the end it says, “The retreat and disappearance of glaciers- there are only…” (pause the number is 160,000) Jo doesn’t say the number and laughs- never mind I won’t read it-
Pause
Time is up.