

## *Engagement: The First Three Days in an Inner City Classroom*

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"The founding fathers in their wisdom decided that children were an unnatural strain on their parents. So they provided jails called school, equipped with tortures called education."

John Updike

### **Initial Explorations**

Kora Janes has agreed to let me work with her students. She attended a series of eight evening Socratic Seminars in the fall, and loved them. She loved the opportunity to think and to discuss ideas with other adults. It was the first time she had felt intellectually stimulated in years.

She was reluctant, however, to let me work with her students. She felt that her students were simply incapable of participating in intellectual discussions. In addition to her experience, she had heard of research showing that middle school students need activity and are not capable of abstract thought. I assure her that this kind of interpersonal interaction is age-appropriate activity: in their free time students spend hours talking to each other and love it. I assured her that I had often seen middle school students develop the ability to think abstractly.

I have been asking for a solid commitment of ten weeks to be dedicated to Socratic Practice. She is concerned, too, that Socratic Practice is not an appropriate learning style for some of her students. Many of her students seemed to respond best when they worked on hands-on projects, such as making collages. She is afraid that, even if some students respond well, those for whom it is an inappropriate learning style will simply be lost if we do it for an extended period of time. I explain that a wide range of learning styles may be integrated into Socratic Practice and that learning, talking, and thinking can be done by everyone.

Finally, she gives in, saying "Frankly, nothing is working that well with these students anyway. This is the most hostile and least-motivated class I've had in years." I begin the first day of second semester; she has agreed to commit all of third quarter to Socratic Practice. She feels that she cannot give me more than one quarter because she must cover grammar, which all the students hate, and she wants to offer her unit on advertising, in which she teaches students the ways that advertisers manipulate people.

In conversation with Kora, I learn that previously the class has spent the previous two weeks studying a juvenile adaptation of "Romeo and Juliet." The class watched the movie version last Thursday and Friday. Over the weekend they were to have finished their "Romeo and Juliet" project, a two-page newspaper reporting on the love story in the manner of a contemporary journalist. Kora feels that that unit was a partial success because at least some students enjoyed the story. She feels that the most successful unit thus far was "poetry," in which students were allowed to write their own poems in whatever style they chose for a week.

Although Kora has held class discussions, and did so with "Romeo and Juliet," she

has never tried anything quite like Socratic Practice. The goal of her traditional class discussions has been to check to see that the students are reading and understanding the story. She reports that the same few students offer answers to her questions in those discussions, and that the others resent being asked.

## Day 1

I enter a drab, uninspired, institutional building: long rows of beige brick topped by long rows of horizontal aluminum windows, everyone the same. I have been in pleasant school buildings, and this is not one of them.

Classes are changing as I search for the room. I walk through loud, crowded hallways. The hallway is being policed by a large, stern-looking man who is regularly bellowing at students. The school is racially diverse. Although I see some mixed race groups, most students congregate in same race groups.

I enter the classroom and greet Kora. I expect that we will work well together. Although I don't know her well, I like her. She seems more harried at school than in seminar. Apparently she was told this morning that four students will be added to the roster, bringing the class size up to thirty-four. She doesn't have enough desks and will have to borrow three from next door.

The desks are arranged in a circle with name tags at each, as I had requested. The thirty-four desks barely fit in the room. As soon as possible I will divide the class in half, Kora taking one group and I the other. For the first day or two, however, I want to set the tone both for the students and for Kora. I sit down at a desk and wait for class to start.

Looking around, I become aware of the ugliness of the room. Although Kora has put up posters and displays around the room, the basic experience is still one of sitting in an uncomfortable, graffiti-covered desk with flickering overhead fluorescent lights. The lights buzz. The air is bad; too many people with too little circulation. Outside it is a beautiful, sunny day. Does anyone want to be here? I am struck again by how even Kora, who had been so joyful in the evening Socratic Seminars, does not seem to be happy here.

While waiting for the bell to ring, I look around at the students. Although these students are only in the eighth grade, some of them are nearly mature physically. As I listen to them interact, I become aware of cliques and hierarchies. A few students, often the most physically and sexually developed, are clearly dominant socially. They are completely at ease among their peers, doing and saying what they please. Some are laughing and teasing. Occasionally the teasing is vicious. Some students are very isolated from the group. There is more talking, and more enthusiastic talking, among the females than among the males.

The talk is often lively and fun. It is about dating, sports, fights, conflicts with friends and family. There is absolutely no mention of ideas, learning, or any academic subject. If a classroom event is mentioned at all, it involves a conflict with authority, or a situation in which ridicule occurred, or a similar human interaction. The presumed content of schooling is simply absent from the students' spontaneous interaction.

The bell rings. Kora asks the students to be quiet, putting a mark on the board for a pair of girls who continued to speak after the bell finished ringing. They immediately quit talking. I suppose the students receive a detention if they get marks. Although I regret that this sort of coercion is necessary, I am pleased to see that she has control over the classroom. I have worked with teachers who do not have control over their students,

and it is impossible to make progress if there is no means of controlling students' behavior. I am here to liberate minds, but in order to do so, a minimum of responsible behavior is necessary.

Ms. Janes introduces me as "someone who will help us learn about Socratic Practice." I feel they have the interest and enthusiasm of a group of inmates being introduced to a new guard. No spark of interest or curiosity on their part. As I take in their welcome I hear Ms. Janes saying "And now I will turn it over to Mr. Strong to tell you about Socratic Practice."

This is where the fun begins. I love this job. Sure I'm apprehensive. No one likes being hated. But I am confident that I can transform this class into one which is dominated by a culture of learning. I enjoy the challenge. Despite Ms. Janes' fear that it won't work with this class, I see enough passion and energy out there to know that this one will work. The scariest classes are those rare ones that seem dead, silent, perhaps clinically depressed. From the passion in their gossiping before class I know that there are real people here whom I can reach.

*"Hi. Call me Mike. Socratic Practice is the task of working together to understand something written, like a story, a poem, or an essay. Any questions?"*

No questions. Continued silence as I pause to look around the room. No questions, no apparent interest either.

*"There is one rule: One persons speaks at a time. That means that if I'm speaking, none of you are speaking, and if one of you are speaking, none of the rest of you are speaking. Okay? Any questions?"*

No questions. I begin passing out the reading. I used to offer more extensive explanations of Socratic Practice and appropriate rules for conversation up front, but then I realized that in many classrooms, no one was really listening. It felt both rude and pointless to talk if no one was paying attention, so have pared down the introduction to a minimum: we are working together to understand and one person speaks at a time. Further explanation will be provided as needed.

The reading I've selected is the chapter titled "Self-Discipline" from Ruth Benedict's classic *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, written in the 1940s. I remember reading this book once in college and liking it. Glancing through the book last night, I decided that I would enjoy thinking and talking about self-discipline and Japanese culture some more. I will be a learner in the classroom, despite the fact that I will understand the text far better than do the students. I don't remember the book well, and haven't re-read this section closely; I have only glanced at the content and the level of prose difficulty. Because it is a generally respected book, I trust that Ruth Benedict's overall perspective will be rewarding. If I were concerned about "information," I might seek a recent article on Japanese culture. But I am less concerned with the accuracy of her assertions, and more interested in understanding the thoughts of a capable mind. We are learning how to understand a text and a perspective. Most of us will forget the facts anyway. As Einstein says, "Education is what remains after you've forgotten everything you've learned." These students will leave here with vastly different minds. They may or may not learn something about Japanese culture.

Although Benedict's prose is more difficult than that to which the students are accustomed, each paragraph has a few narrative sentences that may be understood easily. Reading this will be challenging and yet not entirely a process of deciphering the text sentence by sentence. I expect that after working on it for a week or two, some students will be understanding some paragraphs as we read them.

With regard to the content, I expect that there will be at least some curiosity about

and/or hostility towards Japanese culture. Thus at the simplest level I will be able to appeal to at least a few students. More important for my purposes, the text deals with two "big" issues which are both endlessly sophisticated and easily personalized: self-discipline and the issue of culture. Self-discipline is the easiest to personalize. The issue of culture will only gradually become evident to them beyond platitudes like "they have a different culture." By "endlessly sophisticated," I mean that they are issues that we can never understand fully. I can sincerely participate in this discussion because I am interested in developing my own understanding of these concepts.

After handing a photocopy of the reading to each student, I sit down. I tell them *"This is a chapter out of a book by Ruth Benedict, a famous anthropologist, about Japanese culture. The book is called The Chrysanthemum and the Sword. Any questions?"*

Silence. Despite the fact that early on they do not have questions, it is crucial to build in the expectation that they might have questions. Actually, I am hoping to be surprised by someone who does have a question. I am fairly certain that most of them have no idea what an anthropologist is. Rather than tell them what it is, or embarrass them at this point by asking them if they know, I will simply allow them the opportunity to ask sincere questions. The goal is to cultivate self-initiated learning, and I am awaiting evidence of interest and initiative. On the other hand, I am not disappointed that they are not asking questions; they are not accustomed to being responsible for getting the ball rolling. I realize that being held responsible is new to them, and I am willing to be patient.

I see that they are still watching me, waiting for me to do something.

*"Does someone want to volunteer to read?"*

Silence. I look around patiently. After perhaps a full minute of silence, a girl begins to read out loud:

### Self-Discipline

The self-disciplines of one culture are always likely to seem irrelevancies to observers from another country. The disciplinary techniques themselves are clear enough, but why go to all the trouble? Why voluntarily hang yourself from hooks, or concentrate on you navel, or never spend your capital? Why concentrate on one of these austerities and demand no control at all over some impulses which to the outsider are truly important and in need of training? When the observer belongs to a country which does not teach technical methods of self-discipline and is set down in the midst of a people who place great reliance upon them, the possibility of misunderstanding is at its height.

In the United States technical and traditional methods of self-discipline are relatively undeveloped. The American assumption is that a man, having sized up what is possible in his personal life, will discipline himself, if that is necessary, to attain a chosen goal. Whether he does or not, depends on his ambition, or his conscience, or his 'instinct of workmanship,' as Veblen called it. He may accept a Stoic regime in order to play on a football team, or give up all relaxations to train himself as a musician, or to make a success of his business. He may eschew evil and frivolity because of his conscience. But in the United States self-discipline itself, as a technical training, is not a thing to learn like arithmetic quite apart from its application in a particular instance. Such techniques, when they do occur in the United States, are taught by certain European cult-leaders or by Swamis who teach inventions made in India. Even the religious self-disciplines of meditation

and prayer, as they were taught and practised by Saint Theresa or Saint John of the Cross, have barely survived in the United States.

The Japanese assumption, however,

*"Excuse me, may I stop you for a moment?"*

"Sure."

*"Does anyone understand what this is saying?"*

Silence. I know that most of the class has no idea what the text is talking about. This prose is way over their heads. I have given them an opportunity to take the initiative. If I don't stop them, they might spend the entire hour reading out loud. Actually, if I felt confident that Kora and her administration trusted the process, I might simply let them read out loud for days until one of them broke it off. But in this context, it's time to start poking.

After another full minute, Jake says

"Something about football and religion. I don't get it."

*"Great. Something about football and religion. Did anybody get anything else?"*

LaDonna says "It talks about India and about prayer. Some saints."

*"Okay, football, religion, India, prayer, and some saints. Did anybody get anything else?"*

Silence. Throughout, I maintain an absolutely matter of fact tone. I do not express a wistfulness that they "get it." I am acting as purely as I am able as a facilitating agent. I am not here to validate their responses; I am here to help guide their learning process. The question is, "Has anyone gathered more information or not?" The question is not, even implicitly, "Gee, I really hope that you guys understand this better."

Pleading on my part will undermine the effort to get them to take responsibility.

*"Should we keep reading it even if we don't understand it?"*

Silence. After a 30 seconds, Jonah says

"Yeah. That way we can get done with it."

*"Do all of you agree with Jonah?"*

Silence.

*"Okay. I guess Jonah wants us to keep reading."*

Silence.

*"Is somebody going to continue reading or not?"*

Jeremiah raises his hand.

*"Do you want to read Jeremiah?"*

"Yeah."

*"Okay. But first I just want to say that you don't need to raise your hand. The idea here is for you guys to take over the class and work together without looking to me as an authority. Groups of adults often manage to work together without raising hands. You guys can too. If we get to the point where everyone is yelling and screaming at each other, maybe we'll have to raise hands. But right now, it doesn't seem like we need to. Do you agree? Am I making sense?"*

I see the first evidence of any kind of alertness on the part of a few students. Because students are often deeply in the habit of taking their learning cues from adults, "you are doing it" is a very important message that will be repeated in various forms for the next several weeks.

Jeremiah, among those who became alert, replies "Yeah."

I am happy. I have just made contact. Jeremiah heard what I had said, and processed it, and liked it. We made real contact. Already I have at least the partial sympathy of one student. The rest are listening with both interest and apprehension.

They don't know what I'm up to. It doesn't look like the usual teacher game. I let Jeremiah continue reading:

The Japanese assumption, however, is that a boy taking his middle-school examinations, or a man playing in a fencing match, or a person merely living the life of an aristocrat, needs a self-training quite apart from learning the specific things that will be required of him when he is tested. No matter what facts he has crammed for his examination, no matter how expert his sword thrusts, no matter how meticulous his punctilio, he needs to lay aside his books and his sword and his public appearances and undergo a special kind of training. Not all Japanese submit to esoteric training, of course, but, even for those who do not, the phraseology and the practice of self-discipline have a recognized place in life. Japanese of all classes judge themselves and others in terms of a whole set of concepts which depend upon their notion of generalized technical self-control and self-governance.

Their concepts of self-discipline can be schematically divided into . . .

"What does 'schematically' mean?" asks Kyle.

Bingo! Now I know that this war is winnable. After having passed perhaps dozens of unfamiliar vocabulary words, someone is already willing to stick their neck out and initiate the process of understanding.

*"Do any of you know what 'schematically' means?"*

Silence.

*"I would say that 'schematically' means . . ." I have to pause and think. It strikes me that this is not an easy work to define casually. I tell them: "Give me a minute to figure out a way to explain this."*

Socratic Practice works in part because the leader frequently models learning. Modeling learning includes exposing uncertainties and doubts. If we want students who are willing to think things through when they are not sure, who are willing to expose their ignorance without embarrassment, it is critical that we model these behaviors regularly. A conventional teacher feels a professional responsibility to "know it all." It is difficult to overestimate the social and institutional pressure behind this view of teaching. At the same time, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of modelling learning in the classroom. I look for every opportunity to expose my learning and thinking processes in the course of classroom conversation.

*"'Schematically' means that you can make a diagram out of it. So 'schematically divided' would mean something like 'you can draw a diagram about how it is divided'. Does that make sense?"*

Kyle nods. When I ask the question "Does that make sense?," I make an effort to take responsibility for making sense, rather than putting the responsibility on the student to understand.

*"Do you think we should look it up in the dictionary, or do you think that my definition is good enough?"*

He mumbles that it is good enough.

The idea, from the beginning, is to put the onus of judgment on them. Even when I "tell" them something, such as the definition I offered, I strive to make it clear that it is up to them to determine what to believe, whether understanding has occurred or not.

Silence again.

*"Should we read on or should we stop and figure out what this is saying?"*

Silence.

*"I think that we should go back and work on what this means before going further. Is that okay with you guys?"*

Silence. At this point I have made it clear that I am willing to let them take the initiative and have given them abundant opportunities to do so. I want to begin working on understanding the text together, so I tell them so. I felt that my question "Should we read on or stop?" was rhetorical: I wanted them to say that we should go back and work on understanding. Rather than continue to ask rhetorical questions, I think it is much healthier to put my agenda on the table and even to assert my authority if necessary. Although the idea is to develop their autonomy, in the interim it may be helpful to take charge. I do so far more reluctantly than do most teachers, however. I see out of the corner of my eye that Kora has been itching to take charge and get something done, but she is willing to trust me and let me do it my way.

*"Okay. Let's begin with 'Self-Discipline.' What does that mean?"*

Silence. Maybe this group will be harder than I thought.

*"Does anyone have any idea what 'self-discipline' means?"* By phrasing the question this way, I hope to make it less threatening; I am not asking them for a formal definition, merely some idea regarding the subject. Even so, still no answer.

Observers often note that leading Socratic Practice requires extreme patience. Yes, in circumstances like this, it does. I recommend that people start with easier groups in order to develop their leadership skills. Once leading Socratic Practice has become intrinsically rewarding, it becomes easier to accept these more difficult situations as merely a necessary part of the process.

This group, as with many groups of students, are not accustomed to taking the initiative to understand, especially in public situations. In a sense, our experience today is a shock treatment. The message they are getting is: yes, he is willing to spend most of the class period waiting for us to say something. Often real movement, real growth, requires that they become frustrated. I am not asking them difficult questions (anyone can answer "Does this makes sense"), but I am asking them to participate openly and genuinely.

*"Does anyone have any idea what 'discipline' means?"*

Silence. This time, I am willing to wait it out. I know that they have some idea of what 'discipline' means.

I enjoy watching them squirm as the minutes pass. Some literally begin to wiggle in their seats. Some look around at their classmates, others keep their eyes averted. I am tired of asking questions. I feel like I've given them abundant opportunities to take off with my help. Now I will wait.

After seven minutes, no one has said anything, and the tension seems to be passing. They are beginning to tune out and wait for the end of class. Some have put their heads down to sleep. Kora is very uncomfortable. I'm uncomfortable. My ploy failed: they were not embarrassed into talking, they simply withdrew. Sometimes this is not fun.

I turn to Jeremiah, my best contact so far. Maybe he'll talk to me. *"So, Jeremiah, how are we doing?"*

*"Not too good."*

I am encouraged by his reply. He is not shrugging me off. He is still a human being willing to talk to me as another human being. I need to engage him in dialogue in order to get something going.

*"Do you think that these guys know what 'discipline' means?"*

"Yeah."

*"Why aren't they saying so?"*

"I don't know."

*"Why aren't you saying so?"*

"Because I know what it means."

Not very satisfying dialogue with Jeremiah. This group is more resistant than I had expected.

*"Okay. Is that true for all of you? Do all of you know what 'discipline' means? Raise your hand if you know what 'discipline' means."*

The entire class raises their hands. How do I get to these guys? They are difficult. Let's try a simple question on which they ought to have some kind of opinion.

*"Is discipline a good thing or a bad thing? Let's go around the room and have everyone give an answer."*

We go around, student by student, and get very little response: "Yes," "No," and "I don't know" in monotones. I am tired and frustrated. The bell rings about half way around, the students leave. I am worried that Kora will consider it a complete disaster. I ask her what she thought, and she says that it was very interesting. She is surprised at how quiet they were. I had warned her that it may be difficult starting out. Happily she doesn't seem too concerned. I tell her we'll try again tomorrow and see what happens.

Progress: Miriam voluntarily read. Individual comments volunteered from Jake, LaDonna, Jonah, Jeremiah, and Kyle.

## Day Two

Again, before the bell rings the students are excitedly talking with each other. The contrast between their energy before class starts and after it begins is astonishing. Two boys are throwing paper; Kora gives them a detention. As she quiets them down after the bell, I see some students settling down to snooze through class. She reminds them that they will get a detention for sleeping in class and they make a half-hearted effort to appear awake. She turns the class over to me.

I ask them to take out their readings.

Several ask "What reading?"

*"The one on 'self-discipline and Japanese culture.' Do you remember?"* Some say yes, others no. A few are pulling out a reading, most are not. I say *"Okay, only those who have a reading will participate today. Everyone with a copy of the reading, pull your desk into the middle of the room. Everyone else, stay on the outside."* Out of a class of thirty-four, seven pull their desks into the middle. None of those who spoke on their own initiative yesterday have their readings today.

Although I had hoped that at least one of those who had shown initiative would be in the group today, it is not necessary to have their participation at this point. I am pleased simply to be working with a smaller group. My strategy today will be to have as much fun as possible with this group. Ideally I will create a situation in which those on the outside will want to talk, will wish that they were on the inside circle. Although eventually we want to get to learn how to work with a text, with this class it will simply be an accomplishment to get free-flowing dialogue going.

I ask, *"What do you guys want to talk about today?"*

Silence.

*"Was this class fun or boring yesterday?"*

Several say "Boring."

*"Okay, great. What can we talk about that would be interesting?"*

Johnson, from the outside circle, shouts out "Sex!"

Addressing only those on the inside, I say *"Someone has suggested that sex would be interesting to talk about. Do you guys agree or not?"*

Some students laugh, others seem embarrassed. I say *"Okay, just to get something started, let's go around, and simply say if you think that it would be interesting to talk about sex or not."* I turn to my left. *"Do you think that it would be interesting to talk about sex or not?"*

"No," Judy says quietly. Because of her, I want to be cautious that we not get into an insensitive conversation. I want to know the basis of her "no" but I do not want to put her on the spot, so we move to the next student.

"Yes," says Kurt with mock enthusiasm.

"Yes," says Manuel non-committally.

"Yes," says Deidre in a whisper.

Tara says excitedly, "I don't think that sixth-graders should do it unless they're really mature. My sister has a boyfriend that she has sex with and he's a jerk. She just does it cause she thinks it's cool. I know a lotta people who do it cause it's cool. I also know a lotta people who do it because it's fun." She giggles for a moment, then continues, "Not me, of course, but I know some of these girls in this room have a lotta fun."

Okay, finally someone really talking. Now, where to go with this? I decide to buy time to think by continuing around the circle.

*"Okay. Thanks, Tara. How about you Rich? Do you think that it would be interesting to talk about sex or not?"*

"Yeah"

*"Sarah?"*

"Yeah"

*"What do you think Kora?"*

"I think that Tara had many interesting things to say."

Great. This is why I love having another adult help out in the early stages. In principle, I would figure out a way to get the conversation going on my own. But it is often easier to have another adult to talk with in these situations. It also comforts me to have the classroom teacher setting the pace in this territory, because on a potentially sensitive issue like this, I would prefer that she initiate risky conversations than me simply because she will be held publicly accountable if parents become angry. In some communities, especially those heavily populated by fundamentalist Christians, I might have avoided following the sex comment altogether. I don't want to offend sensitive parents. At the same time, it is extremely valuable to begin at a level on which the students are sincerely interested. Yes, they are interested in things other than sex, but it is also extremely useful to show them that we are not afraid of discussing anything and that when I ask them what they want to talk about that I am genuinely willing to follow up on it. For the time being, we are building trust and dialogue. We will get to responsible academic labors soon enough.

*"What did you find interesting in what Tara said?"*

"That she said that some people had sex because it was cool to do so, and others did it because it was fun. I wanted to ask Kora, 'How can you tell that some people do it to be cool and other people do it for fun?'"

Thank you, Kora! A great question, regardless of Tara's response. Kora is a

natural at asking questions. Rescues like this are why it is so helpful to have a co-leader in the early stages of working with difficult groups.

Tara isn't helpful, "I just know."

I ask *"Do the rest of you think that Tara can tell if other people are having sex for fun or just to be cool?"* I know that this question will be a winner the moment it occurs to me. As I ask it I can see their passions come to the surface. Twenty students are shouting "No!" Tara starts yelling something in return, they yell back, the room is suddenly awash with passion. Kora and I are both demanding that they be quiet, but I am very pleased. We finally touched a real nerve. It is difficult to silence them, they are so eager to argue with Tara. Her face is red, she is at once aggressive and defensive.

We don't want this chaos all of the time, but in order to cultivate a deep personal commitment to the conversation, it is necessary to connect with their passion. The diagram below illustrates a typical progression in a Socratic Practice classroom:

[NEED IN-THE-TEXT/OUT-OF-THE-TEXT DIAGRAM HERE]

With this classroom, on the first day we began "in the text" by trying to understand the text. We had virtually no participation or interest in this conversation. We then completely left the text and eventually struck gold "out of the text" with Tara's comment. Because the discrepancy between the two conversations is so great with this group, it may take three months of daily practice before we get to the end goal: animated, personalized intellectual conversations about the text.

The end goal is extremely valuable. It represents a changed attitude towards learning and an ability to invest oneself in whatever one is learning. It is the foundation of intrinsically motivated learning, the foundation of lifelong learning, the foundation of a culture of learning. Most observers, having seen first the lifeless conversation about the text and then the wild emotional response to Tara, would find no evidence whatsoever that this class was capable of intrinsic intellectual motivation. Many educators believe that students of this age (and older) are incapable of intellectual dialogue.

But I feel joy at this point; I have made the crucial connection that will allow me to guide them to intellectual dialogue. They have exposed true passion in the course of classroom dialogue. Socratic Practice may be seen as the art of combining our dull conversation on Day 1 with our unruly, but excited, conversation on Day 2.

After we have regained control of the group, I ask *"Why does it matter whether people have sex in order to be cool or in order to have fun?"*

Silence. But for the first time, it is an attentive, thoughtful silence rather than a bored, resistant silence. They are thinking. They are thinking about an issue on which they feel passionate. This is a key experience. The question was designed to connect thought with passion.

Socratic Practice is experiential education. Usually, "experiential education" refers to "doing things," such as wilderness education, apprenticeships, other "hands on" activities. The presumption in our society is that intellectual activity is by its very nature opposed to experience. But the reason that some of us devote a significant portion of our lives to thinking is precisely because, for us, thinking is an experience. It is not an experience for us because we have peculiar tastes. Thinking is an experience when one is thinking about something about which one cares deeply. Thus thinking can be an experience, a personally rewarding experience, for anyone. Because of the tremendous intrinsic rewards of thinking, because of the obvious professional utility associated with

having a capable mind, and because of the unrecognized social utility of living among people who make decisions thoughtfully, I am devoting my life to providing this experience to young people.

Still silence after thirty seconds. I don't want them to become frustrated and give up. To help them out, I offer a suggestive question: *"Is it better to do something because its fun or because its cool?"*

Jake, from the outside circle, says, in a strange combination of hesitation and conviction, "Its better to do something because its fun."

I can tell that he despises people who "go along with the crowd," and yet he is uncomfortable exposing himself in this manner. Although my plan was to restrict the conversation to the inside circle, the classroom atmosphere is so positive that I want to integrate everyone as long as it lasts.

*"Do the rest of you agree?"* No response. *"How many people agree with Jake?"* Ten hands are raised. *"How many people disagree with Jake?"* No hands are raised. *"How many people are uncertain?"* Two hands are raised. Everyone is paying attention. They care both about the question itself and about who is taking what position on the question. The classroom atmosphere is great.

*"So, why is it better to do something because its fun than to do it just because its cool?"*

A pause. Then Peter, from the outside circle, says "If you do stuff just because its cool to do then you're a wus."

*"Is it a good thing or a bad thing to be a wus?"*

Several students respond "Bad," some rolling their eyes.

*"So, Jake, are you a wus?"*

"No way man."

*"Are you better than someone who is a wus?"*

"Yeah"

*"Do the rest of you think that Jake is better than someone who is a wus?"*

Several eyes flash, Samantha speaks up indignantly "No one is better than anyone else and if Jake thinks that he is better than other people then he's an egotistical jerk."

Wonderful indignation! Once they've opened up, any question about their interpersonal pecking order is bound to result in a response. To some extent, Socratic Practice motivates people to think by preying upon many of the incredible contradictions inherent in our society. One of the biggest such contradictions is that between the near-universal belief in equality and the near-universal habit of consciously or subconsciously ranking people. I am sure that Jake, and most of the rest of the class, believe that someone who is not a wus is in some sense better than someone who is a wus. I am also sure that Samantha, and most of the rest of the class, believe that no one is better than anyone else. Moreover, I am not merely manipulating the students: this is a profound political issue on which our society is deeply confused and on which I believe it is important that we, as a society, begin to have honest, open dialogue. Yet among adults, it is an issue that is difficult to discuss openly.

*"So, is Jake right or is Samantha right?"*

"What do you mean?"

*"Is Jake right that it is better not to be a wus than to be a wus, or is Samantha right that no one is better than anyone else?"*

Several people are saying that Jake is right (mostly male) and several others are saying that Samantha is right (mostly female) when in a loud voice I remind them of the rule:

*"One person speaks at a time."*

Silence, then a pause. Carmela, who has previously been silent, says, "I think that in some ways Jake is right and in some ways Samantha is right."

Hurrah Carmela! From her intensity and focus, I can tell that here is a person who is thinking hard. Moreover, here is a class that is listening to her carefully.

*"Can you explain what you mean?"*

"No"

*"Does anyone feel as though they understand what Carmela means?"*

Several nod their heads.

*"Can anyone explain what she is talking about?"*

Pause. I want to reassure them, encourage their progress, so I say *"Things like this are really difficult to explain. It's okay if you need to think about it for awhile."*

Jake says "It's not that I think I'm better than anyone else, it's just that no one wants to be a wus."

*"So it's good not to be a wus, but not being a wus doesn't make you better than a wus?"*

"Huh?"

*"Did my question make sense to anyone?"* In my tone, I take responsibility for being unclear. The expectation I try to set is not "can you get the right answer" but "Am I making sense at all?"

Mirabel, who has not previously spoken, replies "I think I kinda understood."

*"Do you want to try to explain it to them?"*

"No."

*"Okay. I'll try again. I'm a little bit confused and I was just asking a question which might clarify my confusion. So I'll try to say it slowly and carefully and see if I can make sense to anyone. Okay: My understanding of what Jake is saying is that, on the one hand, it is bad to be a wus. Right?"*

"Right"

*"And on the other hand, that even though it is bad to be a wus, if, like Jake, you are not a wus, you are still not better than a wus. Right?"*

With more hesitation, a few students reply, "Right."

*"So, if I'm a wus, and Jake is not a wus, I am just as good a person as Jake. Right?"*

Again, hesitation, "Right."

*"And because I am just as good a person as Jake, I will be treated with as much respect as Jake, right?"*

Bo says sarcastically, "Yeah, right. If you're a wus and I see you in the hallway, I'm gonna kick your butt."

LaDonna says with a malicious little smile, "So Mr. Strong, are you a wus?"

*"I don't know. You tell me. Does anyone in here think I'm a wus?"*

Several boys giggle. No one says anything.

I turn to LaDonna *"What do you think?"*

"I don't know."

*"Are you a wus?"*

"I don't know."

We're almost out of time. I want to wrap things up. I also want to leave this conversation while I'm still on top. *"You guys started off by saying that you wanted to talk about sex. What does all this have to do with sex?"*

Germaine pipes up "Wuses don't have sex." These guys are in a rascally mood. But they are still engaged big time.

*"Okay, Germaine thinks that wuses don't have sex. As I recall, this all started off with Tara saying that some people had sex in order to have fun and other people did it in order to be*

*cool. And then Jake said that only wuses did things in order to be cool. Does that sound right?* This is a bit dull, but I'm ready to defuse the conversation in order to get the class to focus on debriefing. I figure I'm better off not rewarding Germaine's comment by engaging it at this point.

"Yeah."

*"Does anyone have anything else to say before we debrief?"*

Silence.

*"Okay. I want to go around the room and have everyone say what the best thing about class was today and what the worst thing about class was today. Okay? Jayne, you go first."*

As we go around, students mention mostly particular statements or moments or topics as especially fun or especially offensive. Some say "It was all fun." Others say "Yeah, we got out of school." Just before the bell rings, when we are half way around the circle, I ask the class as a whole, *"Was today better or worse than yesterday?"* The entire class sings out "Better."

*"Okay. See you tomorrow."*

After they leave, I ask Kora if that was acceptable. She says that it was.

I am pleased with the day. I feel good about tomorrow.

Progress: Volunteered comments from Johnson, Tara, Jake, Peter, Samantha, Carmela, Mirabel, LaDonna, and Germaine. Jake is the only one to say something both days. A very diverse group of speakers; that's good. Many diverse voices will make the process more interesting earlier on. Although due to their lack of academic discipline and focus this appears to be a difficult group (I see why Kora was skeptical), in fact it will not be a particularly difficult group. There is a roomful of passionate people eager to talk in this classroom; that is all I need to make progress.

One of the reasons that I am optimistic about the potential for Socratic Practice to transform the world is that it uses the untapped reservoir of verbal energy inherent in children (and all human beings). It takes intelligence, skill, and experience, to do what I'm doing in this classroom. But once we begin to release that verbal energy in the direction of productive dialogue, we will have a flood of intellectual energy. When education resists the desire of children to talk, or channels the talk narrowly, one is working against one of the most powerful of human impulses. If one can channel their desire to talk into pathways that will provide them with lifelong benefit, the potential for growth is unlimited. The goal of my leadership is to create a culture of learning in this classroom in which it will be as natural for them to talk about ideas as it presently is for them to talk about what they did on Saturday night with their friends.

### Day Three

So what do I do with them today? Day 1 in the text, dead as a doorknob, day 2 out of the text, lively and fun. I'll try to connect self-discipline with sex, day 1 with day 2, and see if we can maintain some liveliness as we get slightly closer to the text.

Soon it would be good to split into two groups, let Kora take one and me take one, but it is still premature. I need to get the class to the point where they are at least minimally moving through the text before I leave Kora alone.

*"How many of you brought your readings today?"*

Six students raise their hand. Of the six, four brought the reading yesterday, Rich and Tara did not. Kurt is absent. Today Samantha and Germaine brought their readings. This pleases me immensely; yesterday's active participants show some

academic initiative in a class in which the apparent norm is to do nothing (at least, to do nothing unless coercion is involved.)

*"Yesterday I allowed people who did not bring their reading to participate in the discussion. Today I will not. It is your responsibility to bring your reading to class every day until we finish working through the essay. Okay?"*

Silence.

*"Everyone with a reading come to the inside circle. Everyone on the outside circle should clear their desks except for a paper and pencil. You are responsible for writing your thoughts down. If there is anything that you would like to say, write it down. You may write about whatever we are talking about or any related topic. Any questions?"*

Jake says "This isn't fair. Yesterday you let us talk without bringing our paper so I just figured that the paper didn't matter anymore so that's why I didn't bring mine."

I feel that Jake has a point. Even more importantly, Jake seems to feel that he has a point. *"Do you guys agree with Jake that this isn't fair?"*

John asks "What isn't fair?"

*"Jake claims that it is unfair for me to force those who did not bring their papers to sit outside and write today because yesterday those who did not bring their papers were allowed to speak. Is that a fair summary of your argument Jake?"*

Jake "Yeah."

*"Does the issue make sense John?"*

"Sort of I guess."

*"How many people understand Jake's argument?"* It is helpful to develop an awareness that students are already, in the course of their daily life, making arguments. Instead of teaching students something that they don't know ("Our lesson today will be how to make an argument"), a process which is implicitly condescending, I acknowledge existing student understanding by respecting Jake's existing ability. He wasn't thinking of himself as "making an argument," but that is what he was doing.

Eight people raise their hands. *"Do you guys think that we should explain it to everyone else or not?"*

Silence. Sometimes this is tedious and frustrating. Sometimes it takes weeks, or even months, before I can ask a straightforward question and get a straightforward answer. On the other hand, I think: "It is important to do this activity precisely because such simple tasks are so extraordinary." I think of the workplace, and of the bad opinion many employers have of teenagers, and I think "it is crucial that these kids get to the point where they can provide simple, clear answers to straightforward questions regardless of context." Most students are completely unaccustomed to having an adult ask for their judgment.

*"Jason, do you think that we should explain Jake's argument so that the rest of the class can understand it, or not?"*

"I don't know."

*"Patrice, what do you think?"*

"I don't know."

*"Jillian, what do you think?"*

"I don't know."

*"LaDonna, what do you think?"*

"I say to hell with 'em. If they don't know what the hell is goin' on, they can just sit there and eat they shorts as far as I'm concerned."

"Well fuck you, too, LaDonna" replies John.

*"Outta here, John. We can't allow that."* John goes to the principal's office. I wait

until he's gone. There is a certain amount of tension in the room; almost always is the first time authority is used in this context. Am I a friend talking to them or am I another teacher, another enforcer?

*"LaDonna, watch your language. Jake, does it seem fair to you that I threw out John but not LaDonna, or do you think I should throw out LaDonna, too?"*

"Doesn't matter to me."

*"How many of you think that it was fair that I sent John out but not LaDonna?"* I count eighteen hands.

*"How many think that I should also have sent LaDonna out?"*

I count seven hands.

*"How many think that I should have sent neither of them out?"*

Two hands.

Okay. Conflict distracts me. Where am I? What's going on? It always makes sense to ask the students what to do when you're lost. It both models honest ignorance and it brings them into the process of working together in a completely authentic way. Realistically, beginning leaders may be lost quite often.

*"Okay. I'm lost. What were we talking about before we became distracted?"*

Samantha says, "LaDonna just said that we should ignore people who don't know what's going on."

*"Oh right, because we were talking about Jake's argument that it was unfair to make people sit out because they didn't bring their papers. Jake, just because I want to get on with things, what if I let anyone who really wants to join the inside circle today even if they didn't bring their paper. Is that okay?"*

"Sure."

*"Okay, if you want to be in the inside circle, go ahead."*

No one moves.

*"Jake, do you mean that you spent all that time arguing even though you didn't want to be in the inside circle?"*

Jake is a little embarrassed, feeling put on the spot. He's not sure what to do. He mumbles "I don't know." There is a silence.

Jeremiah says "I wanna be in." He pulls his desk forward. LaDonna, Mirabel, and Carmela all push their desks forward as well. This is great. Four students showing initiative to be part of class. Only twenty-five minutes of class left, but that's okay. We've made real progress.

*"Okay. In the future, to clarify policy, only those who bring their paper will be allowed into the discussion. Everyone else is to write. For the time being, everyone in the inside circle automatically gets class participation credit. Everyone on the outside has to turn in a page in order to get class participation credit. Bring your paper to class unless you specifically have been asked not to do so. Is that clear?"*

They nod their heads. Most seem to be paying attention.

*"Everyone on the outside write. You are not allowed in the discussion."*

Turning my attention entirely to the inside circle, I ask, *"So. Monday we talked about self-discipline. Tuesday we talked about sex. Is there any connection between sex and self-discipline?"*

Johnson shouts out "Oh man, I need a lotta self-discipline to fuck."

*"Outta here Johnson."* He goes. Note that on Monday no one admitted to knowing what self-discipline was.

*"Is there any connection between sex and self-discipline?"*

LaDonna says "Yeah, there's a connection. Ya gotta have discipline so ya don't get

pregnant."

"Anything else?"

Silence.

"So, what do you mean, LaDonna? Exactly how does having self-discipline prevent you from becoming pregnant?"

"Well, all them guys just wanna do it to ya, but if you say no then you don't get pregnant."

"Do the rest of you agree that self-discipline helps to keep you from getting pregnant?"

Jeremiah says, smiling, "It don't keep me from getting pregnant."

I smile in return. "Okay. So, does having self-discipline help keep girls from getting pregnant?"

The inside circle all says yes. I am relaxing. I have a small group of focussed students ready to work on the concept from the text. Finally, we are ready to start. I decide to return the focus to self-discipline itself.

"On a scale of 1 to 10, how important would you say self-discipline is in your life?"

I go around the circle. I want to hear something from each student.

Jeremiah says "2"

Judy says "8"

Manuel says "9"

Deidre says "7"

Sarah says "8"

Samantha says "0"

Carmela says "1"

Germaine says "0"

LaDonna says "6"

Mirabel says "8"

"For those who rated it '5' or higher, why is self-discipline important to you?" This time I ask the group in general.

Manuel says "Discipline is important to me in every way man. Everything I do is about discipline. I shoulda said 10."

LaDonna says "It's not that it's that important, it just kinda is, especially cause I don't wanna get pregnant."

"So, self-discipline is important to LaDonna because she doesn't want to get pregnant. Although I do understand that self-discipline is important to you, Manuel, I still don't understand exactly why it is so important to you. Could you explain a bit more?"

"Hey man, if you don't understand me you never will. I told you the truth, man, and that's it."

Okay. Manuel's defensiveness caught me by surprise. What should I do now? Rule of thumb: whenever lost, read a paragraph from the text.

"Okay. Let's read the first paragraph of this essay again and see if we can understand it any better now that we've talked about self-discipline for awhile. Volunteer reader?"

Miribel reads:

## Self-Discipline

The self-disciplines of one culture are always likely to seem irrelevancies to observers from another country. The disciplinary techniques themselves are clear

enough, but why go to all the trouble? Why voluntarily hang yourself from hooks, or concentrate on you navel, or never spend your capital? Why concentrate on one of these austerities and demand no control at all over some impulses which to the outsider are truly important and in need of training? When the observer belongs to a country which does not teach technical methods of self-discipline and is set down in the midst of a people who place great reliance upon them, the possibility of misunderstanding is at its height.

*"Okay. I suggest that we work through this sentence by sentence in order to understand it. Samantha, could you read the first sentence?"*

The self-disciplines of one culture are always likely to seem irrelevancies to observers from another country.

*"Does anyone here know what a culture is?"*

No one seems to know. This text is very difficult for this group. I wonder if perhaps this is too difficult to work. While I've got some positive energy in the group, I don't want to wear them down. I glance at the sentence. They won't know what "irrelevancies" means either. I grasp the familiar part:

*"What does it mean to observe another country?"*

Samantha says "That means to look at it from a spaceship, or like a spy satellite."

On the bright side, she knows what "observe" means. I'm looking for some student understanding that I can work with, with which I can help them piece together larger pieces of meaning. When the pieces with which to work are as small as they seem to be here, the task of creating meaning collectively becomes too painstakingly tedious. It would take us an hour of real labor to figure out this sentence.

*"Great. Samantha says that 'to observe another country' means to look down on it from space and to see it. Is that what you said Samantha?"*

"Yeah."

I decide to help out a little. *"Have you guys ever observed the customs of another country? You know, the different ways that different people do things?"*

Jeremiah says "Yeah, I watched this show on National Geographic where people eat bugs."

*"Great. That's an example of a different culture. In our culture we don't eat bugs (at least most of us don't), but in some other cultures they do eat bugs. Now do you guys know what a different culture is?"*

They do. I am relieved.

*"Do you guys think that the Japanese have a different culture?"*

They do.

*"How do you think that Japanese culture is different from ours?"*

Jeremiah says "Those scumbags are taking our jobs away, that's how they're different." Everyone bursts out talking at once. I allow their verbal frenzy to continue for a few minutes. Their conversation is not dialogue, but it is authentic. There will be time enough for them to learn how to listen to each other later. For now, I'm pleased to have overcome their conviction that they could not be themselves in the classroom. The energy in the classroom is now much as it is in the hallway between classes, or minutes in the classroom before educational activities begin. I feel that until I perceive the same personal intensity from students in the classroom as I perceive from them in their real social lives with other students, learning will not begin. One can try to get them to go

through the motions of learning, and some of them will excel at going through the motions, but until their souls participate in the life of the classroom, very little will stick. Moments like this are the sine qua non of the learning process as I understand it.

*"Okay, one at a time, and I'm talking."* They quiet down. *"Since we're almost out of time, it's time to de-brief. What was the best thing about class today and the worst thing:"*

Jeremiah says "Talking about the Japanese. Nothing bad."

Judy says "It was okay. Johnson was disgusting."

Manuel says "No comment."

Deidre says "It was okay I guess. Kinda boring."

Sarah says "Totally boring. I was sleeping."

Samantha says "I liked it."

Carmela says "It was okay."

Germaine says "Totally boring."

LaDonna says "I thought it was good. Ya'll were just lazy. If ya sit up and pay attention maybe ya'd get somethin outta it."

Mirabel says "It was okay. I like what LaDonna said."

*"Okay. See ya tomorrow. People on the outside, give your papers to Ms. Janes."*

Great de-briefing. Everyone seemed fairly honest. LaDonna is already putting pressure on peers to contribute, Mirabel supports LaDonna. If peer pressure is used to encourage others to contribute, wonderful things will happen. Kora immediately sees the importance of what LaDonna did. Although we aren't getting anywhere with the text, Kora is aware that we are making tremendous progress. The students are engaging in dialogue with an adult in a manner completely unprecedented for this group. I am pleased, both with the day and with Kora's appreciation of it. We agree that she is not yet ready to go off on her own.

Progress: Comments volunteered by Jake, LaDonna, Samantha, Jeremiah, and Manuel. Johnson's outburst doesn't count. Miriam volunteered to read. Miriam and Judy gave more than the minimum during de-briefing. It seemed like there was some real engagement today, especially from LaDonna and Jeremiah. Samantha is tracking pretty well, too. I'm still worried about the text. Tomorrow I may ask them if it is too difficult. We should work through the first paragraph even if we choose not to finish the essay.