

Running Head: VIDEO TEACHING EPISODE

Video Teaching Episode Paper

Kimberley Daly

George Mason University

### Introduction

For this paper, we have been asked to select a lesson to videotape and reflect upon. As my senior IB English classes were nearing their actual examinations which take place 5 May and 12 May, this presented a slight problem for me as I was not teaching any new material but only reviewing with my seniors previously learned material in preparation for their exams. Nonetheless, since I had the assignment to do, I decided that the best activity to use for this would be a Socratic Seminar. I could have my students still practice questions for Paper 2 of the IB English examination and use the activity for the assignment I had to do. A Socratic Seminar is also a format that my students were familiar with so asking them to work in this manner was not asking them to do something so unusual during examination preparation time when they are being pulled in many different directions by many different people.

### Purpose

For this video teaching learning episode, I decided that my purpose would be to evaluate how effectively I have taught my students to conduct discourse. For the students, however, I would be evaluating how effectively they could work with their Paper 2 texts. It is important that for this exercise, my purpose and theirs needs to be different as I am not taking the IB English examination immediately and they are. For someone who does not know what Paper 2 is, a brief explanation is the following: It is an essay of thematic analysis based on two texts studied this spring. Students in my class may *only* choose from *Death and the Maiden* by Dorfman, *Incident at Vichy* by Miller, *A Man for All Seasons* by Bolt and *Oleanna* by Mamet to answer a question. If a student only uses one text or uses an illegal text there are mandatory deductions. Students are graded according to their response to the question, knowledge of the works, analysis of literary features, organization, and use of language.

In evaluating my purpose, I will be looking towards what I can do to improve my teaching methods for next year. Unfortunately, as students take IB examinations in our school, instruction in our building greatly changes and many senior classes have dramatic attendance drops. Many teachers, including myself, assign a final cumulative project instead of conducting regular classes because there are not enough students present each day to conduct regular classes. The IB and then SOL examination schedule make having regular classes difficult for nearly three weeks.

### The Socratic Seminar

Students in my classes are familiar with my Socratic Seminars. By the time we got to this seminar, my students had participated in seven other seminars this year in addition to other class discussions, both formal and informal. The rubric used to grade both the seminar participants and the evaluators was determined by the class prior to the first Socratic Seminar through a class decision-making process involving putting several rubric possibilities on Blackboard for all students (80 in total) in IB English 2 to comment on and make changes and then discussing those in class before coming to consensus about which rubric was better to use.

For each seminar we have had with the exception of the first, I have added some kind of “curve ball” for the students. These twists are usually something that I either see as an issue or need the students to work on at the given time in our calendar - perhaps oral commentaries are coming and I need those particularly silent students to speak more or maybe I want students to break out of their comfort zones and undertake some research so I am going to give them a question from the other group. For this seminar, I was particularly hard about the questions in that they had to be written as if they could possibly show up on the IB English Paper 2 examination. I also put an embargo on any topic or theme that we had previously covered in class so students had to think of

new territory that could work through with their texts. Since questions are also formatted with quotations as a lead-in, students were encouraged to create questions in this format as well.

### Differentiation

Because all students have a goal of trying to succeed on the IB English exam, which means to them attaining at least a score of 4, I do not really differentiate in my approaches. In one area of the IB English curriculum, the World Literature Assessment, I believe IB actually takes care of this in that it allows students to differentiate for themselves and choose the assignment that they will be the most successful on. One of my current students does have a 504 Plan but it does not have any academic accommodations. One weakness that I do see in a few students however, is either unwillingness or an inability to participate orally in class discussions. Two students in particular come to mind and one was in the class that I used for this episode.

Ben is generally a quiet student and probably would not have taken IB English on his own. He struggled in IB English 1 and his parents decided that he would take IB English 2. He is only one of three students I assigned a predicted grade of 3. I have met with Ben, his parents, and his guidance counselor on two occasions to discuss his lack of drive and even to discuss if he is motivated to graduate since English is a required course. He is polite at all times. In class, he brings his materials, does some assignments but never participates unless called upon. He is particularly friendly with two other boys in the class and when I put groups together, I will often put Ben with at least one of those two boys in the hope that this will stimulate him. Ben can write the commentary exam but I am dubious of his ability to artfully construct a Paper 2 essay as I doubt he has read all of the texts thoroughly despite his parents purchasing the books from me at our last meeting. The last time I saw the books the spines on two had not even been cracked.

Over the course of the year, I have been differentiating not for Ben specifically, but for those learners who do not like to speak. In a way, I have been sneakily coming up with ways to provide assessment for those students (although the whole class is also getting assessed) because of those students who do not speak. After the first Socratic Seminars, when those who did not speak fell short on the rubric the classes had agreed upon, I started writing into the Socratic Seminar handouts that I would collect preparation notes. I had not done this on some seminars. On seminars when I did not collect notes, I asked my silent students for prep notes individually. Students like Ben got used to handing them in. Sometimes they were complete and sometimes they were short but they at least provided me with another piece of the puzzle and allowed me to ascertain whether or not the students had a clear understanding of the topic being discussed. In this particular seminar, the differentiation has evolved to the use of a Socratic Seminar leader, a student leader who guides the entire discussion and has my express permission to call on those silent students and ask them point blank what they think about a question or an idea that has been raised. During the last three seminars, we had been using an informal leader – groups had selected someone to keep time and order but no one actually would call out those who were silent even though the students kept writing on evaluations that someone should be allowed to do this. Because the students kept writing it, I finally gave in on this final seminar. Unfortunately, Ben, the student in the class that I am evaluating for this video teaching episode, happened to be in the evaluation group and even when I tried to prompt him to speak declined this time with a shake of his head. In order to make it fair for all my students, I had a colleague select a random student in each class to determine which group would be the participating group and the evaluation group. My colleague did not know which students were in each group.

## Evidence of Learning

Overall, the Socratic Seminar went well and I was pleased at how the students were able to use three of their four spring texts. Their fourth text, *Oleanna*, had been due that day and was not actually required to be included in the seminar although I did ask about it during the taped evaluation. None of the students in the group had prepared any answers which might apply to *Oleanna*, but I did mention to the students on tape that at least a couple of the questions that they had created would have been suitable questions to pursue for that text. As the objective of Paper 2 is to have students critically evaluate two texts in light of thematic exam questions, the students in the group completing the Socratic Seminar did come across as proficient in that regard. The questions (a copy is provided with this paper) also addressed literary and dramatic features as are in line with the drama section of the Paper 2 IB English HL examination and the students were good at providing specific examples from multiple texts to make their points.

One thing that was different with this seminar was the evaluation. This was done on tape. In the past, I have had my students write their evaluations, including their connections to the IB Learner Profile. Because of this assignment, however, the overall evaluation was done on videotape. During the evaluation, I not only asked how the students thought the seminar went but inquired about the use of the seminar leader. I was curious because this seminar was the first time we had had a formal leader and I had given permission for the leader to specifically direct questions at participants by name. In addition, during this seminar, one of the students, Grady, had put forth a rather controversial point about one of the books and Lauren, the seminar leader, had gone after him, pushing him to defend his point much the same way I would in class. The idea itself was definitely a risk for Grady in the first place and Lauren and Grady both talked about their experiences during the evaluation. Grady said that he felt comfortable taking the risk in this class at

this point in time and Lauren said she now understood what I must feel like sometimes when I hear things that I want to jump in on but am constrained by my role at that moment or time concerns. It was interesting to hear students acknowledge those things. Grady and others noted that they feel much more comfortable in discussion settings now than at the beginning of the year because of the community environment in the classroom. When I asked about the Learner Profile (as the students know I always do and this has become a friendly source of laughter in the class now that they are winding down their IB education), they noted that they worked on the skills of Knowledgeable as well as Inquirers. Grady also noted he was a Risk-Taker, rightfully so given his experience during the seminar.

### Barriers to Learning and Teaching Implications

Obviously, the main barrier to having a good experience with a Socratic Seminar in the format that I have it set up is a lack of preparation. Simply, students who are not prepared for the seminar do not get the most they can out of the seminar and this is the reason I had started to collect the preparation notes in the first place. By me collecting the notes, I am telling the students that this is important since this is being considered part of their grade. When we discussed and decided on the rubric at the beginning of the year, it was a strong feeling in the four classes that if they were going to do work to prepare for the seminar, then they should be rewarded/graded for their efforts. The argument of the students was that their time should count for something. Students who are absent on the day of a Socratic Seminar must turn in written responses for both groups' questions on the first day of return in order to make up for the absence as they generally are not getting the benefit of participating in a seminar and are not evaluating a seminar either.

The teaching implications of Socratic Seminars depend at what point in the year they are completed. In addition to ascertaining mastery of material, I can also assess oral communication

skills and readiness for the oral commentary. This would be more important to me from November to January. After February, it would be more important for me to assess not only mastery of a text but a student's ability to look for subtle details within a work as the Paper 2 examination requires students to recall subtle detail without the aid of a text in front of them. As the year progresses, the depth of the questions I require from the students should get more advanced as the students will have to work with multiple texts and make connections to dramatic features, history, and other themes.

One proposal made during the evaluation was to allow participants a specific period of time to state their opinion on each question before beginning discussion, suggesting that it may cut down on repetitiveness. This suggestion was made by Kyle. I asked Kyle how he might do this with multiple questions and think I will consider the idea for future seminars, just as I had considered the students' suggestions for the more formal seminar leader who *could* call on the silent students.

#### Reflection on the Video Teaching Episode

As stated earlier, my purpose was to consider how effectively I have taught my students to conduct discourse. Watching the video teaching episode, I noticed a couple of things. First, my students have gotten to a point where they know what I expect of them very well and work hard to please me. It was interesting to see them scramble at times to speak. Second, they are comfortable with each other and respect each other as learners. Even when they disagree with each other as Kyle and Amber did at one point, they were still courteous to each other and listened to each other's point of view. Third, my students have the ability to make connections between what they read and the outside world. They took the associated history of the works we read and applied them to the lessons of the plays. In addition, in other class activities, they brought in other events that could connect to the works.

### Conclusion

So, the question remains if I think I was effective in teaching my students to conduct discourse. In this case, I believe I was. However, I think in order for students to conduct discourse effectively certain conditions must be met. Firstly, teaching students to conduct discourse takes time and is not something that students learn overnight. One must put in the effort to scaffold discussion activities so that the students get comfortable with each other and with you. Second, one needs to create a safe environment for students to conduct discourse. If Grady had felt that he would be chastised for his ideas or would be metaphorically pushed off the ledge he would not have put his ideas out there. Third, students need to feel that they are in control of their discourse. By discussing a rubric and taking their suggestions seriously, I think I created a climate where there was a community conducive to my students learning to conduct effective discourse and have no doubt that they will be able to continue honing their skills in their college classes next year.

### References

Wells, G. (Ed.). (2001). *Action, talk, and text: learning and teaching through inquiry*. New York: Teachers College Press.