

**PROCESS: Deep Understanding & Critical Thinking Continued**

**Bring on the Rigor!**

There are various taxonomies available that outline different levels of cognitive complexity or high order thinking. But what does high order thinking look like? What does it sounds like? And how do you make it accessible for ELLs? Take another look at your **Bloom's Taxonomy and Webb's Depth of Knowledge chart**.

While you certainly understand that there are appropriate levels of cognition for each task, your goal is to encourage each student to stretch him or herself to their individual potential. If you are in the business of developing future leaders who can design solutions to problems and create new innovation, then you must teach them how to think critically. Such taxonomies as Bloom's and Webbs' give you a framework and concrete direction for ensuring high order thinking. By constantly asking ourselves, "At what level of cognitive complexity am I asking my students to perform?" you become more mindful of the activities that you design.

Try it on for size. Think about the activities that you identified in the last unit that were supported by technology of your choice. What level of cognitive complexity are you asking of students for each? Again, by no means are you saying that it is a terrible thing to ask students to think on the recall/comprehension level. In fact, in some cases, this is necessary. For example, that student who you identified who needs to build background regarding Florida wildlife is going to need to fill in the gaps by identifying, recognizing, and comprehending the different types of wild life before he can move on to deeper levels of exploration with them. The question is, once you build that background, where do you go from there? What is your ultimate goal? How will you encourage him to think critically and creatively about his newfound content? Have you set your goals high?

One concrete way to promote high order thinking is through the questioning techniques. These could be questions that you design or questions that students design. **Click here** 7\_HOT Questions for a list of question stems at each level of cognitive complexity. Now think again about your identified objectives. What are some questions that would promote high order thinking and help your students reach your goals?

You might be thinking, how can a beginner English learner understand these complex questions? And you are right. If you want students to be able to think about and respond to

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these high order questions, they have to first understand them. Remember, L1 (first language) support is one of your many strategies. This might be an appropriate time to translate question stems into students' L1. Heritage language dictionaries could be used. Also, online translators might be appropriate. **PARENT TIP:** There are question stems designed to address each of the FCAT Reading benchmarks and have been translated into Broward County's three most predominant languages:

- **Spanish**
- **Haitian Creole**
- **Portuguese**

The idea here is that you use first language supports so that ELLs understand what is being asked of them. From here, you scaffold that understanding to and through English.

### **Reflective Journal**

Discussion is a powerful way to promote high order thinking and involve all of your students in collegial conversation that builds background and deep understanding. Before you go further into this practice consider the following questions:

#### **Have you ever thought any of the following; or do they apply to you?**

1. I don't have time to spend just on talking; I've got my curriculum to cover.
2. I do let my students talk; I call on them often to answer critical thinking questions.
3. I have a "correct" answer in mind when I ask a question.
4. My kids just shout out and talk over each other when we try to have a discussion.
5. I'm afraid to give control of the class over to my students.
6. I don't understand how just talking is teaching.
7. What is the point of just letting the kids talk?
8. Administration wants to see results on standardized tests. How does this help achieve test results?
9. I worry about attempting new things in my classroom.
10. My desks are permanently arranged in rows.

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Discussion and inquiry is the essential component missing from so many classrooms. When teachers bemoan the state of children's ability to think, is it any wonder really when you offer them so few opportunities to *learn how to do it*? Passively listening to a teacher is not *thinking*. But attempting to comment on a story read in class, or by developing an original question about the story by oneself is where true learning begins.

### **Socratic Seminars**

Socratic Seminars are one form of structured discussion that promotes the involvement of all learners from all different backgrounds and educational experiences. Students who have never been exposed to an American classroom or any formal educational setting, are certainly capable of sitting in a Socratic Seminar, listening and contributing their thoughts. Of course, depending on the class climate and stage of language development, students will be more or less inclined to share through encouragement and patience. Remember, learning environment is everything! ☺

### **What is Socratic Seminar?** And how do I try it in my classroom?

The Socratic Seminar method of teaching (or Socratic Circles, Socratic Method etc.) is based on Socrates' theory that it is more important to enable students to *think for themselves* than to merely fill their heads with "right" answers. Therefore, he regularly engaged his pupils in dialogue by responding to their questions with questions, instead of answers. This process encourages divergent thinking rather than convergent.

Students are given opportunities to examine a common piece of text, whether it is in the form of a novel, poem, art print, or piece of music. After reading or listening to a common text, students pose open-ended questions to one another. Desks are arranged in a circle; this is key. Students discuss with each other; they do not "answer the teacher's questions."

Open-ended questions allow students to think critically, analyze multiple meanings in text, and express ideas with clarity and confidence. After all, a certain degree of emotional safety is felt by participants when they understand that this format is based on dialogue and not discussion/debate. They soon understand there is not ONE right answer, and they are free to make suggestions and comments to add to the discussion.

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Dialogue is *exploratory* and involves the suspension of biases and prejudices. Discussion/debate is a transfer of information designed to win an argument and bring closure. Americans tend to be great at discussion/debate. The question is, do you dialogue well? Once teachers and students learn to dialogue, they find that the ability to ask meaningful questions that stimulate thoughtful interchanges of ideas is more important than "the answer."

Participants in a Socratic Seminar respond to one another with respect by carefully listening instead of interrupting. Students are encouraged to paraphrase essential elements of another's ideas before responding, either in support of or in disagreement. Members of the dialogue look each other in the eyes and use each other's name. This simple act of socialization reinforces appropriate behaviors and promotes team building. It is important to consider that maintaining eye contact is indeed a cultural behavior. Some students of Haitian decent, for example, are taught not to look adults in the eyes as it can be considered disrespectful. They are taught, instead, to look down when being addressed by an adult as a show of respect. In such cases, your understanding and gentle yet explicit guidance is necessary.

What does it look like? Let's view a few examples:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxZMGK6IdEs&feature=related>

Secondary students discuss the *Catcher in the Rye*

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x\\_dTxBgVN9E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_dTxBgVN9E)

Elementary students discuss the government.

So, as a teacher, how do you initiate Socratic Seminars—just announcing, "Let's put our desks in a circle and have a discussion!" is NOT the best idea! Tell your students a little about the man, Socrates <http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/socr.htm>, and how you will be doing a new form of discussion, and be sure students understand your expectations:

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1. The goal is to have a discussion, exploring lots of ideas and not to have a debate.
2. One student speaks at a time.
3. All students listen actively.
4. Students address and answer each other, not the teacher.
5. Students use supportive language, never belittling or berating peers.
6. Students do not raise hands; just take turns speaking one at a time.
7. Come prepared with questions on the text/poem/story (as per teachers' directions).

**Resources for Socratic Seminars**

<http://www.wcs.edu/fhs/StaffDevelopment/socraticseminars.htm>

<http://www.centralischool.ca/~bestpractice/socratic/index.html>

<http://www.pwcs.edu/curriculum/sol/socratic.htm>