

## Student-Run Socratic Seminars

(Originally titled “Spinning the Web”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, instructional coach Alexis Wiggins describes how her classroom approach was radically altered when she taught English at a high school whose rubric for Socratic seminars included this clause: “Because this is a team effort, there will be a team grade. *The whole class will get the same grade.*” Loquacious students had a powerful incentive to dial back, shy students needed to speak up, and all students had to learn to facilitate broad participation by asking good questions and really listening. “This is a shift in thinking about learning and assessment for many students,” says Wiggins, “but I think it targets some major gaps in how we educate students to become ethical, collaborative thinkers and problem solvers.”

Wiggins found this approach so effective that she developed a variation that she calls Spider Web Discussion. First, she explains the process to students, hands out copies of the discussion rubric, says how much time they have, and spells out the goals for the discussion (which is usually on a text they read the night before). For example, here are the criteria for an English class to earn an A:

- *Everyone* participates in a meaningful and substantive way, more or less equally.
- There is a sense of balance and order, focusing on one speaker and one idea at a time.
- The discussion is lively and the pace is neither hyper nor boring.
- Students back up what they say with examples and quotes from their journals and/or the text.
- At least one literary feature, element of writing style, and class vocabulary word is discussed correctly.

For other sample rubrics, see <http://bit.ly/15LWXTl>.

During the discussion, Wiggins sits outside the circle with a map of the class and keeps track of the “web” of talk by drawing lines across the circle as students respond to one another. She also codes what’s going on – interruptions, citing the text, insightful contributions, thoughtful questions – and notes student weaknesses for individual chats afterward. For example, she spoke to a girl whose comments were often superficial and urged her to use her journal to develop deeper insights about the reading. “Using this kind of data to help students correct errors in thinking and understanding *before* the big test or paper was one of the most powerful outcomes of my coding system,” says Wiggins.

One of the key features of her approach is that students run the discussion. From the beginning, Wiggins insists that they ask the questions, redirect the conversation when it’s getting off track, correct misunderstandings, and ensure that the tone is civil. At first, things are awkward as students adjust to an unusually laid-back teacher, but there’s a steep learning curve. After each discussion, students debrief and assess themselves on the rubric. They’re usually right on target, says Wiggins, providing useful data for improving future discussions. “Students are far

better referees and masters of knowledge than we usually give them credit for,” she says. “By the middle of the year, they do it very well, and I take great pleasure in seeing how irrelevant I am.”

What about schools that don’t allow group grading? Wiggins has found that even if the group assessments don’t “count,” students still care about them and the dynamic is the same.

“Spinning the Web” by Alexis Wiggins in *Educational Leadership*, November 2014 (Vol. 72, #3, p. 78-81), <http://bit.ly/15LWO2g>; Wiggins is at [alexiswiggins@spiderwebdiscussion.com](mailto:alexiswiggins@spiderwebdiscussion.com). For a short video of Spider Web Discussion in action, see [www.authenticeducation.org/alexis](http://www.authenticeducation.org/alexis)