



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## Questioning in a Socratic Seminar

Normal Park Museum Magnet Elementary School, Tennessee

March 2008

Topic: How to Organize Your Teaching

Practice: Higher-Order Questions

### Highlights

- Teachers at this school use Socratic Seminars, or text-based discussions, to engage their students in rigorous conversations about important ideas.
- This fourth-grade teacher begins the seminar by reminding students of the ground rules and structures for the discussion which keeps the focus on the text and questions.
- While this teacher has planned the seminar with a series of open-ended and probing questions in mind, she also uses follow-up questions to elicit more elaborate explanations.
- Students are coached to agree or disagree with each others' ideas, and refer to the text to support their opinions with evidence.
- This teacher uses a line of questioning that helps students discover important elements of M.C. Escher's woodcut: for example, his creation of an "impossible object" that cannot exist in reality.
- Prior to this seminar, students have learned about the characteristic properties of matter and how the organization of the universe is complex, but predictable. This helps students understand how Escher has created an "unreal" scene.

## About the Site

### Normal Park Museum Magnet Elementary School

Chattanooga, TN

#### Demographics

73.1% Caucasian

22.1% African American

1.5% Asian

2.1% Hispanic

1.2% Native American

36.2% Economically Disadvantaged

Normal Park Museum Magnet staff plan curriculum in grade-level teams to organize instruction that promotes student understanding and retention of key concepts. Distinctive features of the school include:

- Nine-week interdisciplinary curricular modules based on “essential questions” and “enduring understandings”
- Weekly learning expeditions to partner museums that connect abstract concepts taught in modules to concrete and real-life experiences
- Quarterly Exhibit Nights where students create displays and act as museum docents to demonstrate their understandings
- Differentiated instruction in reading, math, and spelling where individualized lessons are designed to alternate between teacher modeling and student practice
- Socratic Seminars, text- or art-based discussions where teacher questioning leads students to explore of key ideas through a cooperative process
- Hands-on, intensive professional development in the summer and throughout the year

## Full Transcript

Teacher: Alright, before we begin today let's review our Socratic Seminar rules. Listen first, participate, don't dominate. If you're a person who normally likes to have a lot to say, remember to yield to others. We love to disagree sometimes but remember not to be disagreeable. And we really want to make sure we are keeping focused on our text or the question that someone else has raised. And also, you all are very good at this, but remember not to talk over or under. You don't want to talk to your neighbor; we want to address the whole group. Okay?

We have a piece of graphic art today, it's by an artist named M. C. Escher and I know you all have seen a lot of his work. This particular piece is called Waterfall. And before we start talking I would just like you to look at it for a minute and think about, what do you notice and also what does it remind you of? Can you think of anything that it reminds you of? What do you notice and what does that remind you of? Just sort of think about it for a minute. Alright, and my first question to you today is, where is this place?

Student: Under water.

Teacher: It's under water?

Student: If it was under water why would there be a waterfall?

Teacher: It's what, Devonte?

Student: The coral.

Teacher: You see coral and that makes you think that it's under water?

Student: Yeah, but there's people out.

Student: Like the coral part could be an underwater garden or something.

Teacher: So maybe part of it is under water? Did anybody have an idea that maybe it was somewhere besides underwater? Did anybody have a different idea?

Student: Somewhere out in the desert because you can see in the background it doesn't look very grassy, maybe a few trees and a few bushes.

Student: I agree with Sydney about the desert.

Teacher: You think it's in a desert?

Student: Yeah.

Teacher: Okay.

Student: I think it could be like underground because in the background it's sort of going up higher and the level is getting bigger.

Teacher: What about the waterfall? That's the title of the piece. Who has an idea about the waterfall?

Student: I'm want to sort of ask a question about the waterfall. Do you think it's running up or down because it looks like it's running up?

Student: I think it's running down because, like you can see your connection right here, the little thing. The thing that spins in the water it spins out there and then it goes like that and it comes back down and it just keeps going.

Student: How do we know where it starts?

Student: Water doesn't go uphill, it goes downhill only.

Teacher: So, K.C., you think that it could not be running uphill at all? Okay.

Student: I disagree with both of them because if it's running downhill how would the waterfall be going?

Student: Yeah, it has to run uphill to be a waterfall, or the waterfall is going backwards.

Teacher: What makes the water run up the hill?

Student: The water is probably starting to flow and then the rest of it just does itself.

Teacher: Well, do you think that this is real or do you think it's unreal?

Student: I think it's like a fairy tale.

Teacher: A fairy tale. Why do you think it's like a fairy tale, Devonte?

Student: It's like no place where the water starts, and we can't tell if it's uphill or downhill, going downhill or uphill.

Student: So it's like an optical illusion because you can't really tell—because it looks like it's just going straight like a river, but then there is a waterfall at the very end.

Student: And the whole thing could just be flat.

Teacher: How could it be flat?

Student: Well, it actually couldn't because the waterfall would be dropping from where it began so, where it ended.

Student: The waterfall is going down and then maybe it's pushing it up like Sydney said, and it's just starting all over again.

Teacher: Is that hard to tell which way the waterfall is going?

Student: Yes.

Teacher: How many people, when you first looked at this, thought that it maybe could be a real place but now you looked at it a little bit longer and you think, well, maybe it couldn't be a real place?

Student: It looks like, and there are some places in this picture where, like, these stairs lead into water, and like there are places that are unexplained, like these things at the top and these little stairs and corals.

Student: I am wondering about the coral. It's probably not under water, but if it's not under water how is the coral flowing, is there like a fan under it?

Teacher: Camilla, you had a comment?

Student: I agree with Gareth because how would the plants be flowing and wouldn't they just be dead because they're not in water?

Student: The entire picture is weird, so who says the coral can't be weird?

Teacher: Christy, what about you? Were you thinking of something about it to share with us?

Student: There is like a gate there, I think, like, people that could go in there, but how could they go in there if some of the people think that there is like water in there?

Student: Maybe it's not coral. Maybe it's something else, or if it is coral that might...since there are a lot of weird things in this it could just be like invisible water, water we can't feel.

Student: It's kind of weird because, like, the picture...you think you figured out what the picture is and then there is something that, like, changes.

Student: I agree with Isabella. It's like you think you figured it out and then you see something and you think it's a totally different thing.

Teacher: Boys and girls, in a little while we will do our seminar response. Thank you for an excellent seminar, and I am going to keep this up because I think that we can keep talking about it, and there is a lot more I think that we didn't get to that we might want to discuss.