CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Research Article

To what extent do Socratic seminar activities encourage engagement in Classical Civilisation lessons?

Lois Robinson

Roman Society Prize for King's College London PGCE 2022, King's College, London, UK

Abstract

Classroom dialogue provides significant opportunity for students to build on their understanding of a subject. It is also a vector through which the educator can assess progress in their lessons (Alexander, 2008). The purpose of this study was to explore what effect a specific form of classroom dialogue (the Socratic seminar) has on student engagement, and consequently, their learning.

Key words: Socratic seminars, dialogic teaching, engagement, teaching for creativity

Introduction

The study was conducted at a coeducational community school in an outer-metropolitan borough (School X). School X's ethos places considerable emphasis on assessment of pupil progress across the curriculum. Additionally, the provision of Classics had increased in recent years at the school, with all Key Stage 3 students offered the opportunity to study a Classical subject on timetable. New Classical Civilisation students have one lesson each fortnight based around the OCR GCSE course's *Myth and Religion* module. Due to the novelty of the provision, the Classics department at School X is open to experimentation with teaching and learning activities. Moreover, a stated aim of the new Classical Civilisation GCSE course is to encourage students to use ancient sources to develop their understanding of the classical world (OCR, 2021). It feels appropriate to use a form of dialogic teaching, developed to enhance students' appreciation of literary texts (Adler, 1982), to explore sources relevant to the GCSE specifications.

The class selected for this study is a diverse Year 8 group of 25 students, who were learning about the Olympian gods in their first two terms of lessons. The class has more male than female students, with a diverse range of ability and levels of interest in the subject. Most of the class enjoy group activities but are usually reluctant to assess their own and others' progress in lessons. From this perspective, I endeavoured to choose a representative sample for my focus group, comprised of five students whose classroom participation varied considerably. In line with ethical guidance (BERA, 2018), the students are provided with pseudonyms and all references to their work and comments have been anonymised:

- Arete: a female student with English as an additional language
- Aspasia: a female student with additional needs

- Crito: a high-attaining male student with prior knowledge of classical mythology
- Phaedo: a male student who struggled to engage with Classics lessons
- Protagoras: a high-attaining male student with English as an additional language

This study comprises a review of relevant literature, explaining my research questions and the reasonings behind them in greater detail. Subsequently, I will analyse how my understanding of the literature informs my planning of the lesson sequence and the forms of assessment used throughout it. Each lesson will be evaluated with reference to the research questions in turn, before I reflect on the sequence and reach conclusions about Socratic seminars as a teaching activity. The implications of the sequence for my future pedagogy with the class (and in general) will be used to evaluate the efficacy of this form of classroom dialogue.

Literature review

I was first introduced to Socratic activities in the classroom when I had the opportunity to observe P4C (Philosophy for Children) sessions as part of my primary placement. Students had stimulus material, which they would discuss as a whole group; then they split into pairs and devised a question which they would like to ask about the material. The students then shared these with the rest of the group and held a vote on the question which they would like to discuss for the remainder of the session. This format of discussion seemed successful for promoting class participation and higher-order thinking, with most students justifying their own opinions. My interest in this area led me to the work of Lucas and Spencer (2017), who explored how Socratic seminars could provide opportunities for formative assessment both of students' learning and of more general capabilities in Key Stage 3 classes.

Author of correspondence: Lois Robinson, E-mail: robinsonlois8@gmail.com

Socratic seminars and assessment for learning

A Socratic seminar can take many forms, but at its core it comprises 'a structured conversation that students facilitate through open-ended questioning' (Vierstra, 2018, p. 1). The emphasis in this seminar is on learning through questioning – the name comes from Socrates' method of exploring philosophical ideas with his interlocutors through answering their questions with his own (Chowning, 2009). The term was pioneered by the work of Adler (1982) who developed an exercise of literary criticism based on the so-called Socratic method. Students would conduct their own seminar by asking their own questions about a particular text. This approach has been adapted by other scholars and educators and, more recently, has received attention from authors focusing on classroom assessment (Lucas and Spencer, 2017).

In their definition of a successful Socratic seminar, Lucas and Spencer specify that this kind of discussion 'values the process of checking understanding' (2017, p. 194). Therefore, it can serve as a chance for teachers to assess students' grasp of a topic as the discussion evolves and respond accordingly to influence their progress. This kind of formative assessment is correlated with student attainment (Black *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, as a form of classroom discussion, the philosophies behind Socratic seminars chime with a lot of assessment for learning (hereafter: AfL) literature on the importance of classroom talk for students' learning. Much research has expounded the benefits of so-called dialogic teaching, in keeping with Alexander's original assertion that 'talk is arguably the true foundation of learning' (2008, 5). Through interaction with the students designed to elicit longer responses, such as open-ended or exploratory questions, an educator is able to check students' understanding effectively (Alexander, 2008; Gall, 1970). As Harrison and Correia (2018) elaborate, dialogic teaching requires significant contributions from both teacher and student. Studies have found that teachers who ask more questions promote greater levels of student attainment. But Lucas and Spencer (2020) note that it is not only the teacher's questioning that influences outcomes for students, arguing that students should be encouraged to ask questions and be curious. This view correlates with research which suggests that the teachers who use AfL most consistently encourage questions from students (Harrison and Correia, 2018). It therefore seems valuable to explore these assertions by incorporating Socratic seminars into my own teaching.

Although there is a lack of specific literature about the effectiveness of Socratic seminars specifically in Classics lessons, a significant amount of recent research has been conducted on their benefits for secondary school children in both science and humanities subjects (Griswold *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, Socratic seminars are associated with the practice of dialogic teaching and Socratic questioning more generally, which are subjects that have been explored in research on teaching Classics (Chung and Irwin, 2022). For example, a survey of European Classics teachers found that most recognised the importance of using a 'Socratic method' to help students with their learning (Canfarotta *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, it is still possible to extrapolate the potential advantages of using this activity with a Year 8 Classical Civilisation class and develop my own research questions for this lesson sequence.

Research Question 1: To what extent do Socratic seminars in Classical Civilisation lessons promote student engagement and satisfaction?

Student engagement is constantly variable and difficult to define, leading teachers to focus on students' visible behaviour rather than other indicators of their learning (Skilling, 2018). There is also a significant focus on mitigating student behaviour in some literature on Socratic seminars. Educators can be hesitant at implementing exploratory activities such as these, disputing their relevance to both the curriculum and secondary school students (Polite and Adams, 1997). Even research with a positive outlook on such seminars acknowledges the potential pitfalls of facilitating them: 'a conversation can quickly veer out of control … if the discussion is not structured appropriately' (Chowning, 2009, p. 36).

However, researchers have developed more focused frameworks of engagement, which are relevant to the research questions of this essay. In particular, the work of Reeve and Tseng (2011) investigates students' agency as an indicator of their engagement. I am choosing to focus on this idea of agentic engagement and the behaviours associated with it, including asking questions and willingness to explore difficult problems (Reeve, 2009) as this is something that Socratic seminars should encourage.

Reeve and Tseng define student agency as their 'constructive contribution into the flow of the instruction they receive' (2011, p. 258). A danger of teacher-directed pedagogy is students feeling as if they are passive recipients of instruction whose role is to answer the questions, not ask them (Dillon, 1990). Student engagement can be enhanced by a greater sense of agency in learning (Skilling, 2018), leading students to make more constructive contributions to a lesson (Reeve and Tseng, 2011). The potential of Socratic seminars to promote students' agency in the classroom is suggested by the literature (Brown, 2016; Lucas and Spencer, 2019). Socratic seminars are a form of dialogic teaching, a pedagogy 'which emphasizes that students' voices are equal to teachers' voices in knowledge creation' (Brown, 2016, p. 2). The Socratic seminar actively encourages the teacher to 'view the child as knowledgeable and capable of leading the learning experience' (Helterbran and Strahler, 2013, p. 312) because it is their questions and observations that direct the seminar. This in turn gives students a sense of empowerment, which is linked to greater motivation and satisfaction. Dialectical forms of learning also give students the chance to express their personal opinions and ideas (Chung and Irwin, 2022).

Student engagement is evidently desirably on its own but to be effective it must also be clearly linked to progress in terms of their attainment in lessons (Skilling, 2018). A study assessing students' participation in Socratic seminars found that enjoyment of these sessions was associated with greater attention to detail and analytical ability in written work set after the sessions (Shane, 2019). This is only one study, but it seems reasonable to extrapolate from its conclusions that engagement is linked to enjoyment and therefore increased motivation during lesson tasks and attainment.

Another study (Polite and Adams, 1997) finds that Socratic seminars conducted with secondary students had a higher satisfaction rate if they explored materials with which some students may be familiar, such as stories from popular media or fairy tales. It therefore seems appropriate to structure the seminars around texts relating to ancient mythology, which are relevant to the school's existing Myth & Religion scheme of work. Lucas and Spencer (2017) also suggest that Socratic seminars should explore philosophical questions which are relevant to the students themselves, so encouraging students to ask their own questions might increase their interest in Classical material.

There is a greater emphasis than ever on developing civic 'key competencies' in education (Lucas and Spencer, 2017) which has led educators to explore how Classics teaching can influence these.

Despite students' and educators' scepticism about exercises that cannot clearly lead to a final mark or grade, researchers have found Socratic activities in Classics can have the benefit of teaching 'metacognitive strategies that make students more effective in planning, organising, and evaluating the results of their learning' (Canfarotta *et al.*, 2022, p. 13). Similarly, students can see the potential of studying classical subjects to increase their cultural awareness (Canfarotta *et al.*, 2022). This is something that I will be exploring within my teaching sequence, as it is a potential sign of agentic engagement (Reeve and Tseng, 2011).

> Research Question 2: To what extent does the use of Socratic seminars in Classical Civilisation lessons promote respectful and effective peer assessment?

Socratic seminars can offer a lot of scope for formatively assessing students' learning. Chowning (2009, p. 40) describes how a teacher can 'focus on student preparation for the seminar, student reflections or writings following the seminar, or participation in the seminar itself' to assess students. For this study, it is important to encourage student involvement in the process of assessment as Socratic seminars themselves are designed to promote students' agency in their own learning. Moreover, another benefit identified in the research is the potential for encouraging social as well as academic skills through Socratic enquiry. Chowning distinguishes Socratic seminars from other types of class discussion on the basis that they 'foster collaborative intellectual dialogue' (2009, p. 38). Helterbran and Strahler note that both the ethical issues that may arise from Socratic discourses and the atmosphere that they engender in the classroom 'can encourage and support the moral development of children' (2013, p. 312). Therefore, the second research question investigates to what extent the use of Socratic seminars has any impact on students' ability and willingness to use peer assessment.

Socratic seminars were developed to support students' critical thinking through the use of group enquiry (Helterbran and Strahler, 2013). They also lend themselves to asking about the act of questioning itself, which was something to which I intend to allude in my lesson sequence. When describing the Socratic seminar and its supporting activities, there is opportunity for a teacher to model the act of questioning. The practice of a teacher modelling their own thinking process is shown to be beneficial for students (Rosenshine, 2012) so it follows that Socratic seminars have the potential cognitive benefits. There is evidence to suggest that Socratic seminars can encourage skills such as metacognition, as they provide 'opportunities to practise and develop logical, higher order thinking skills' (Polite and Adams, 1997, p. 260). Other small-scale studies at the undergraduate level provide evidence that engaging in Socratic seminars encourages students' justification of their own ideas verbally and in writing (Shane, 2019).

Additionally, students reflecting on their own and others' thinking has the wider benefit of promoting understanding. As well as scaffolding children's learning as part of the enquiry, the educator has the responsibility to model respectful discussion and evaluation of others' ideas (Chowning, 2009). A successful seminar requires participants to be active listeners and civil communicators. Communication is important in education. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that learning is a socially constructed process, facilitated by the use of language. Therefore, my second research question focuses on the group work aspect of Socratic dialogue, as, according to social constructivist theories of learning, group discussion should have implications for student learning.

A benefit of group work and discussion is that it encourages students to learn from each other and assess their own learning (Harrison and Correia, 2018). This could translate into effective peer assessment because students are encouraging each other to become better learners and therefore also better able to reflect on their own learning (Black *et al.*, 2002). Lucas and Spencer (2020) identify useful peer assessment as feedback that is respectful, detailed, and building on a student's piece of work. Socratic seminars have been demonstrated to encourage students to build on each other's arguments and express disagreement (Brown, 2016). Therefore, one of the criteria against which I will evaluate the success of Socratic seminars is to what extent it improves students' peer assessment over the course of the lesson sequence. I will describe in further detail how my lesson sequence was planned with reference to the conclusions that I draw from the literature.

Planning

As noted in my review of the literature, the Socratic seminar can both offer opportunity for assessment within the activity itself and have implications for student progress in other areas of the lesson (Chowning, 2009). The sequence that I planned (see Appendices) is comprised of lessons with the Socratic seminar as a central focus. However, they are not the only significant activity or method through which pupil satisfaction and progress could be ascertained within the sequence. During each lesson, I not only observe students' participation in the Socratic seminars, but also encourage them to reflect on their experience of the activity through exit tickets (see Supplementary Appendix). Originally, I planned to assess whether student agency and engagement had changed throughout the lesson with questionnaires designed to assess their capabilities, modelled on examples seen in Lucas and Spencer's (2017) work on classroom creativity.

However, these questionnaires included questions which I would not typically ask in a Classics lesson, so it was unethical to collect this information (BERA, 2018). Instead, the exit tickets were designed to prompt students to reflect on their enjoyment of the lesson and their contributions to it. They also encouraged students to assess their own learning, through questions such as 'What would you like to do differently next time, if we tried this activity again?' I am choosing to assess student agency through observation of student behaviours and contributions throughout the lesson, with particular attention to my focus group.

Additionally, I planned to keep a tally of types of questions asked by both myself and the students during the lesson. The literature suggests that a consistent obstacle to dialogic teaching was not just the quantity, but the quality of teacher questioning (Alexander, 2008). I would not count questions which were closed, asked for the purposes of classroom management, or merely involving factual recall (Gall, 1970), to assess whether I was consistently encouraging students to be creative and evaluative through my pedagogy. Likewise, students' readiness to ask on-topic, exploratory questions is a sign of the sequence's aims being met, so I would count these as well. An overall increase in effective teacher and student questioning across the sequence suggests that the use of Socratic seminars was promoting effective AfL (Lucas and Spencer, 2017).

The sequence consisted of three, 100-minute lessons. The outline plan for the sequence worked as follows: each lesson was centred around a new source or stimulus material that formed the basis of the Socratic seminar activity. In the first two lessons, the Socratic seminar was the main task and built up to by supporting activities. In the final lesson, the Socratic seminar took place before

a task designed to assess students' ability to respond to a text creatively and personally: a test of whether student agency had improved across the lessons (Reeve, 2009). Opportunities for peer assessment were gradually patterned throughout the sequence – in lesson one, the students assess a model answer provided by the teacher; in lesson two, students assess each other's homework. Finally, students assess the creative task completed by a peer, allowing me the opportunity to judge whether their experience of classroom discourse over the sequence has enhanced their ability to give effective feedback (Harrison and Correia, 2018).

A limitation of the sequence was the fact that the pupils only have one lesson of Classical Civilisation every two weeks. This has implications for effective assessment of the students' learning, as long gaps between lessons are potentially detrimental for pupil progress (Rosenshine, 2012). Not only are the class covering new material each lesson, but the entire sequence hinges around a potentially completely new form of classroom dialogue to students, the routine and rules of which would likely need to be reiterated in order to be upheld consistently (Chowning, 2009).

However, the duration of School X's lessons is a significant advantage to exploring this activity, providing time for the Socratic seminar to be scaffolded effectively (Rosenshine, 2012) through introductory activities and modelling. The literature recommends a period of 30 minutes or longer for a Socratic seminar (Brown, 2016) and I required sufficient time to assess student discussion throughout the activity. Consequently, the lesson timings are beneficial for the development of the sequence and allow me to plan multiple forms of assessment into each lesson. In addition, it is school policy to have homework set after each of the lessons, so I set questions that were open to multiple interpretations, and therefore would involve higher-order thinking and argumentation on the part of the students – skills supposedly encouraged in the Socratic seminar (Polite and Adams, 1997).

For the first two lessons I had the benefit of an external observer, my mentor, who judged the success of my sequence's aims against School X's recommendations for effective classroom AfL. The principles involved, devised by the senior leadership at School X, chimed with the questions that I wanted to ask about the effectiveness of pedagogy recommended by Lucas and Spencer (2020). I was hopeful that the focus on questioning in this study would encourage me, as well as the students, to become more reflective.

Lesson 1

The lesson began with an activity designed to help me further familiarise myself with the class and their understanding of topics studied so far. I distributed a post-it note to each student, asking them to write their names and their favourite Olympian deity. This was my first opportunity to assess students' understanding of the gods through dialogic questioning, asking several students to share their favourites and then elaborating with follow-up questions on why they enjoyed the god. For example, Crito gave a developed answer about Poseidon, claiming that he was his favourite god because the seas were so large that he must be powerful. Despite this, students were reluctant to contribute when I showed a model answer about my favourite deity on the board and asked them for ways to improve it. It took several subsequent questions to get students sharing their knowledge about the goddess Hestia and how I could have used that to expand my answer.

Students were engaged during the discussion-based questioning activities. Arete worked well with her partner to develop a list of

questions about an unfamiliar stimulus image. From discussions of Vestal Virgins, we moved to reading the section in Livy of the birth of Romulus and Remus. This was an unfamiliar, difficult text even in translation, and I asked students to underline words they did not understand and wanted to ask about afterwards. Some students were forthcoming with their questions, especially Protagoras and Aspasia, and noted down my explanations. I asked some generalised comprehension questions about the story to gauge understanding and elicited some clear answers from Phaedo, who had seemed uninterested during the reading, before we moved on to a more exploratory questioning activity.

Students were eager to try the Socratic seminar activity, and out of the 18 students present (divided into six groups of three), six questions were proposed. These were:

> Why did the brothers (Romulus and Remus) grow up to kill each other? (4 votes)
>
> Could Vestal Virgins ever get married? (1 vote)
>
> Why didn't Mars save Rhea Silvia? (2 votes)
>
> Why did they put the babies in a basket in a river if they wanted them to die? (3 votes)
>
> If you were one of the king's men, would you have killed the children? (6 votes)
>
> Why didn't the wolf eat the babies? (2 votes)

It was interesting that the majority of students chose the question which invited probably the most personal response out of all of them. The discussion prompted many different opinions, but this required encouragement on my part, because students were initially reluctant to offer a dissenting opinion from the rest of the group. By the end of the discussion, responses were more even, with Aspasia commenting that she could never kill a child, but Protagoras, Crito, and Phaedo arguing that it was reasonable for the king's men, but for slightly different reasons. Phaedo claimed that it made sense to assume that Rhea Silvia was lying about the children's conception to avoid punishment, while the other two students focused on the perceived lack of choice of working for a corrupt king.

However, several quieter students, such as Arete, were reluctant to contribute to the group discussion, so it was difficult to gauge their learning from the lesson. The aim of the lesson, to get students to make constructive contributions (Reeve, 2009), was not universally met. My mentor suggested that I vary my questioning to be more inclusive of these students, and also model notetaking of the discussion on the board, so I would have more physical evidence of students' progress to collect. The exit tickets were completed, but most students gave one-word answers to the questions and interpreted the more reflective ones as asking about the activities, rather than their own actions. I edited the questions slightly for next time, but this was not a total disappointment, as students expressing preferences (as Aspasia and Crito did) is still a potential sign of agentic engagement (Reeve and Tseng, 2011).

Lesson 2

This lesson had more of a focus on peer-assessment, with students shown model answers based on the responses to the homework. A minority of the students had responded to the question with a lack of argumentation or independent ideas, but Aspasia and

Protagoras had provided original, opposing views on the question of whether Hestia is still important today. Students benefitted from seeing the exemplar work and being asked which they agreed with most, with Aspasia commenting, 'I can explain this one, because I wrote it'. After the discussion, all students made some additions to their answers based on the detailed arguments heard from Protagoras and Aspasia. One student changed her original view following the discussion, showing that the group dialogue was promoting openness and reflection (Harrison and Correia, 2018).

For the seminar discussion, students watched a video version of the myth of Persephone and Hades and groups volunteered questions based on this. Students were eager to move to this part of the lesson and show their expertise, with Protagoras claiming, 'I know what to do from last time'. However, there was also a competitive aspect to the discussion this time with students bribing other groups to vote for their question and some expressing disappointment at the eventual result. Harrison and Correia (2018) state that the atmosphere of a classroom in which dialogue is used effectively should be collaborative and not competitive, so this was somewhat detrimental to the learning process, with students trying to tailor their questions to what they thought would interest their peers. The results were as follows (seven groups of students, six threes and one pair):

Why did Demeter grow old? (6 votes)

Did the food have to be pomegranate seeds? (3 votes)

Why did Persephone have to stay for six months? (1 vote)

Why did Demeter allow the plants to die if she knew it would hurt humans? (4 votes)

Why can't Zeus just change the rules and let Persephone back? (2 votes)

Why did Hades want a wife? (3 votes)

How long did it take them to find Persephone? (1 vote)

As before, while some of the questions could have simply been answered with factual recall, the more popular options involved higher-order thinking (Gall, 1970). The discussion also followed an interesting progression, with students such as Crito recording it with mind-maps in their books. This process of mapping out the discussion highlighted students' metacognition (Lucas and Spencer, 2017). When the session finished, students were discussing why the year was divided into 12 months, after Phaedo questioned why they had months before the seasons changed. Every student took part in the discussion this lesson, but Arete was very quiet again and only answered closed questions directly addressed to her.

Lesson 3

The third seminar was based on Horace *Odes* 3.13, to encourage the students to think about worship and sacrifice in preparation for the creative task of writing their own poem about sacrifice (addressed to a particular god). Once again, students were eager to start the discussion. Arete was in a group with Crito this time, and they worked together on a thoughtful question about the history of the spring in the poem, which I asked Arete to elaborate for the class. She also volunteered her opinion during the seminar, but louder figures such as Aspasia and Protagoras still dominated the discussion overall. It suggested that my facilitation of the seminars was still not sufficient for assessing the whole class (Harrison and

Correia, 2018). The questions asked were mostly exploratory this lesson (seven threes and one pair):

Does the type of animal you sacrifice matter? (2 votes)

Why did they let blood go in the water? (1 vote)

Did they drink the water after the sacrifice? (1 vote)

Why is it a goat that gets sacrificed in the poem? (1 vote)

What's the significance and history of the Bandusian spring? (3 votes)

Does the fountain represent a god? (5 votes)

Why did Horace write a poem about this? (2 votes)

How would the goat feel (if it had human feelings)? (6 votes)

The vote was quite tight and again some students expressed disappointment at the chosen question, leading the pair that provided the winning question to become defensive. I had to remind the students of the rules about the seminar (Chowning, 2009) to promote respectful discussion. The eventual discussion developed into a debate on whether it was ethical to kill animals under any circumstances. This discussion (and that of the last seminar) were interestingly similar to potential seminar topics suggested by Lucas and Spencer (2017) as being engaging for students.

The students were all engaged in the final creative task to produce their own poem. Arete and Aspasia enjoyed choosing their deities. Aspasia asked for more help with structuring her poem, which is a sign of student agency (Reeve and Tseng, 2011). Phaedo also showed engagement by asking if there was a god of sadness and enjoyed writing a poem to a unique god. Crito and Protagoras reflected on the starter discussions about modern religion and incorporated elements of their own religions into their poems. Students relating Classics to different cultures can be desirable for engagement in the subject (Barnes, 2018). Additionally, some students chose personal items to sacrifice to the god, including one student with additional needs who wrote about sacrificing the journal he uses to regulate his emotions.

During the peer assessment, all students were able to provide the requisite amount of feedback, but some was simplistic with a significant minority of students using one or more of the example feedback points that I used when modelling peer assessment on the board with no further elaboration. One notable exception was Phaedo, who despite being dismissive of other students' contributions previously, had no difficulty complimenting the poem that he assessed, and offering a detailed piece of feedback. The class discussed their poems verbally throughout the exercise, suggesting an atmosphere of collaboration (Harrison and Correia, 2018). After this lesson, the overall number of students who could list specific contributions that they had made and express opinions about which part of the lesson they enjoyed most was at its highest according to the exit tickets.

Conclusions

From my observations, I believe that the experience of Socratic seminar activities increased student engagement to a certain extent. Most students took part readily in the class discussions and by the final seminars, students were eager to contribute an interesting question that had the potential to be discussed by the rest of the class. I have more specific evidence of agentic engagement

increasing across the sequence as well, due to the data from exit tickets. In the third set of exit tickets, students were more likely to be self-reflective on what they could have done differently to improve their learning experience, or to use the exit tickets to express a preference about what they would like to do next. According to the framework of Reeve and Tseng (2011), all these behaviours signify a sense of student agency in their learning.

Most students in the focus group improved their confidence and engagement across the sequence, as shown by both their participation in group discussions and their written work, regardless of whether they had prior interest in Classics. However, despite her written work showing that she engaged with the questioning processes, Arete was characteristically very quiet during class discussions. She spoke most during the third Socratic seminar, after I asked a series of questions which increased in difficulty, following advice from my mentor. One thing that this sequence has taught me is that questioning still needs to be varied to engage a variety of students (Dillon, 1990). The number of open, exploratory questions that I asked increased across the sequence, but this was not the straightforward sign of successful pedagogy that I initially predicted. If I had the opportunity to repeat this study, I would have focused less on simply asking open questions and ensured there was a good balance of questions that students with less confidence speaking could answer. This may have encouraged quieter students to take part in class discussions (see Figure 1).

However, overall, I think student questioning improved across the sequence. Not only did the numbers of open questions asked by students increase, but the questions proposed for each Socratic seminar consistently involved higher-order thinking (Brown, 2016). Moreover, it was interesting how philosophical some of the discussions arising from the original questions became (Lucas and Spencer, 2017).

The conclusions that I can draw about Socratic seminars affecting peer assessment are more tenuous. It was a short sequence and the original, control activity was about assessing an exemplar that wasn't taken from a peer's work. However, there was some interesting material among the final peer assessment task which suggested that the experience of Socratic dialogue may have influenced students. Some students were more likely to give detailed feedback, including Protagoras and Aspasia, who had an extended discussion with the student whose poem she assessed. From this I can posit that an emphasis on group discussion may help some pupils develop their peer assessment, but further research into this is needed to reach a sound conclusion.

One drawback for the class in the study was the difficulty of promoting cooperative, whole-group discussion. The discourse was competitive at points. Moreover, while the class acclimatised to the hands-down discussion by the end of the sequence and did not need to face me and wait for me to prompt them, they instead began having discussions around their table rather than as an entire group. To mitigate this, I would try organising the seminars more closely to what was suggested in the literature. Most authors advise that Socratic seminars should be conducted with students facing each other in a circle (Lucas and Spencer, 2017). This was not possible in the classroom due to space constraints, but I underestimated the impact it could have on class discussion.

However, another way in which I would like to address this would be to change my approach to the seminars themselves. The aim of this lesson sequence was to get students to recognise how their contributions could be valuable in Classical Civilisation lessons. This was undermined by the visible act of discarding questions that did not get the highest number of votes, as recommended in the literature (Lucas and Spencer, 2017). My mentor commented that it was upsetting to see good questions not used in the lessons. In the final lesson of the sequence, I kept all the questions, and set students homework to research one (or more) of their choice. Students appreciated this, with several commenting in their final exit tickets that it would be fun to think about other questions.

Both the positive and the negative aspects of the sequence were a learning opportunity for me. I will use Socratic seminars in my future teaching, but I hope that they become just one of many potential activities that I can use to encourage student-directed learning. Classics is a discipline that can still be relevant to modern students, and seeing an entire class able to interrogate classical sources for potential relevance to them was a rewarding exercise. It is important to remember that when students are disengaged, teachers are more likely to respond 'by lessening their support and heightening their control' (Reeve and Tseng, 2011, p. 257). This was something that I unfortunately recognised in my own pedagogy as a student teacher. Asking an unfamiliar class to take control in the outcome of their lessons by making constructive contributions was anxiety-provoking, but ultimately valuable for both myself and the students.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631022000459.

References

Adler MJ (1982) *The Paideia Proposal*. New York: Macmillan.

Alexander R (2008) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking Classroom Talk*, 4th Edn. Dialogos.

Barnes J (2018) Developing students' ideas of diversity in the ancient and modern worlds through the topic of Alexandria in the *Cambridge Latin Course*, Book II. *Journal of Classics Teaching* 37, 1–9.

Black PJ, Harrison C, Lee C, Marshall B and Wiliam D (2002) *Working Inside the Black Box: Assessment for Learning in the Classroom*. London: King's College London School of Education.

British Ethical Research Association (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. London: BERA.

Brown CA (2016) Classroom community and discourse: how argumentation emerges during a Socratic circle. *Dialogic Pedagogy* 4, 1–17.

Canfarotta D, Tosto C and Casado-Muñoz T (2022) Development of key competences through Latin and Greek in secondary school in Italy and Spain. *Journal of Classics Teaching* 23, 13–21.

Chowning JT (2009) SOCRATIC SEMINARS IN SCIENCE CLASS: providing a structured format to promote dialogue and understanding. *The Science Teacher* 76, 36–41.

Chung A and Irwin C (2022) Petrarch and the significance of dialogue. *Journal of Classics Teaching* 23, 40–44.

Dillon JT (1990) *The Practice of Questioning*. London and New York: Routledge.

Gall MD (1970) The use of questions in teaching. *Review of Educational Research* 40, 707–721.

Griswold J, Shaw L and Munn M (2017) Socratic seminar with data: a strategy to support student discourse and understanding. *The American Biology Teacher* 79, 492–495.

Lesson	No. of questions asked by teacher	No. of questions asked by students
1	33	28
2	40	35
3	45	42

Figure 1. Table showing number of open, exploratory questions asked by both teacher and students across the sequence.

Harrison C and Correia C (2018) Classroom assessment. In Maguire M, Gibbons S, Glackin M, Pepper D and Skilling K (eds), *Becoming a Teacher: Issues in Secondary Education*, 5th Edn. London: Open University Press.

Helterbran VR and Strahler BR (2013) Children as global citizens: a Socratic approach to teaching character. *Childhood Education* 89, 310–314.

Lucas B and Spencer E (2017) *Teaching Creative Thinking*. Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing.

Lucas B and Spencer E (2019) *Zest for Learning*. Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing.

Lucas B and Spencer E (2020) *Developing Tenacity*. Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing.

OCR (2021) *GCSE (9-1) Specification: CLASSICAL CIVILISATION J199 for first assessment in 2019*. Available at https://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/315240-specification-accredited-gcse-classical-civilisation-j199.pdf (Accessed 2 February 2022).

Polite VC and Adams AH (1997) Critical thinking and values clarification through Socratic seminars. *Urban Education (Beverly Hills, Calif.)* 32, 256–278.

Reeve J (2009) Why teachers adopt a controlling motivational style towards students and how they can become more autonomy supportive. *Educational Psychologist* 44, 159–75.

Reeve J and Tseng CM (2011) Agency as a fourth aspect of students' engagement during learning activities. *Contemporary Educational Psychologist* 50, 1–13.

Rosenshine B (2012) Principles of instruction: research-based strategies that all teachers should know. *The Education Digest* 78, 30–40.

Shane S (2019) *Effects of Socratic Seminar and Online Discussion on Student Writing*. Ann Arbor: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Skilling K (2018) Engaging in learning: learning to engage. In Maguire M, Gibbons S, Glackin M, Pepper D and Skilling K (eds), *Becoming a Teacher: Issues in Secondary Education*, 5th Edn. London: Open University Press.

Vierstra G (2018) *Engaging Students in Socratic Seminars*. Available at https://www.teachingchannel.com/blog/socratic-seminars (Accessed 2 February 2022).

Vygotsky L (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.