Developing Professional Dispositions in Socrates café: Implications for Teachers of English Language Learners

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Developing Professional Dispositions in a Socrates Café: Implications for Teachers of English Language Learners

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Introduction

The need for teachers who can successfully work with the increasing number of culturally and linguistically diverse students is well documented. This need underscores the implementation of multicultural curriculum, culturally responsive teaching, and social justice initiatives. The development of critical thinking skills among teachers and students is a necessary but often ambiguous component among these practices (Banks, 2008; Elder, 2004; Gay & Howard, 2000). Without purposeful attention to the development of critical thinking skills, these practices have little value and impact. It is imperative that teachers critically investigate their own and others’ values, beliefs, assumptions, and biases before working with linguistically and culturally diverse students (Anderson, 2012; Bartolomé, 2004; Kidd, Sanchez, & Thorp, 2008; McCarthy, 2008); otherwise, it is likely their preconceived notions will prevail, they will
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continue to perpetuate stereotypes, and unexamined educational inequities will persist.

In addition to critical thinking skills, critical reflection, civil discourse, and critical pedagogy may also contribute to the development of successful teachers who work in diverse settings (Piro & Anderson, 2014a; Bartolomé, 2004; Sellen, 2011). The culmination of these skills may be termed dispositions. Teacher preparation accrediting agencies (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2014; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011) commonly require programs to identify and assess the professional dispositions that include critical thinking and equitable practices.

There are over five million English Language Learners (ELLs) in U.S. schools (Migration Policy Institute, 2014). These numbers underscore the need to help teachers develop the professional dispositions necessary to work successfully with culturally and linguistically diverse students. The development of these dispositions is enhanced when teacher education programs provide opportunities for investigation of complex issues and scaffold critical thinking instruction, such as within a Socrates Café. The last issue of the monograph included the authors’ chapter on the steps for implementing a Socrates Café discussion in a cooperative group setting. The Socrates Café has been successfully adapted for grade school, university, and online settings, as well as large groups, and self-assessments (Anderson & Piro, 2013, 2014; Piro & Anderson, 2014b). The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the professional dispositions of pre-service and in-service teachers that can be developed as a result of their participation in these varied Socrates Café discussions.

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The Socrates café revisited

Socratic questioning is commonly applied when developing critical thinking during discussions (Golding, 2011; Knezic, Wubbels, Elbers, & Hajer; 2010; Paul & Elder, 2007). In addition to traditional classroom applications, Socratic questioning has been sustained in another venue, the Socrates Café. Christopher Phillips (2001) originally established Socrates Cafés by creating open-invitation discussion groups in coffee shops and libraries, but the same objective can be implemented in educational settings too. Socratic questioning may scaffold critical thinking in a Socrates Café (Piro & Anderson, 2014b). The quality of the questions asked within a discussion parallels the quality of critical thinking (Elder & Paul, 2008) and often generates further questions in order to continue dialogue and reflection.

An academic benefit of the Socrates Café is the claim that it may enhance critical thinking and expand one’s perspective beyond the self (Piro & Anderson, 2014b). According to Phillips (2001) the Socrates Café “reveals people to themselves” and “makes them see what their opinions really amount to” and “is not so much a search for absolute truth and certainty as it is a quest for honesty” (Phillips, 2001, p. 53). This expansion beyond the self and the quest for honesty are processes that are developed by opportunities to discuss complex topics, reflect, and pose Socratic questions with others. Critical thinking instruction within the Socrates Café can be scaffolded and assessed by utilizing Elder and Paul’s (2008) nine universal intellectual standards—clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness—as a framework (Piro &
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Anderson, 2014b). Socrates Café discussions can also help instructors in teacher preparation programs identify the presence or lack of pre-service and in-service teachers’ professional dispositions as well as foster their development. The steps for implementing a Socrates Café can be found in the previous edition of this monograph series as well as via the authors’ works in the list of references at the end of this chapter. The following section will discuss the dispositional elements present in the authors’ applications of the Socrates Café.

Dispositional elements in the Socrates café

The aptitude to understand the perspectives of others, or what may be termed as dispositional elements toward civility, is a particularly meaningful goal of a Socrates Café. This aptitude also has implications for teachers of ELLs. Setting aside one’s own perspective to engage with the notions of others challenges one’s taken-for-granted views of complex issues and may further democratic engagement in learning spaces. Dispositional elements of the Socrates Café that are essential for this process include the attitudinal elements of critical thinking, critical reflection, and civil discourse (Piro & Anderson, 2014a). Critical pedagogy dispositions (Bartolomé, 2004; Sellen, 2011) have also been identified as integral to the development of teachers who work with ELLs. Coupled with the authors’ dispositional elements, the critical pedagogy dispositions are complementary components of professional dispositions that guide a successful Socrates Café discussion; therefore, each of these elements will be highlighted in the following sections.
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Critical thinking

The ability to use critical thinking may be separate from the disposition to think critically (Facione, 1990, 2000). The disposition of critical thinking may be defined as “consistent internal motivations to act toward or respond to person, events, or circumstances in habitual, yet potentially malleable ways” (Facione, 1990; 2000, p. 64). Following this definition, if “good thinking is synonymous with critical thinking, a person who has the ability to think critically but decides not to do so is not a critical thinker” (Lai, 2011, p. 12). The demonstration of this ability is what matters.

An additional factor that comes into play when conceptualizing dispositions in critical thinking is the element of domain specificity. Some argue that critical thinking dispositions are domain specific (Ennis, 1989). In other words, learning how to use dispositions within critical thinking may be more likely when learners are immersed in actual content areas or within a given domain rather than as a general skill (Bailin, 2002; Willingham, 2007). According to Bailin (2002), critical thinking as a general skill is useless because what constitutes valid evidence is so divergent across content domains that critical thinking and critical thinking dispositions are specific to the domain itself. Contrarily, others (Halpern, 2001; Lipman, 1988; Van Gelder, 2005) maintain that critical thinking in general and the dispositions toward critical thinking are not domain specific, and that comprehensive critical thinking skills and dispositions may be taught and used in a variety of contexts.

For the purposes of the authors’ application of the Socrates Café, critical inquiry is considered a general skill
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that may cross content areas and instruction when analysis is scaffolded (Piro & Anderson, 2014b). However, the authors also contend that the open-ended questions used in a Socrates Café should be grounded in the content and reflect actual problems in educational settings (Halpern, 1998). For example, in the authors’ co-teaching of a graduate diversity course, topics in a Socrates Café include issues surrounding ELLs, globalization, prejudice, discrimination, immigration laws, and religious diversity. Instructors may discover content-related questions to advance the goal of domain specificity within their own curricula. The authors further contend that attitudes and dispositional elements of critical thinking in a Socrates Café are an indispensable component to its success. The “habits of mind” (Meier, 2002) or dispositions necessary for the critical inquiry in Socrates Café discussions consist of what Paul (1993) called intellectual traits. The essential intellectual traits consist of (1) Intellectual Humility: consciousness of the limits of one’s knowledge, including a sensitivity to circumstances in which one’s native egocentrism is likely to function self-deceptively; (2) Intellectual Courage: awareness of the need to face and fairly address ideas, beliefs or viewpoints toward which we have strong negative emotions and to which we have not given serious hearing; (3) Intellectual Empathy: the awareness of the need to imaginatively put oneself in the place of others in order to genuinely understand them; (4) Intellectual Autonomy: the ability to have rational control of one’s beliefs, values, and inferences; (5) Intellectual Integrity: realization of the need to be true to one’s own thinking; (6) Intellectual Perseverance: awareness of the need to use intellectual insights and truths in spite of difficulties,
obstacles, and frustrations; (7) Confidence in Reason: confidence that, in the long run, one’s own higher interests and those of humankind at large will best be served by giving the freest play to reason; and (8) Fair mindedness: awareness of the need to treat all viewpoints alike, without reference to one’s own feelings or vested interests (pp. 16–17).

Critical reflection

The ability to reflect on one’s assumptions, thoughts, and taken-for-granted notions and those of others within a Socrates Café is a second dispositional element. Following a Deweyan perspective (1916/2004) that suggests that the purposes of education are the individual’s intellectual, moral, and emotional growth and the advancement of democratic learning spaces, the interactional element of a Socrates Café necessitates a subsequent reflective component to enhance those goals. The disposition toward critical reflection is a necessary element for learning in a Socrates Café. This is grounded conceptually in the following criteria:

1. Reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the thread that makes continuity of learning possible and ensures the progress of the individual and, ultimately, society. It is a means to essentially moral ends.

2. Reflection is a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking, with its roots in scientific inquiry.

3. Reflection needs to happen in community, in interaction with others.
4. Reflection requires attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others. (Rodgers, 2002, p. 845)

Civil discourse

Teaching how to engage in deliberate discussions of controversial issues is a “democracy-sustaining” approach to education (Hess, 2009). During a time of great polarization regarding important issues in the United States, thoughtful and respectful participation in civil discourse is a necessary dispositional element of a Socrates Café and of any pedagogy aimed at sustaining democracy as an outcome of education. The attitude of civility in discourse may be observed when “citizens of a given culture speak and act in ways that demonstrate a caring for the welfare of others as well as the welfare of the culture they share in common” (Davetian, 2009, p. 9). McAvoy and Hess (2013) suggested that Dewey’s (1916/2004) assertion that “democracy is a way of life” informs instructors who seek deliberation within discussion. Consequently, when teachers engage in dialogue on public issues, self-interest is diminished and knowledge may expand as a result. Assisting teachers in moving past completely egocentric thinking and thinking that ignores the perspectives of others defines this disposition. When people are involved in functional civil discourse, they display several behaviors. They undertake a serious exchange of views; they focus on the issues rather than on the individual(s) espousing them; they defend their interpretations using verified information; they thoughtfully listen to what others say; they seek the sources of disagreements and points of common
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purpose; they embody open-mindedness and a willingness to change their minds; they assume they will need to compromise and are willing to do so; they treat the ideas of others with respect; they avoid physical, emotional, and verbal violence (Leskes, 2013).

Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy considers the sociopolitical issues of knowledge and power in teaching and learning. Common elements include reflection upon one’s own cultural experience, development of voice through a critical lens, and the idea that teachers can be transformational change agents (Delpit, 1995; Freire, 1993; Giroux, 1988). Studies indicate that teachers who effectively work with culturally and linguistically diverse students demonstrate common critical ideologies and dispositions (Bartolomé, 2004; Sellen, 2011). Common ideologies include the awareness of asymmetrical power relations, the questioning of meritocratic explanations of the social order, the rejection of deficit views of minority students, and the interrogation of romanticized views of dominant culture (Bartolomé, 2004). Sellen (2011) drew upon Bartolomé’s commonalities to create a framework of six critical pedagogy dispositions:

1. An understanding of the inequities of the social order for culturally and linguistically diverse students;
2. A rejection of meritocracy as the reason for ELLs’ lack of upward mobility;
3. A rejection of the belief that ELLs’ cultures and languages are deficits;
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4. An ability to question the strengths and weaknesses of mainstream, middle-class white culture;
5. An ability to empathize with the struggles of ELLs;
6. An ability to advocate and guide ELLs through the American educational system. (p. 7)

The Socrates Café is an ideal forum to facilitate the development of ideologies and dispositions conducive to critical pedagogy practices. The dispositional elements of critical thinking, critical reflection, and civil discourse complement the aforementioned critical pedagogy dispositions. The essential intellectual traits (Paul, 1993) of humility, courage, empathy, autonomy, integrity, confidence in reason, and fair-mindedness; reflection that is meaningful, systematic, and community-oriented; valuing personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others (Dewey, 1916/2004); deliberate discussions that provide opportunities for teachers and students to exchange views civilly, thoughtfully, and respectfully for the purposes of sustaining a democracy (Hess, 2009) while using behaviors that promote civility in discussion (Leskes, 2013); and finally, the deconstruction of power and privilege, meritocracies, deficit theories, and the dominant culture (Bartolomé, 2004) are all dispositions that are supported, scaffolded, developed, and required for a successful Socrates Café.

Conclusion

Specific professional dispositions are necessary for teachers who successfully work with ELLs (Bartolomé, 2004;
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Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2014; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011; Sellen, 2011). The identification and assessment of these dispositions will grow in importance as our nation’s schools continue to become more linguistically and culturally diverse. Socrates Café adaptations for use in teacher preparation programs have shown success in scaffolding critical thinking instruction and show further promise in developing dispositions by way of the attitudinal and critical pedagogy elements.

Critical thinking, critical reflection, and civil discourse in combination with critical pedagogy contribute to the development of a dispositional repertoire integral to the success of teachers working with all students, including ELLs. The ability and desire to critically think, understand multiple perspectives, systematically reflect upon one’s own cultural experiences within a community, engage in respectful dialogue, develop voice through a critical lens, and to potentially act as a change agent are powerful dispositions. Teachers may implement Socrates Cafés in their own classrooms and advocate these same dispositions in their students, continuing the potential change impact. “It is indispensable for educators to endeavor to nurture youth into being critical thinkers capable of acting upon the world” (Bartolome, 2004, p. 119). The development of professional dispositions has significant implications for all teachers, but due to our nation’s growing diversity, especially for those who teach ELLs.

In conclusion, the following are recommendations for instructors in teacher preparation programs for developing the professional disposition of ELL teachers. Many of these
recommendations also could be adapted for a teacher’s use in his or her own classroom.

- Model the dispositions of critical thinking, critical reflection, civil discourse, and critical pedagogy.
- Make explicit the significance of these dispositions.
- Provide instructional spaces to implement Socrates Café discussions in coursework or subject areas where the dispositions may be practiced.
- Identify the dispositions displayed in a Socrates Café for assessment and or credentialing purposes.

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