

**Personal Statement**  
**Charles Ames Fischer**

*The main part of intellectual education is not the acquisition of facts but learning how to make facts live.*  
~ Oliver Wendell Holmes

Critical and creative thinking are definitely growing in importance. Before the advent of the Internet, information was a valuable resource, especially if it was collected together into a single, well-educated person. Now, however, more information than anyone could use in several lifetimes is freely available. What is more important for contemporary students is what they are able to do with information. Can they, for example, find reliable sources? Can they organize information into more complex forms? Can they synthesize multiple perspectives to create informed opinions? Can they craft something new to add to the growing pool of knowledge? Will this new idea have value?

*Creativity is a type of learning process where the teacher and pupil are located in the same individual.*  
~ Arthur Koestler

Over the past eleven years I have had the opportunity to regularly conduct very special classes called Socratic Seminars\* with elementary, middle and high school students. Specifically designed for promoting critical and creative thinking, Socratic Seminar functions on the idea “The person who does the work does the learning.” Teachers take on the role of coach or facilitator, while students do the work of thinking, asking questions, generating new ideas, analyzing evidence and more. Through the guided conversations they teach and learn from one another.

*The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery.* ~ Mark Van Doren

To the untrained eye, these seminars may simply appear to be formal discussions in which the facilitators mainly pose questions and students discuss them. Beneath the surface, however, there are hidden mechanics that teachers must monitor, record and orchestrate. One thing to look for is eye contact. Confident students will address the entire group, making eye contact with many or all participants. Tentative students, however, typically make eye contact with the teacher immediately after speaking, often to seek a verbal or somatic endorsement. By collecting various conversation data, teachers can provide their students with valuable feedback.

*You can teach a student a lesson for a day; but if you can teach him to learn by creating curiosity, he will continue the learning process as long as he lives.* ~ Clay P. Bedford

The art of asking questions is a major part of any Socratic Seminar. I have seen many versions of state curriculum frameworks and I have never come across anything comprehensive about teaching questions to students. Yet, without a question, without a *quest*, how can we truly learn? To better prepare for seminars, I teach my students different types of questions and their importance, including a great seminar tool: the word *Mu*. This Japanese word roughly translates to “unask the question” and can be masterfully used in situations when a question is somehow inherently faulty.

\* Similar forms are: Harkness, Touchstones and Paideia Seminars.

*The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn. ~ Alvin Toffler*

Students who regularly engage in Socratic Seminar develop better listening, speaking, and interpersonal skills. Because of the depth of inquiry and the number of viewpoints involved, students also develop strong critical and creative thinking skills. As a constructivist approach where students develop their own understandings, learning how to learn is the most important result.

*The Socratic method, then, is the art of teaching not philosophy but philosophizing, the art not of teaching about philosophers but of making philosophers of the students. ~ Leonard Nelson*

Socratic Seminar is a major component of my teaching practice. I have been so impressed with student dialogue in Socratic Seminar over the years that I felt compelled to write about it. I am currently writing a book that thoroughly explores the realm of Socratic Seminar, from choosing seminar materials and asking questions to facilitation strategies and assessment. I am also working on a teacher training manual focusing on critical and creative thinking. I believe that some part of the curriculum of every school must give students the opportunity to wrestle with complex ideas in deep and meaningful ways. Only with time and practice can they then become philosophers themselves.