
ONLINE DISCUSSION TOOLS FOR SOCRATIC SEMINAR

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Abstract

The author describes an educational technology tool called Kialo (<https://www.kialo-edu.com>) that may increase participation in classroom discussions.

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My classroom has always centered on student discussion and making student voices heard. This is great—until I meet a student too nervous to speak. I’ve had several who are intelligent and hardworking but terrified to answer a question or participate in a small group.

This comes to a head during one of my favorite activities: the [Socratic seminar](#). If you don’t know, Socratic seminars “are named for their embodiment of Socrates’ belief in the power of asking questions [and] prize inquiry over information and discussion over debate” (Filkins, n.d.). I use this method in a [Fishbowl Discussion format](#) in which students are placed in an inner and outer circle (Learning for Justice, n.d.). Half are inside, actively discussing. The others in the outer circle stay quiet; their role is to take notes. The discussion encourages critical thinking and dialogue, but its structure can unintentionally exclude students who struggle with verbal participation. The first time I did this, I was impressed—nearly all my students participated! However, I worried about the few who said nothing, even though they had read the text and understood it well. When conferencing with them, one said, “I had so much to say, but I hate talking in front of all those people. I just wish it could be like a big group chat where we talk about it.”

I realized I needed a tool to help these students access discussions. I scoured the web for a site that could do this. After creating accounts on about six different platforms (mostly discussion boards), I found what I was looking for.

Kialo (<https://www.kialo-edu.com>) is a live discussion tool, so you can offer students a collaborative graphic organizer or keep it simple in a real-time chatroom. Kialo gives teachers the ability to moderate or remove users as needed. Additionally, it’s entirely free, and students don’t need to create accounts. Be careful with that last point, though—without pre-approved accounts, anyone can join. Personally, I had my students create accounts so I could verify participation. Here’s how I use this site: During the discussion, students on the inside circle talk as normal. Students on the outside get to discuss virtually in Kialo, reacting in real time to the verbal discussion. I usually grade both aspects, so success requires active participation in both modalities.

In all six of my classes, they instantly loved this tool. It kept students in the outer circle engaged and gave quiet or anxious students a voice in the discussion. Whenever I mention a Socratic seminar, several hands excitedly shoot up to ask if they’ll get to use Kialo.

Truthfully, a tool like this is a scaffold, not a solution. But for many students, the positive recognition they received online gave them confidence to start sharing in real discussions. When we

give students multiple avenues to engage, they're more willing to trust their classmates, take risks, and grow as learners.

References

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Author Biography

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