The Values Education Good Practice Schools Project – Stage 2 cluster project synopses

The following has been extracted from At the Heart of What We Do: Values Education at the Centre of Schooling – The Final Report of the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project – Stage 2, August 2008.


Melbourne Interfaith Intercultural Cluster
Victoria

Socratic Circles: Many Cultures, One Community

Cluster coordinator: Catherine Devine, St Monica’s College

Participating schools:
- St Monica’s College (Catholic faith-based school)
- Thornbury Darebin Secondary College (secular-based government school)
- Australian International Academy (Islamic faith-based school)
- Siena College (Catholic faith-based school)
- The King David School (Jewish faith-based school)

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Key messages
1. Through its shared inquiry methodology, Socratic circles pedagogy encourages a deeper engagement with and understanding of values concepts in the middle secondary school.
2. Socratic circles pedagogy promotes equitable and productive discussion that respects divergent opinions, and moves participants beyond stereotypes to more sophisticated understandings.
3. The Socratic circles pedagogy can be used in a range of secondary school key learning areas to provide opportunities for social interactions among students from different cultural and faith traditions to discuss important, relevant, significant and sometimes contentious social issues.
4. Student self-expression through various artistic mediums complements and consolidates values education learning, and demonstrates the learning to new audiences, thereby strengthening values education outcomes across school communities.
5. The Socratic circles pedagogy provides a safe and supportive vehicle for students in the secondary school to explore intercultural and interfaith understandings.
The Melbourne Interfaith Intercultural Cluster’s project, *Socratic Circles: Many Cultures, One Community*, provided opportunities for students of different faiths and different cultural backgrounds to interact with one another, discuss issues relating to community identity and values, and foster greater intercultural and interfaith understanding.

The Socratic circles pedagogy, which involves the examination of important issues through shared inquiry, was integrated into curriculum design and delivery in a range of key learning areas with Year 10 students. The Socratic circles method was used to promote equitable and productive discussion on sensitive issues that were inherently loaded with very different values and cultural perspectives. The method fosters respect for divergent opinions, freedom of expression and engagement in questioning – all of which was intended to lead to greater understanding and confidence for the students involved. The method is particularly suited to use with adolescent learners in secondary schools.

The project began with a series of cluster meetings designed to enable school coordinators to distil the aims of the project and plan for meaningful student gatherings. Student gatherings were held at which the Socratic circles methodology was used to shape student discussion.

Socratic circles methodology involves grouping students into ‘inner’ circles of approximately six students who adopt a discussant position and an equal number of students into an outer circle. Those in the outer circle are asked to comment on the quality of the discussion, keeping in mind a number of criteria, such as contribution to discussion, respect for others’ opinions and other aspects of the dialogue.

A folio of stimulus material relating to a significant social or cultural issue is presented to students prior to the proposed class. The inner Socratic circle reacts to the folio material, which is often framed as a focus question, such as ‘What does it mean to be an Australian today?’ The folio might contain a poem, a newspaper article, a scene from a movie, a poster or an object destined to stimulate thought about the issue. Students are given time to think about the significance of the material in the folio and ‘read’ the text critically. Students are taught to attend to the text by highlighting significant words, phrases or larger parts of the text. They take notes on the text and these are used when they are speaking in the inner Socratic circle. The process is not confronting, as some classroom discussions can be, because students have the chance to prepare responses which encourages more considered participation. As a UAN adviser for this cluster observed:

One advantage of Socratic circles as a learning strategy is that it provides for systematic dialogue and the objectification of possible conflict.

Throughout the process, students are also taught how to formulate questions because this is a key component of the inner circle discussions. Often students are more experienced in answering questions than asking them. However, the ability to ask questions is a crucial skill in the development of dialogue and deep understanding of the values that underpin our society.

The Socratic circles methodology was used by the cluster schools during class time at each school. The cluster decided at its first meeting to directly involve students from the Year 10 level. This appeared to be the most appropriate year level as the students were not yet completing their studies for the Victorian Certificate of Education but were sufficiently mature enough to contribute to the discussions given the complexity of the content. The methodology was introduced to as many subject areas as were prepared to become involved. It was also used at different times during the year when the schools met for social and cultural gatherings, including the celebration of Purim with the King David School, Ramadan with the Australian International Academy, Saint Monica’s and Saint Catherine’s feast days with Saint Monica’s College and Siena, and on both Australia Day and Harmony Day at the Thornbury High School.

The first student gathering, held at the King David School during its festival of Purim, was an opportunity for the participating students from the non-Jewish schools to learn about Jewish culture and enjoy the informality of many of the activities. Another student gathering held at Siena College involved a tour of the local church and the school’s chapel. The religious significance of these places was explained to students. At the Australian International Academy during the month of
Ramadan students participated in an iftar meal to ‘break the fast’. Again, students learnt of the significance of this sacred ritual in the Islamic faith.

At each of these gatherings, the values of understanding, tolerance and inclusion, freedom, respect and responsibility were foregrounded. The nature of the interfaith and intercultural student mix combined with the methodology of the Socratic circle gave everyone involved the chance to express their opinions respectfully, to develop understanding of the issue and the other people involved, and to behave responsibly and inclusively. In short, the methodology became a vehicle for mediating the practice of the four values the cluster was focusing upon.

A significant feature of the cluster’s approach was the development of a collection of student artwork to express aspects of the project as the work and relationships developed. Poems, prose, music, drama and student artwork were used to complement the Socratic circles methodology. At the third student gathering, after significant engagements among students from diverse backgrounds had occurred, the focus was on art, culture and values. Each of the 60 students involved created a piece of artwork they felt expressed what they had learnt about values as a way of reinforcing them and providing a vehicle for discussing them.

Some of the feedback received from students in the form of vox pops, reflection sheets, Socratic circles feedback sheets and pre- and post-testing indicates that the interactions among some of the students resulted in a change in perception on the part of many students about other cultures. Individuals soon realised that we all share many values and through mutual respect we can come to understand each other more deeply. So too they learn and live the core values that we share and which bind us as a civil and free community. This level of improved cultural awareness is demonstrated in many of the student reflective comments:

The second Socratic circle was at the Immigration Museum and at the Yarra River, where we discussed a lot about the Aboriginal culture and values – especially about the history of the Yarra (especially to the Aborigines). We were given a tour around the Yarra and a little introduction on the history of the river when the Aboriginal people were there. Afterwards we went to the Immigration Museum and achieved more of an understanding on immigration and the Aboriginal people. We then had Socratic circles on values we shared [in Australia] – especially among the Aboriginal culture. Everyone in the circle shared their views on what they thought about the events of the day and the influence on values on Australian culture – respect, tolerance, inclusion, responsibility and acceptance. Overall I enjoyed both the Socratic circles as it was an eye-opening experience for me. It helped me to develop into a better person and improve my overall confidence. It is fantastic to be part of such a program and to share my views and ideas on various topics.

The UAN report observed that the Socratic circles method contributes significantly as a form of safe student support in managing exchange about issues with different and sometimes contentious values positions:

One of the advantages of Socratic circles is that it gives student support and direction when discussing potentially difficult and contentious issues. There is safety in the structure of the Socratic circle. Students know their roles, they have had an opportunity to read material from the media file; they are not being asked questions they haven’t seen before, or asked about things they haven’t had a chance to think about before.

Finally, students overwhelmingly report that their confidence in speaking publicly was increased by their participation in Socratic circles methodology. It would therefore seem that the Socratic circles technique plays a role in improving students’ communicative abilities as well as deepening their understanding of different world views and different values perspectives.