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**STRATEGY: Socratic Seminar**

**Explanation:** Socratic seminar is a whole-group discussion technique that involves asking a series of thought-provoking questions to stimulate critical thinking, illuminate ideas, and uncover underlying assumptions around a shared text. This falls under the idea of argumentation because it encourages students to engage deeply with the material and develop their own insights through student-to-student dialogue.

**Why this is impactful:** Socratic seminar can be used regardless of the content to push for deeper insight, connection, and perspective. With its roots in philosophy and psychology, Socratic seminar is designed to stimulate critical thinking, expose contradictions, and lead learners to consolidate and elaborate understanding through dialogue. Although many questioning methods are designed to elicit a single answer, the power of Socratic questioning lies in its open-ended, probing questions so that students begin to put information together, reconstruct it in meaningful ways, and have AHA! moments in thinking as they build understanding with their classmates.

**How this fits in the GRR:** Although the teacher has a set of questions prepared to probe student thinking, the power of this strategy lies in the collaborative learning and dialogue amongst students. The teacher will pose the central question, but the role of the teacher is not to lead the discussion—it's to activate it and encourage student-to-student dialogue.

**Checks for Understanding:**

- Listen to current understanding. Determine if students understand isolated facts, have a general idea about the topic, or can make connections. Adjust questioning to push students to the higher level.

**Variations:**

- Use guided Socratic questioning. Instead of the dialogue flowing freely among student groups, guided Socratic questioning offers a scaffold where the conversation flows through the teacher more frequently. The goal, however, is that students bear the onus of dialogue, but guided Socratic questioning offers an entry point.
- Use the Socratic strings approach, in which students pass around a string or an object in a larger classroom circle and take turns clarifying, building on, questioning, and deepening each other's knowledge. The string gives a visual for students and their contributions in class.

**Related Strategies:**

Questioning  
Fishbowl Discussion  
Debate Corners

Self-Explanation  
Elaborative Interrogation

## STEP BY STEP

### Preparation:

1. **Identify the content.** Choose powerful texts that are complex and debatable so that students have the room to offer a different perspective. Effective texts include those that have multiple meanings, interpretation, and, perhaps, dilemmas.
2. **Prepare Socratic questions.** Determine what students need to know and understand at deep levels and orient questions to pursue those ideas. A teacher can prepare just-in-case questions that scaffold the content in case students struggle to think deeply. The questions should not push students to think one way or another but instead are neutral. Ask questions in the following ways (adapted from Sutton, 2020):
  - Clarify what students mean: "What do you mean by that?" "Can you give me an example?"
  - Challenge students to examine the assumptions underlying their thoughts: "What are you assuming here?" "Is this always the case?"
  - Seek evidence and reasons for statements and beliefs: "What evidence supports this idea?" "Why do you think this is true?" "Can you tell me more?" "How do you know?"
  - Explore different viewpoints and perspectives: "What are some alternative ways of looking at this?" "How would someone else perceive this?"
  - Examine the implications and consequences of ideas: "What might be the consequences of this?" "How does this affect other aspects?"
  - Reflect on the questions themselves to deepen understanding: "Why do you think this question is important?" "What does this question assume?"

### Implementation:

- **Provide students with norms to ensure equitable participation.** Because the Socratic Seminar strategy involves student dialogue, establish norms about what successful conversation looks and sounds like. Students should be expected to clarify their thinking, build on others' ideas, offer different perspectives, and ask questions.
- **Structure the discussion.** Initiate the first question. Allow students think time to formulate a response.
- **Offer up questions.** Use Socratic questions to move the conversation when it stalls.
- **Summarize what is said.** Throughout the conversation, summarize what has been said without offering any perspective as a way to name the flow of the conversation.
- **Reflect on discussion.** Have students reflect verbally or in writing to share their understanding, to note how their understanding is strengthened or changed, or to pose any lingering questions they still have.
- **Don't panic.** Sometimes discussion doesn't go as planned. Perhaps it's too quiet or out of control. Instead of abandoning discussion altogether, as a teacher reflect on what went well and what areas need improvement.