

SOCRATIC DISCUSSION

A response to the example script shown on the Victorian Department of Education website

The table below outlines what I would think, say and do if I were facilitating the illustrative Year 5/6 discussion shown in the ‘Socratic discussion’ script on the Victorian Department of Education and Training website (as discussed in my blog post ‘Doing Without Socrates’). The left-most column below replicates participants contributions to the discussion as shown on the script, while the remaining columns indicate the observations that I would make, the intentions and goals I would be guided by, and the actions I would pursue if I were to find myself in the role of discussion facilitator in that Year 5/6 classroom.

Comment/question from original transcript	My observation	My intention	My goal	I would write/ask/say:
<i>Teacher’s opening question:</i> In many countries, voters choose whether to vote or not. What do you think about compulsory voting in Australia?	This is question is unfocused and therefore poorly formulated for eliciting dialogic argument.	Begin with a clearly focused question.*	Develop students’ skill in dialogic argument.	Ask instead: ‘Do you believe that voting in Australia ought to be compulsory?’ – or alternatively, ‘Do you think voting in Australia ought to be made optional?’
My point of view is that voting should be up to each person. If you don’t want to vote you shouldn’t have to. What do other people think?	The student’s second sentence is an elaboration, not a justification.	Elicit the student’s reason.	Foster habit of reason-giving.	Ask: ‘Before we move on to hearing other people’s views, could you clarify for us why you think that the question of whether to vote should be a matter of individual choice?’

* Often, a grammatically closed question works best. See Worley, P. ‘Open Thinking, Closed Questioning: Two kinds of open and closed question’. *Journal of Philosophy in Schools* 2(2), 2015.

Comment/question from original transcript	My observation	My intention	My goal	I would write/ask/say:
I disagree with that. I think everyone has a responsibility to participate in the community. If people don't vote they don't get a voice or a say.	<p>The student has accurately identified her contribution as an expression of disagreement.</p> <p>The student has given two reasons without indicating their independence or relationship.</p>	Clarify the independence or relationship of the given reasons.	Foster habit of identifying reasons and connecting ideas.	<p>Scribe the following on the board (under a heading 'Voting should be compulsory because...'):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - voters have a responsibility to participate in the community - voters each ought to have a say in who will be elected <p>Say: 'Do these notes capture your ideas correctly? ... Are these two <i>separate</i> reasons for favouring compulsory voting, or are they somehow connected?'</p>
	The first reason given requires elaboration.	Seek elaboration.	Foster habit of elaborating complex ideas and uncovering assumptions.	Ask: 'In what sense is voting fulfilling a responsibility to the community?' – or alternatively, 'How does the community at large benefit from compulsory voting?'
	This student has made a helpful contribution by beginning the process of generating reasons in support of compulsory voting.	Seek further reasons on both sides.	Foster habit of seeking breadth and completeness.	<p>Ask: 'Can anyone suggest some further reasons why voting should be compulsory?'</p> <p>Later, ask: 'Does anyone think that voting <i>shouldn't</i> be compulsory? Can you let us know your reasons?' [Scribe on board.]</p>
I'd like to build on what has been said by adding that some groups of people might just give up and then we would only get the opinions of the loudest or strongest people. They might not be the best voices.	This student has not made clear which side of the argument she is building on.	Seek clarification as to the student's position.	Foster habit of clarifying positions.	Ask: 'Just to clarify, are you offering a reason <i>against</i> compulsory voting here?'

Comment/question from original transcript	My observation	My intention	My goal	I would write/ask/say:
Can you clarify what you mean by some groups of people giving up?	This is a fair question, and could be followed with a more in-depth exploration.	Invite analysis.	Foster depth and thoroughness of analysis.	Ask: 'Do you think those voters are less inclined to give up on expressing their views under a compulsory voting system? Or do you think they're just as likely to give up, and not show up to vote – or else cast an informal vote?'
I'd like to offer a connection to this discussion. Think of our school. The best way we get a say in what happens is through the student representative council (SRC). Remember when we And we bought it up at the SRC and..... Well voting is the same as that. We get electors who can represent us and what we think. They make the laws for us.	While examples connecting with students' personal experience should be encouraged where relevant, this example does not seem relevant to the discussion. It appears to be merely a defence of representative democracy. The question of compulsory voting is about who should participate in the process of electing representatives, whereas in the example given, the issue raised is about how students succeed in getting their elected representatives to act on their behalf. So – to the extent that the analogy between SRC and Government holds – the example given says more about the effectiveness of <i>lobbying</i> representatives than of <i>electing</i> them.	Anchor back to the question.	Foster habit of maintaining relevance.	Say: 'We're discussing who should be involved in voting for members of Parliament. Can you explain how the example you've given relates to this question of who should be involved in the election process?' Perhaps add: 'Did you want to say something about how the SRC was elected? Should it have been compulsory for everyone in the school to cast a vote to elect the SRC representatives? If so, why?'

Comment/question from original transcript	My observation	My intention	My goal	I would write/ask/say:
Are there any groups who would disagree with wanting everyone to vote? I think some racist groups might not want other people to have a say. What do you think?	This student is raising a new question. Before diverting to a new question, we should investigate how the student's stated view bears on the original question.	'If' and anchor back to the question.	Foster habit of maintaining relevance.	Ask: 'If racist groups opposed compulsory voting because they didn't want certain people to vote, would that influence your decision as to whether voting should be compulsory? What impact would it have on your decision?'
Do you think that there would be as many people interested in the decisions the government make if they didn't have to vote?	This is a useful question for inviting students to examine a possible defence of compulsory voting.	Raise a possible argument and ascertain whether it corresponds with students' intuitive beliefs.	Foster habit of interrogating beliefs.	Follow up by asking: 'Is there a 'virtuous cycle' between voting and taking an interest in government decisions? Does each strengthen the other?'
Why do you think some people choose not to vote?	Students may not have the requisite knowledge to answer this. It might be better to present some research-based findings about why people choose not to vote, and then challenge students to evaluate whether the reasons given detract from the argument for compulsory voting.	Require students to draw a conclusion on the basis of a consideration of the persuasiveness of evidence.	Foster epistemological evaluativism.	Say: 'We know from sociological research that some people choose not to vote because [X, Y & Z]. Do you think these are legitimate reasons not to vote? Are you inclined to alter your view on the question of whether voting should be compulsory in light of these research findings?'