

Socratic Smackdown Activity

The Socratic Smackdown activity was adapted for use in a university-level academic oral English skills course for international students. The original Socratic Smackdown was designed by educator Rebecca Grodner to gamify middle and high school students' development of argumentation skills around a range of topics and texts. (Access and download the original Socratic Smackdown [here](#).) The game can be modified by instructors to meet the learning goals of the course. Areas for adaptation include the learning outcomes, the discussion strategies being targeted, and the rating system for scoring purposes. Ultimately, the aim is to raise everyone's awareness and competency with critical argumentation skills and oral discussion strategies.

Introduction

In higher education settings, students are regularly required to participate in group discussions. Practicing discussion skills will prepare students for effective oral communication with other students, instructors, colleagues and professionals. The Socratic Smackdown activity targets the following learning outcomes, which align with [Common Core State Standards](#).

Learning Outcomes

In this game, students will:

1. Come to discussions prepared, having read or researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text, or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1a)
2. Follow rules for collegial discussions and decision making, track progress toward specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1b)
3. Pose questions that connect the ideas of several speakers and respond to others' questions and comments with relevant evidence, observations, and ideas. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1c)
4. Acknowledge new information expressed by others, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views in light of the evidence presented. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1d)

Guidelines

1. The instructor should pre-assign a topic or text to be the focus of the activity, or let students generate ideas to choose from.
2. Divide students into teams of 4-6. Provide them with the materials they'll need to prepare prior to class, including resources related to the topic, texts to read or listen to, and guiding questions for the discussion.

3. Prior to the game, review the scoring system and scorecard so that the entire class is familiar with the various discussion strategies and point values. (See Appendix A.)
4. The Socratic Smackdown is a fishbowl activity. The first team to engage in discussion will form an inner circle, while the observers (scorekeepers) will form an outer circle surrounding them. If the class is online, this can be modified.
5. The team inside the fish bowl arrangement will have 10 minutes to hold a discussion on the designated topic or text.
6. The instructor and students in the outer circle will use the scorecard (see Appendix B) to track the various moves made within the discussion. Students gain points for certain strategies, and lost points for moves that disrupt the discussion.
7. In the end, each team's points will be averaged to determine a winner.
8. As a wrap up, the instructor and students can share insights about what makes an effective discussion and what presents challenges. They can note strengths and areas for growth that emerged during each team's discussion.

Appendix A: Socratic Smackdown Strategies and Scoring System

Discussion Strategy	Points	Description and/or Example
Agreement with support	+1	I totally agree with your idea <i>because...</i>
Disagreement with support	+1	I don't agree with that statement <i>because...</i>
Follow up question	+1	You make a good point, but have you wondered if...
Use hedging language	+1	<i>Perhaps</i> you are missing the fact that... It's <i>possible</i> that could work, but it <i>may not be</i> feasible because... more here
Summarizing	+1	Summarizing what others have said to add your own information
Use evidence from outside source	+2	The speaker stated that... According to the author, 97% of all humans...
Devil's advocate	+2	Pose a question or situation that is counter to the person's argument: -Argument: High school students should not start class before 8:30 am

		-Devils Advocate: But you fail to think of the impact that will have on bus schedules...
Connect	+2	Link a person's argument with another person's previous statement -You claim that starting school at 9 is a better idea, but Carlos stated that this change will affect bus routes. What is your reaction to his statement?
Clarifying	+2	I am not sure I fully understand your opinion, could you clarify what you mean by...
Dominating	-1	Speaking way more frequently than others and not giving others the option to talk
Distract	-1	Distract team or class from discussion (i.e., making off topic or inappropriate comments)
Vague language	-1	Make statements that are very general and do not contribute any substance to the conversation
Insult	-1	Say something insulting: e.g., "That idea is stupid."
Interrupt rudely	-1	Talk over someone or fail to use polite interruption language
Doesn't speak or only speaks when asked	-2	You have to listen and participate to get points

Appendix B: Socratic Smackdown Scoring

Discussion Strategy	Names →					
	Points Possible	Student 1 Points	Student 2 Points	Student 3 Points	Student 4 Points	Student 5 Points
Agreeing	+1					

Disagreeing	+1					
Follow up question	+1					
Using hedging language	+1					
Summarizing	+1					
Using evidence	+2					
Devil's advocate	+2					
Connecting	+2					
Clarifying	+2					
Dominating	-1					
Distract	-1					
Using vague language	-1					
Insulting	-1					
Interrupting rudely	-1					
Not speaking	-2					

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5
Student Totals:					
Comments & Team Total:					