

Classroom materials

Ingrid Seitz

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In recent years, the Classroom Materials section of *JAAL* has been coordinated by Jeanne McGlenn. Jeanne has contributed to the success of the journal in many ways, and I extend my sincere thanks for her efforts.

Beginning with this issue, the Classroom Materials department will be coordinated by Ingrid Seitz. Ingrid is a thoughtful and talented classroom teacher at Anthony Middle School in Manhattan, Kansas, USA, and I am grateful for her willingness to assume responsibility for the department. I have no doubt *JAAL* readers will appreciate her insights as well. Books for review may be sent to Ingrid Seitz, 3028 Tamarak Drive, Manhattan, KS 66503, USA.

F. Todd Goodson, editor

Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in Middle and High School

Reviewed by Ingrid Seitz, Anthony Middle School, Manhattan, Kansas, USA.

I begin this column with an introduction and an invitation. I am a classroom teacher, accepting the challenges, frustrations, and nuances inherent in teaching adolescents; enjoying the sometimes poignant, yet frequent hilarious aspects of this job; and all the while reveling in the content that I love. I am one of those educators, probably much like you, who spends her spare time reading and researching best practices that will work with my students, excited about trying the new practices that I have read about, and who actively seeks out colleagues who share my love of teaching and learning. It is with this foundation that I introduce myself to you as the new coordinator of the Classroom Materials review section of *JAAL*. I invite you look for this column as a place to explore new professional literature that has the potential to enhance the learning in your own classroom.

I am pleased to bring forward today the recently released book, *Socratic Circles* by Matt

Copeland. Socratic Circles are in-class discussions focusing on a particular piece of text students have spent time reading and analyzing. However, the nature and process of the ensuing discussion differ from the typical teacher-led, question-and-answer discussion. These discussions are entirely student led. It is said that wisdom begins in wonder. That being the case, the effectively implemented Socratic Circle method of classroom discussion can enhance reading comprehension, improve listening and speaking skills, and promote critical thinking initiated by that natural wonder.

The book provides an introduction to the benefits and importance of student-led discussion and, perhaps more significant for the classroom teacher, resources and materials needed to easily begin, implement, and sustain this program in your own curriculum.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to have Matt Copeland visit my seventh-grade classroom and conduct a day of Socratic Circles. I was doubtful, at first, of my students' abilities to participate in this higher level thinking activity. I felt that, perhaps, it was a discourse that worked best at the high school level. To my pleasant surprise, I was wrong. With Matt's gentle direction, the students stepped up and led the way. In the years

since, I have used this method of discussion throughout the year in a number of ways, including a particularly effective preunit discussion and a postunit closure. The students love it and ask when the Socratic Circles will again take place. Each time, I have an “ah ha” moment and relive the joy of why I went into teaching in the first place.

In his own words, Mr. Copeland

sees students getting excited about what they are learning and excited about the parallels they can draw between ideas and their own lives. I hope this book reads as part philosophy, part narrative, and part coaching guide so that classroom teachers see how the strategy can affect students and alter the paradigm of learning. If it helps teachers to see the power of dialogue and propels them to begin discussing their pedagogy and

practice with other teachers as well, I'll be ecstatic. (Personal communication, April 12, 2005)

The author has established a blog where teachers can join together in a professional learning community posing questions and discussing use of the Socratic Circle method of critical and creative thinking at <http://socratic.fetchbook.info>.

I recommend *Socratic Circles* to you wholeheartedly as a reader-friendly text that offers a step-by-step formula needed to conduct a Socratic Circle in your own classroom. Teachers in search of support for critical thinking skills, ways of involving students in their own learning, and methods for becoming a proud observer—open the pages and fall into a wonderful opportunity.

Matt Copeland. 2005. Portland, ME: Stenhouse. 176 pp. ISBN 1-57110-394-5. US\$17.50.

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