

Hear me through a legend: Incorporating literature from around the world

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Summary: Skillful deployment of interpretive and evaluative questions within a Socratic seminar deepens students' understanding of the ideas and issues in a complex story while empowering them to express themselves. This article advocates for incorporating literature from around the world to show the universal values found in inclusive classrooms.

Keywords: Socratic seminar, shared inquiry, interpretive questions, evaluative questions, Mehregaan

Connecting Old and New

In my social studies methods course designed for teacher candidates, when teaching about the Socratic discussion model, I use a variety of historical documents (e.g., The Pledge of Allegiance, Gettysburg Address) and stories from Native American sources and international literature too. The story of Kaaveh the Blacksmith who stood up to Zah-haak, a tyrannical king who ruled Iran for 1,000 years minus one day, is a story for all ages (see below for a synopsis). This story is from *Shahnameh/The Book of Kings* written by Ferdowsi (1959/2537 Shahanshahi) over 1,000 years ago. Ferdowsi spent over 30 years writing the epic account of Iranian legends and history in poetry. In this constructivist approach to a shared inquiry, students enhance each other's understanding of the story through discussion (Parker, 2012). They analyze the story and study the motives of the main characters by drawing connections to current happenings in the country and around the world.

Studying the ancient Iranian festival of Mehregaan (Kaviani, 2017) brings focus to the perennial issues of how to create good governance, and what individual responsibilities we have in maintaining a democratic society. A classroom is a perfect place to examine public issues as a way of allowing children to experience good governance and develop the skills necessary for maintaining

our democracy. One approach to enhance inclusive classrooms is by acknowledging students' cultural diversity when incorporating international literature in the curriculum.

Importance of Thought-Provoking Questions

In this form of teaching, the purpose and norms of the Socratic seminar are on display (see Figure 1). The story has several layers and details that are exposed through carefully crafted questions the Socratic seminar leader poses to the students. The interpretive questions focus on the main ideas and issues of the story, while the evaluative questions draw attention to the right and wrong behaviors exhibited by the major characters (see Figure 2). To answer the interpretive questions, the students' eyes are drawn to the text while searching for relevant explanations to warrant their claims. In contrast, when answering the evaluative questions, the students' eyes may wander around the room or stare into the distance before expressing a personal feeling/opinion about the issue. A combination of interpretive and evaluative

<p>Figure 1: Socratic Seminar Poster</p>
<p>Purpose: To achieve a deeper understanding of the ideas and issues in the legend of Mehregaan.</p>
<p>Norms:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Don't raise your hand. 2. Address one another. 3. Refer to the Legend as needed.

<p>Figure 2: Interpretive and Evaluative Questions</p>	
<p>Attributes of Interpretive Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on the main ideas and issues in the "text." Text can be a movie, a story, part of a document, etc. 2. There are more than one answer. 3. Answers can be found or supported by the "text." 	<p>Examples:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What's the main message of Mehregaan? 2. Which part of the legend had a powerful message? 3. What was the endgame for Ebless? 4. What parallels do you see between this story and what's going on in Iran today? 5. What lessons can we learn from this story that can apply to our society?
<p>Attributes of Evaluative Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Questions are about judgment calls. 2. Claims are supported by the individuals, not necessarily by the story. 	<p>Examples:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Was it right for the people to imprison Zah-haak? 2. Should Zah-haak have received the death penalty? 3. Did you like the story? 4. Should the teaching of legends from around the world be incorporated into school curriculum?

The Story of Mehregaan

The legend of Mehregaan begins with King Jamsheed who is smart and quite innovative. He becomes egotistical and self-aggrandizing when he concentrates religious and political powers into his hands. In essence, using modern language to describe the situation, King Jamsheed violates the separation of church and state. After being overthrown by the people who opposed him, a new ruthless ruler replaces King Jamsheed. Zah-haak is his name. He symbolizes a tyrannical rule that uses force against the people while wanting to appear popular.

Zah-haak is very ambitious and wants to rule the world. Zah-haak is persuaded by Eblees, a nefarious spreader of chaos who seeks to destroy humans, to kill his father and become the new king. Through magic, Eblees becomes a chef and introduces meat to Zah-haak's diet. Intrigued and pleased with his new chef, Zah-haak asks Eblees what he wants as a reward. Eblees asks to kiss Zah-haak's shoulders. After kissing them, he disappears! Soon after, two snakes grow from Zah-haak's shoulders that frighten the king and all those around him. Every time the snakes are cut, new ones grow back. Terrified and confused, he summons the best physicians and demands a cure. For the third time, Eblees shows up as a doctor and convinces Zah-haak that if he really wants the snakes to become harmless and eventually die, the brains of two young men should be fed to his snakes.

Over time, people realize the mistake of giving Zah-haak the power to rule over them. However, by this time, people are too afraid to resist as their sons are taken away by Zah-haak's henchmen. Sensing that people are disgusted with his rule, Zah-haak starts a public relations campaign to project a softer side of himself by inviting the locals to his palace and asking them for their pledge of loyalty. One of the people who goes to the palace is a blacksmith named Kaaveh. After demanding the immediate release of his son from Zah-haak's prison, Kaaveh refuses to sign the oath of loyalty to Zah-haak and storms out of the palace. Kaaveh leads a successful revolt against the monster king. Zah-haak is overthrown and put in a prison under Damaavand Mountain. According to the legend, every time Damaavand rumbles, people say Zah-haak is talking.

Today, people in Iran, Tajikistan, and other countries celebrate this victory in October as the autumn festival of Mehregaan. The festivities used to go on for six days and ended on the day of Raam, meaning Happiness, Peace, and Tranquility. Raam Day is set aside for personal contemplation and thinking about the role each person plays in creating the conditions in their home, neighborhood, city, and country.



questions ensures deeper understanding of the text by allowing the students to see themselves as active characters making decisions in moral dilemmas that are consequential.

Planning for a Successful Discussion

The odds of having a successful class discussion improve when the chosen text is rich with plots and moral tensions. Students are prepped for discussion by presenting them with 2-3 questions to answer (see Figure 3) so that when they come to class, they are ready to sit in the discussion circle and share their views openly. I have found graphic organizers/foldables to be popular with students because they can personalize their answers. In addition, they learn about group interaction etiquette (e.g., taking turns to speak, not interrupting others, and listening to understand.) and essential qualities (e.g., keeping an open mind, speaking freely, respecting peers, assuming the best intentions, considering the evidence, and being willing to clarify.) that should be present when sitting in a circle to discuss issues with their peers (Dillon, 1994).

Discussions are particularly beneficial for Multilingual Learners because they can prepare some of their answers ahead of time and can decide when they want to contribute to the discussion by speaking or listening to their peers.

Through repeated exposure to Socratic seminars, students learn to consider other viewpoints and express their own ideas in

a respectful manner. Six to ten minutes into discussion, I summarize what each person has said. This act signals to the students that their ideas are being heard and valued as the exchange of opinions evolves spontaneously. When a student is speaking, I deliberately break eye contact with that person and focus on my writing down their words, thus, forcing them to look for other eyes to connect with. There is a delicate balance between my urge to control the discussion by posing new questions when I feel that comments may be off-topic versus my desire to trust the group to construct new meanings as

they make sense of the text. Other techniques I typically use are asking students to clarify what they mean, inviting them to consider other perspectives, welcoming new voices into the conversation, or asking for further clarification of concepts.

After discussing the story for about 30 minutes while leaving additional room for further exploration of the issues, the participants express how their understanding of the legend of Mehregaan improved. Next, students are asked to share their observations about the participation of their peers during the discussion (e.g., “I noticed the guys dominated the conversation.” “I noticed this side of class was quiet.”), to say what they liked about the seminar, and to have the opportunity to bring up questions (see Figure 4). Ending the seminar before all ideas are exhausted allows students to continue examining the issues in their minds.

For post discussion, the related homework assignment can be designed based on multiple intelligences learning styles (Gardner, 1983). Like an exit ticket, students complete a non-graded self-evaluation survey (see Figure 5) to gauge their participation level, appropriate responses to others, and new insights gained. This approach contributes to strengthening a culture of open dialogue, trust, and respect in the classroom.

Figure 3: Sample Seminar Ticket

Name:
 Class Period:
 Date:
 Topic:

Please answer these questions.

1. What were your takeaways from this story?
2. Design a logo for or against Zah-haak: Imagine you were carrying a sign outside of Zah-haak’s palace. What would your sign look like?

Figure 4: Wrapping up the Seminar

Sample questions:

1. How did your understanding of the legend improve?
2. What did you like about our discussion?
3. What suggestions do you have for improving our future discussion?
4. What did you notice about participation patterns during our discussion?
5. What questions do you still have?

Figure 5: Sample Self-Evaluation After Discussion

Score yourself from 1–5 in each of the categories below based on the following criteria:

5 = Very happy 4 = Happy 3 = Not sure 2 = Unhappy 1 = Very unhappy

Quality of my contribution	Level of involvement
Ability to express my ideas	New insights I gained
Referring to the text	Listening to my peers
Appropriate responses to my peers	

I also wanted to say...

Lessons of Mehregaan

After discussing the story of Mehregaan, the students discover the dangers of following someone else’s persuasive talk without thinking it through, and the high cost of blind followership of arrogant leaders. The fact that the brain was fed to the snakes underscores the symbolic importance of rational thinking and sound decision-making. As the students discuss whether the punishment for Zah-haak was appropriate, they examine the role of the state in capital punishment and whether life without parole is an appropriate verdict in cases of mass murder and other heinous crimes.

Subsequent to discussion of Mehregaan, I would often hear from different cohorts that being exposed to this story in elementary school (grades 5 and up), when they were dealing with unwanted peer-pressure, would have been beneficial. They saw a powerful example of courage and informed decision-making, just like Kaaveh, when standing up to bullying and other forms of injustice. Socratic seminar empowers students by valuing their ideas and creating opportunities for authentic engagement with complex texts.

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CITE THIS ARTICLE

Kaviani, K. (2023). Hear me through a legend: Incorporating literature from around the world. *WAESOL Educator*, 48(1), 13-16.



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