

Socratic Seminar Student Learning Plan

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Context:

Title: Decoding Machiavelli

Grade/Class: 9th Grade World History

Length: Two 90-minute class periods

Text: Chapters XVII and XVIII of Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*

Background Information: Written in 1513, *The Prince* is considered by many to be the first modern treatise on political philosophy. Written by Italian diplomat Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* offers no allegiance to the abstract ideals of morality. While the Church aimed to shield its followers from Machiavelli's cold world, *The Prince* preaches that a prince must do whatever is necessary to achieve glory among Alexander, Augustus, and others. Machiavelli advises a prince to murder when prudent, instill fear to maintain order, connive as though a fox, and roar as though a lion. Machiavelli counsels a prince to constantly study war and to embrace his hell-bound fate if he is serious about his rule. *The Prince's* God is his principality, and his judges are the historians who will echo his name through eternity. Machiavelli writes this text directly to the leader of Florence, with whom he wished to reestablish good ties.

Rationale: Few texts are mentioned by title in the Virginia SOLs for World History I. This is one of them, and it is also one of the most misunderstood texts in popular political theory. The deep investigation afforded by Socratic seminars is perfect for this type of text. Machiavelli is a villain to the popular imagination. His name colloquially means "cunning, scheming, unscrupulous." However, his text hides nothing; he puts on display the inner workings of every executive that wishes to maintain power. His text is considered the "Koran of courtiers" and has been praised by generations of world leaders. Close readers believe his work to actually be a *satire*, meaning to give bad advice to ambitious princes. It is interesting that the writers of the SOLs ignore this deeper reading of *The Prince* and aim only to perpetuate the modern stereotypes of the text. Through careful examination of the text, guided questioning, and discursive learning students can glean the more important elements of Machiavelli: solving problems decisively, the impossibility of securing a hostile people, being *good* as a default and *evil* as a necessity, to be willing to go to hell for the state, to be clever as a fox and strong as a lion, that while advisors are necessary you must make all the decisions, and *most importantly* that there is no *moral grounding* for law. It is always coercive. In the cold world of Niccolo Machiavelli, opportunity is the brother of luck, and both are the offspring of *virtu* – virtue. This text is a perfect introduction to the very conversations that define political theory today, and the best way to study them is in that exact form: a conversation.

Instructional Model:

A fishbowl discussion is, according to Larson and Keiper, designed to "help students develop effective group skills of participation and observation." The class is split into two groups. One will be inside the "fishbowl" and engage in the discussion while the second will remain outside the "fishbowl" and observe and record the actions of their partner inside. The fishbowl ensures that by keeping the discussing group small, most students will participate, while also giving an important task to those not engaged in the discussion verbally. Listening is as important as speaking, if not more so, and students will benefit from

learning patience. This text is of immutable importance in western philosophy; it shapes the behavior of modern and historical politicians and autocrats. The best reason to use a Socratic method is because it gives students ownership of the text; they have not simply read *The Prince*, they now have an intelligent opinion about it. It is an excellent tool to have in their political kit going forward as it is in large part the basis for political realism. As ninth graders, they will use this text to approach the classes they will take in their future careers in high school, particularly government and US History.

Objectives:

The student will demonstrate knowledge of developments leading to the Renaissance in Europe in terms of its impact on Western civilization by sequencing events related to the rise of Italian city-states and their political development, including Machiavelli's theory of governing as described in *The Prince*.

(WHI.13b)

Students will debate that *The Prince* argues for the absolute power of the ruler by discussing the fourth question of the seminar.

Students will discuss whether "the end justifies the means" in the seminar format.

Students will consider what the nature of "good" and "evil" are in Machiavelli's writing by reading chapters XVII and XVIII of *The Prince* and responding to the entry ticket question.

Students will complete an entry ticket for a fishbowl discussion on *The Prince* to show they have read the text and considered the questions in advance as a means of preparing for their first academic seminar.

During their discussion, students will maintain the norms listed below.

Observing students will record the actions of their partner inside the fishbowl.

Students will complete and turn in an exit ticket with final reflecting questions on the fishbowl discussion.

Assessment:

While I agree that authentic seminars do not necessarily have a concrete end goal in mind, this lesson is tied directly to a Virginia SOL, so the preparation and questions I guide students with will be aimed at addressing the chief concerns of Virginia first. With those covered, we can also explore some of the great questions being debated by scholars of Machiavelli as well. Because this will likely be the first seminar they have ever done, I will weigh heavily the entry, observation, and exit tickets. This way, if they get nervous during the discussion and do not feel comfortable contributing much, their grade will not suffer greatly. While the skill of discussion is important, so too is critical reading, observing, and synthesizing. I will assess the skill of discussion during their time participating in the seminar. I will assess critical reading by collecting and reviewing their entry tickets. I will address their observation skills by assessing how well they assess their peers. Finally, I will evaluate their synthesizing skill by reviewing their exit ticket. Therefore, I will emphasize to students that all elements of their participation will be weighed. They will receive feedback on the tickets they fill out about the content of the tickets and the discussion itself. These assessments will align with the Virginia SOLs because they all contribute to students' understanding of 13b.

Content and Instructional Strategies:

Opening Question:

Group 1: What does it take to be Machiavelli's Prince? (5 minutes)

Group 2: Would you want to be Machiavelli's Prince? Give examples from the text. (5 minutes)

Core Questions:

Group 1: (20 minutes)

- 1) What does Machiavelli have to say about Cesare Borgia?
- 2) What drawbacks does Machiavelli see in being merciful?
- 3) Is it better to be feared or loved? Which argument by Machiavelli is more compelling?
- 4) What is the difference between hatred and fear? Give examples from the text.
- 5) What does Machiavelli mean when he advises a Prince “should pick the fox and the lion”?
 - a. Why does one need to recognize both snares and wolves?
 - b. What is a fox for Machiavelli?
 - c. What is a lion?
- 6) Does *The Prince* argue for the absolute power of a ruler?

Group 2: (20 minutes)

- 7) Why do you think modern observers call Machiavelli “cruel” and “ruthless”?
- 8) Why is it significant for Machiavelli to argue that a Prince must sometimes act “against his faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion”?
 - a. Who is Machiavelli’s audience?
 - b. Why is the Church significant in Italy?
- 9) “One looks to the end” is a landmark statement in political theory. How does Machiavelli use it here and why is it an important concept to consider?
- 10) (Follow-up) What regard does Machiavelli have for Christianity? Give examples from the text.

-Preparation for Seminar (seminar text): (40 minutes)

1) Students will need a brief background of Florence and Italian politics. Questions like: Who is Cesare Borgia? Where is Florence? will be answered in a short lecture (15 minutes) to give historical context. Students need a brief background of Niccolò Machiavelli. I will have a bio prepared and reveal the circumstances of his writing this book (which was not published until after he died). For whom is this book written? This is an important question; this was first addressed directly to the ruler of Florence alone. At this point, I will also model a strategy for annotating the text called “bookmarking”. Students will fold a piece of paper in thirds. On the front, they will write “how I feel” and record their emotions during the reading. Below that, they will write an “important passage”. Finally, on the back, they will write “lingering questions” from the text.

2) The entry ticket for each group will simply be the questions that I will use for the discussion. I think that it is important to calm the fears some students will express when faced with such a discussion format. I will ask students to read the text *and then* I will distribute the entry ticket, so that students do not skip large portions of the text looking specifically to answer the questions I have introduced.

-Room Arrangement: Because of space considerations the room will have to be arranged in one large circle. If possible, we can do two separate circles or one circle inside another circle.

-Preparation for Seminar (discussion skills): (40 minutes) Students will need two classes to complete this type of seminar. In the first class, they will read the text and annotate. I will model proper annotation procedures in the first paragraph. After they have completed the reading, I will ask them to get into small groups and model the Socratic discussion for them. This will be considered a practice round. I’m not sure if this will take away from the authenticity of the later discussion. I will lay out the expectations that all students participate, students refer back to the text, that no students need to raise their hands, that one should not interrupt another, that comments should build off of previous thoughts. The ticket to get into the discussion is a completely filled out sheet with the focusing questions of the discussion. I will give students the ticket after we discuss the norms and allow them to work on it for the remainder of the first

ninety-minute class period. They will be asked to do so individually unless given special permission. No ticket means the student will only observe the discussion.

-Procedures for the seminar: As I outlined briefly above, the class is split into two groups. Group one will create a small circle within group two's circle. Persons in group two will be pair with persons in group one, whom they will observe throughout the discussion. I will inform students that I will use their notes to judge how well they observed and consult their observations when evaluating the discussion. I will remind discussants of the norms we practiced in the previous class period. I will remind them that I will not be involved in the discussion except when absolutely necessary. Then, I will pose the opening question.

-Post-Seminar and Debrief: In other types of lessons, it might be prudent to make up an "exit-ticket" before class begins so that the teacher may anticipate the direction of the lesson and ensure students leave the class with a certain understanding or skill. However, the nature of the seminar is such that it is difficult to predict how students may take the discussion. For this reason, I will ask students to reflect less on the content of the discussion and more on the mechanics (how they felt it went for them, who spoke a lot, what they would have done differently).

Resources:

There are not many resources needed for this type of lesson. I will make copies of the entry ticket for each group, the observation form (attached), and the text itself. I will also need desks that are not attached to the floor and a computer with a projector (or a map of Florence).

Differentiation: When reading a text of this difficulty level, differentiation is hugely important to ensure all students have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the discussion. There will be some students who simply are not literate enough to read this text on their own. While I do not anticipate this will be a problem in an honors class, in an inclusion class, we may have to read the text together. One way to build understanding of the text is to read it closely with students and ask them to reflect on the meaning of each sentence or paragraph. While I have not written a whole curriculum, this lesson deviates from the normal SOL-driven curriculum that relies on rote memorization and lecturing.

Adaptations: As far as I am aware, no students have a particular 504 or IEP to which this lesson would apply in my honors class. A couple of students have provisions that they should be placed in the front of the class; I have contacted a special education specialist to discern where to place these students. Some students may have "read aloud" provisions; I have planned earlier to do so in a whole class environment.

Reflection:

In my mind, the main challenges for this lesson are that the students may not fully understand the text and that they have not been engaged in discussion before. However, this text is excellent to use to solve both of these issues. First, the concepts in the text may be difficult to glean initially, but once they are found they are quite logical and even *natural* for citizens of western democracies. It is the opinion of many political theorists that Machiavelli's theories underpin our society. I agree, and I think students will find the concepts rather familiar once they are introduced to them. Therefore, I hope that despite the difficult language, students will take refuge in the time-honored concepts. Second, vis-à-vis inexperience with discussions, I think students will rise to the challenge of discussion. In my experience with these sorts of discussions, the first few times that students attempt them, they will be jittery and have difficulty building

off one another (rather they will often simply say their piece in no order). However, I prefer that they have the questions prior to the seminar so that they can at least have a few points prepared. Some students may be overactive in the seminar, but I will remind them that it is important to include others in the discussion. If they manage to get too far off track, I will refocus them by asking them to move on to the next question.

Post-teaching – Have you reflected on the lesson in a way that informs your use of inquiry in the future, did you use the PASS framework to analyze how you engaged students in authentic intellectual work? Have you effectively used data from observing the lesson and feedback from students (i.e., informal comments or assessment data) to evaluate the lesson and recommend future adaptations?

CHAPTER XVII

Concerning Cruelty And Clemency, And Whether It Is Better To Be Loved Than Feared

1) COMING now to the other qualities mentioned above, I say that every prince ought to desire to be considered clement and not cruel. Nevertheless he ought to take care not to misuse this clemency. Cesare Borgia was considered cruel; notwithstanding, his cruelty reconciled the Romagna, unified it, and restored it to peace and loyalty. And if this be rightly considered, he will be seen to have been much more merciful than the Florentine people, who, to avoid a reputation for cruelty, permitted Pistoia to be destroyed. Therefore a prince, so long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal, ought not to mind the reproach of cruelty; because with a few examples he will be more merciful than those who, through too much mercy, allow disorders to arise, from which follow murders or robberies; for these are wont to injure the whole people, whilst those executions which originate with a prince offend the individual only.

2) And of all princes, it is impossible for the new prince to avoid the imputation of cruelty, owing to new states being full of dangers. Hence Virgil, through the mouth of Dido, excuses the inhumanity of her reign owing to its being new, saying:

3) *Res dura, et regni novitas me talia cogunt
Moliri, et late fines custode tueri.*¹

4) Nevertheless he ought to be slow to believe and to act, nor should he himself show fear, but proceed in a temperate manner with prudence and humanity, so that too much confidence may not make him incautious and too much distrust render him intolerable.

5) Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with. Because this is to be asserted in general of men, that they are ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous, and as long as you succeed they are yours entirely; they will offer you their blood, property, life and children, as is said above, when the need is far distant; but when it approaches they turn against you. And that prince who, relying entirely on their promises, has neglected other precautions, is ruined; because friendships that are obtained by payments, and not by greatness or nobility of mind, may indeed be earned, but they are not secured, and in time of need cannot be relied upon; and men have less scruple in offending one who is beloved than one who is feared, for love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails.

6) Nevertheless a prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred; because he can endure very well being feared whilst he is not hated, which will always be as long as he abstains from the property of his citizens and subjects and from their women. But when it is necessary for him to proceed against the life of someone, he must do it on proper justification and for manifest cause, but above all things he must keep his hands off the property of others, because men more quickly forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony. Besides, pretexts for taking away the property are never wanting; for he who has once begun to live by robbery will always find pretexts for seizing what belongs to others; but reasons for taking life, on the contrary, are more difficult to find and sooner lapse. But when a prince is with his army, and has under control a multitude of soldiers, then it is quite necessary for him to disregard the reputation of cruelty, for without it he would never hold his army united or disposed to its duties.

7) Among the wonderful deeds of Hannibal this one is enumerated: that having led an enormous army, composed of many various races of men, to fight in foreign lands, no dissensions arose either among them or against the prince, whether in his bad or in his good fortune. This arose from nothing else than his inhuman cruelty, which, with his boundless valour, made him revered and terrible in the sight of his soldiers, but without that cruelty, his other virtues were not sufficient to produce this effect. And shortsighted writers admire his deeds from one point of view and from another condemn the principal cause of them. That it is true his other virtues would not have been sufficient for him may be proved by the case of Scipio, that most excellent man, not of his own times but within the memory of man, against whom, nevertheless, his army rebelled in Spain; this arose from nothing but his too great forbearance, which gave his soldiers more licence than is consistent with military discipline. For this he was upbraided in the Senate by Fabius Maximus, and called the corrupter of the Roman soldiery. The Locrians were laid waste by a legate of Scipio, yet they were not avenged by him, nor was the insolence of the legate punished, owing entirely to his easy nature. Insomuch that someone in the Senate, wishing to excuse him, said there were many men who knew much better how not to err than to correct the errors of others. This disposition, if he had been continued in the command, would have destroyed in time the fame and glory of Scipio; but, he being under the control of the Senate, this injurious characteristic not only concealed itself, but contributed to his glory.

8) Returning to the question of being feared or loved, I come to the conclusion that, men loving according to their own will and fearing according to that of the prince, a wise prince should establish himself on that which is in his own control and not in that of others; he must endeavour only to avoid hatred, as is noted.

1. ...against my will, my fate,
A throne unsettled, and an infant state,
Bid me defend my realms with all my pow'rs,
And guard with these severities my shores.

CHAPTER XVIII

Concerning The Way In Which Princes Should Keep Faith

9) EVERY one admits how praiseworthy it is in a prince to keep faith, and to live with integrity and not with craft. Nevertheless our experience has been that those princes who have done great things have held good faith of little account, and have known how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft, and in the end have overcome those who have relied on their word. You must know there are two ways of contesting, the one by the law, the other by force; the first method is proper to men, the second to beasts; but because the first is frequently not sufficient, it is necessary to have recourse to the second. Therefore it is necessary for a prince to understand how to avail himself of the beast and the man. This has been figuratively taught to princes by ancient writers, who describe how Achilles and many other princes of old were given to the Centaur Chiron to nurse, who brought them up in his discipline; which means solely that, as they had for a teacher one who was half beast and half man, so it is necessary for a prince to know how to make use of both natures, and that one without the other is not durable. A prince, therefore, being compelled knowingly to adopt the beast, ought to choose the fox and the lion; because the lion cannot defend himself against snares and the fox cannot defend himself against wolves. Therefore, it is necessary to be a fox to discover the snares and a lion to terrify the wolves. Those who rely simply on the lion do not understand what they are about. Therefore a wise lord cannot, nor ought he to, keep faith when such observance may be turned against him, and when the reasons that caused him to pledge it exist no longer. If men were entirely good this precept would not hold, but because they are bad, and will not keep faith with you, you too are not bound to observe it with them. Nor will there ever be wanting to a prince legitimate reasons to excuse this nonobservance. Of this endless modern examples could be given, showing how many treaties and engagements have been made void and of no effect through the faithlessness of princes; and he who has known best how to employ the fox has succeeded best.

10) But it is necessary to know well how to disguise this characteristic, and to be a great pretender and dissembler; and men are so simple, and so subject to present necessities, that he who seeks to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived. One recent example I cannot pass over in silence. Alexander VI did nothing else but deceive men, nor ever thought of doing otherwise, and he always found victims; for there never was a man who had greater power in asserting, or who with greater oaths would affirm a thing, yet would observe it less; nevertheless his deceits always succeeded according to his wishes, because he well understood this side of mankind.

11) Therefore it is unnecessary for a prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated, but it is very necessary to appear to have them. And I shall dare to say this also, that to have them and always to observe them is injurious, and that to appear to have them is useful; to appear merciful, faithful, humane, religious, upright, and to be so, but with a mind so framed that should you require not to be so, you may be able and know how to change to the opposite.

12) And you have to understand this, that a prince, especially a new one, cannot observe all those things for which men are esteemed, being often forced, in order to maintain the state, to act contrary to faith, friendship, humanity, and religion. Therefore it is necessary for him to have a mind ready to turn itself accordingly as the winds and variations of fortune force it, yet, as I have said above, not to diverge from the good if he can avoid doing so, but, if compelled, then to know how to set about it.

13) For this reason a prince ought to take care that he never lets anything slip from his lips that is not replete with the above-named five qualities, that he may appear to him who sees and hears him altogether merciful, faithful, humane, upright, and religious. There is nothing more necessary to appear to have than this last quality, inasmuch as men judge generally more by the eye than by the hand, because it belongs to everybody to see you, to few to come in touch with you. Every one sees what you appear to be, few really know what you are, and those few dare not oppose themselves to the opinion of the many, who have the majesty of the state to defend them; and in the actions of all men, and especially of princes, which it is not prudent to challenge, one looks to the end.

14) For that reason, let a prince have the credit of conquering and holding his state, the means will always be considered honest, and he will be praised by everybody because the vulgar are always taken by what a thing seems to be and by what comes of it; and in the world there are only the vulgar, for the few find a place there only when the many have no ground to rest on.

15) One prince ¹ of the present time, whom it is not well to name, never preaches anything else but peace and good faith, and to both he is most hostile, and either, if he had kept it, would have deprived him of reputation and kingdom many a time.

1. Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor.

OBSERVATION FORM:

During your time outside the “fishbowl” please observe the actions of your partner who is inside.

Name: _____

Name of partner: _____

Number of times speaking: (please record in ticks)

First comment:

Most interesting comment:

Body language (posture, attentiveness):

Final comment:

Additional thoughts: