



Opinion Sages

Over the past few years, I have become very concerned about students who do not participate very much in class. I'm not talking about the normal discipline problem or the student who says they don't like school, but the shy student who doesn't appear to have much self-confidence. And so, it was that, during Spring Term last year, I came up with **a structure for giving these quieter students a chance to speak up.**

I based this new structure on **Dr. Kagan's Circle the Sage** structure, but I reduced group size and changed the role of the "Sage" from lecturer to pundit. After consulting with **Dr. Kagan**, we decided to name this structure **Opinion Sages** and share its six steps with two variations:



Opinion Sages

Each teammate gathers around a different "Sage" to hear their opinions on the topic; they then return to their team to contrast and share ideas.

1. Teacher selects "Sages" to share opinions.
2. Sages spread around the room, standing.
3. Teammates from each team gather around a different "Sage".
4. Sages share their opinions. (Optional*Team members use a prompt provided by the Teacher to draw out the Sage's opinions.)
5. Teammates return to their teams to RoundRobin, paraphrasing the opinions they heard.
6. Teammates contrast the opinions heard and discuss their own opinions.

Variations:

Rotate Sages: After Step 4, teammates move to other Sages and repeat Step 4

Team Statement: After Step 6, each team composes a team statement to express what they all agree on.

Here's how I put **Opinion Sages** into practise. We had been studying *Hamlet*, so I made up a list of 12 questions asking for opinions and reactions to Shakespeare's play; for instance, "What do you think of Hamlet's hatred for his stepfather?" **I then selected six students who did not often participate in class.** I put their names in bold type on a handout, with two questions after each name.



I assigned the rest of the students into teams of three. Teammates used my questions to draw out each Sage's opinions on *Hamlet*, and each teammate wrote down those opinions on the handout. Each team moved around the room until its members had questioned each of the six Sages. Then the groups re-assembled and discussed the opinions that the Sages had given them.

Students responded well to this activity. The six Sages actually got out of their seats and started looking for team members to ask them questions! Each Sage seemed excited about being asked his or her opinions.

Because the **Opinion Sages** structure wasn't developed until near the very end of the school year, I only had the opportunity to use it twice with that Yr9 English class. But **I was so surprised and impressed with how readily my students took to it.** It was the first time for a long while that **I saw shy students get so actively involved.** I believe they did not feel coerced into taking part because I saw their desire to actually seek out other students. I also think this structure was successful because, by the end of Spring Term, my students had taken part in enough **Classbuilding** and **Teambuilding** activities to make them feel comfortable working with each other.

This last factor is very important. I recommend that you try this structure only after students feel comfortable working with each other and with **Cooperative Learning** structures.

There are a number of content possibilities for **Opinion Sages**. Students can be asked for their opinions in so many areas – current events, scientific breakthroughs, historical episodes, maths procedures – that are important to them as students or citizens, and where forming and defending an opinion is important. It is vital for students to have the opportunity to express their thoughts, especially shy students. **Opinion Sages** gives them that opportunity.

Opinion Sages is great for staff development. Ideas to share on: Good leaders are made, Change is the only constant, People learn in different ways, Professional development should be mandatory, Play and fun are essential to learning. Etc.

One of my favourites Cooperative Learning Structures is **Agreement Circles** because it, too, encourages sharing of ideas. Another favourite is **RoundRobin** because it affords quick and effective practise of newly learned or reviewed material. **My students tell me they like being involved with classmates and learn a great deal from one another.** They like the structures and almost always get into them easily. I hope that **Opinion Sages** gives teachers another way to involve students in their own learning – and to get the shy student to speak up.

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