

# The Art of the Seminar



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Most of the courses I teach are seminars. They are often fractious and unsettling. They have twists and turns and sometimes get off track. Sometimes learning from seminars requires that students *unlearn* other ways of thinking and other knowledge they are familiar with – lecture, note taking, listening quietly. Unlearning is always difficult and does not happen easily.

The **seminar**, like the lecture is a form of academic instruction. It brings together small(er) groups for inquiry and discussion, focusing on a particular subject, in which everyone present is expected to actively participate. It is based on asking and answering questions to stimulate engaged thinking and to illuminate ideas. It often involves an exchange in which one point of view is questioned; another is contradicted; and still another is supported – sometimes all by the same individual!

A lecture, on the other hand, is an oral presentation intended to present information about a particular subject. Lectures convey foundational information – historical facts, background, theories and/or equations. Usually the lecturer stands in front of the room and recites information relevant to the lecture's content, e.g. Sermon on the Mount.

With the move to larger classes, the lecture is the most common teaching method in most colleges and universities. Most academic awards go to faculty who “lecture well”. When done well, the lecture is indeed captivating and highly stimulating -- *not to mention cheap and efficient*. Accordingly, it has received the most attention from those concerned with improvement of teaching.

Rarely does the seminar get such attention. And while there is certainly something to be said for being able to capture the attention of a group of 40 or more students, neglecting the seminar (which is in my view, a considerably more difficult teaching practice/method, is a serious omission.

The seminar is a collective project, where meaning is made *in situ*. Everybody owes it to each other to be prepared and participate. In this way, it is the quintessential exercise in democracy. By putting students at the center of the project, they learn that it is better for them to claim ownership of some body of knowledge than just to have it dictated to them. They begin to ask questions that can only be answered collectively – some questions can't be answered at all; but the answer is secondary. Learning to ask the question is primary.

Drawing on the ideas of Bourdieu (*habitus*) and Merleau-Ponty (*embodiment*) and the models of learning they imply, education is an existential exercise that moves an individual from one state of being to another. It is a process of acquiring a new identity and a new way of existing in the world. In the seminar, students are not just taught how to think critically; they become critical thinkers.

This transformation can be accomplished in two ways—both depend on faculty. The first requires faculty to *be* what they want their students to become – seriously asking questions of the text under review and genuinely challenging authority of the writer's guiding assumptions (with conviction and sincerity). The right question can (and probably should be) be a disruptive agent that opens a portal and removes the veil of complacency. Who benefits? So what? What is assumed? What does it lead us to do? The second requires that the faculty person be able to control the pace and direction of the class and guide students at their pace thru the maze of ideas-opening the dialogue, guiding the dialogue, and closing the dialogue.

Over time students move from the simple and absolute; to relativism and complexity; from concreteness to abstractness; and from external to internal regulation of behavior. An important goal is to prepare students for participation in a democratic society where the ability to ask a question, lead a discussion, present an idea, work toward solving problems, and speak respectfully and knowledgeably are essential skills. In the almost 90 hours of class time faculty have with students, they pick up valuable habits –ranging from a healthy impatience with authority (may be called critical thinking) to active listening.

Perhaps the neglect of the seminar stems from the perception that it is not truly an academic exercise (it does not impart FACTS); but rather is merely a carefully contrived effort to erode ideas/ideals students hold dear. In addition, teaching a seminar is often seen as ‘an easy assignment’ -- only a few students (<30) most of whom are advanced (and most do the readings).

While all of this is possible, it is more likely that the neglect of the seminar results from the fact that teaching a seminar is an art, not a science. It involves emotions and values and I would argue that it requires you to throw your heart into it, think on your feet (when students haven't done the readings), respond with passion, have your ideas challenged, and be willing to entertain alternative, self-serving, contradictory perspectives, and perhaps even revise your thinking.

A successful seminar introduces students to content, keeps faculty abreast of the newest ideas in the field, and pushes students to the point where they can challenge ideas (those in the texts and those of the faculty). It all begins with selecting material – abstract, open to multiple meanings/interpretations and can challenge students' logic/thinking. The text ought to be appropriate for the participants' current level of intellectual and social development and should be complex and difficult to summarize. Beyond this, the faculty person

must resist the temptation to talk/impart knowledge and instead only ask questions that make students aware of what they know AND what they don't know; a delicate balancing act. The aim is to get the student to realize that if s/he searches long enough and diligently enough "truth is in their own power to find."

A question I often use to open the discussion is . . . "In 50 words or less, what is this piece about?" As the reading progresses and we have moved away from the author's main point, I ask students "how did we get here?" "Why do you say that?", "Could you explain further?," "Is this always the case?," "Why do you think that this assumption holds here?" "Is there reason to doubt this evidence?" "Is there a counter argument?," "Can/did anyone see this another way?" Sometimes I even ask, "Why do you think that I asked that question?," "Why was that question important?"

I also ask students to read passages out loud. This directs our attention to the same text and puts us all on the same page. Reading the text out loud creates a level playing field – ensuring that the tone and focus in the classroom remains consistent and true to the topic at hand. Sometimes-but not often-we define new words. Like reading out loud, this puts us all on the same page and ensures that we are all talking about the same thing.

The goal of the seminar is to have participants (students and faculty) work together to construct meaning and arrive at an answer; not for one student or one group to "win an argument."

As Einstein put it: "If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on it, I would use the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."

Further reading:

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