

Thinking about seminars: resource overview

Collection: Small group teaching

Learning outcomes

To be able to engage in a planning process which is likely to make seminars a lot less boring for students - and for you.

Overview

Let's start by repeating what we said in the Overview of this Collection of resources. Teachers sometimes forget what a challenge the seminar may represent to many students. The seminar is, after all, a genre with its own (often unspecified) rules and assumptions. We cannot take for granted that this is a medium students are naturally good at. They may be uncertain about what counts as having anything to say about this subject – and anxious about exposure in front of their peers. So as teachers, we need to make our assumptions and practices explicit and visible. If we do so, and if we make some simple concessions to acclimatising our students to this form, the seminar can still be a powerful medium of learning. This is one of the places where students learn to become fluent in the discourse of the subject. And you as tutor have to be prepared to listen as well as talk. Arguably, the quality of your own listening will set a benchmark for the rest of the group.

- seminars (classes) operate simultaneously on intellectual, affective, and social levels. While the experienced group leader may not be conscious of these levels all the time, (s)he takes account of them while leading the group.
- the seminar is a difficult genre. Students do not automatically know how to participate, or to listen to each other, or even how to learn in a seminar;
- seminars are not simply about learning in a given subject discipline. They are also about learning to learn; (these are not necessarily the people among whom any



given individual would have chosen to learn – but then their work colleagues won't necessarily be, either!);

- All participants bear some share of responsibility for the success of the individual session or the programme as a whole, BUT
- the tutor / leader has a *particular* responsibility to
 - structure the seminar in such a way as to enable participation;
 - maintain the group's working environment.
 - establish **ground rules** about preparation and participation.

So it follows that as tutor you are going to have to work out (as far as reasonably possible) how you can nurture not just the intellectual and knowledge-oriented life of the group, but the life of the group as a social and even emotional entity. Not what you signed up to, you might think. But the social and emotional life of the group will in any case affect the ability of its members to learn whether or not you consciously address them. You need to bear this in mind if you tackle the activities included in this resource.

Significant time

'That was a waste of time'. We've all overheard it on the corridor, and may have dreaded our class being the one so dismissed. One way of thinking about seminars, and your own role as a facilitator, would be in terms of significant time. How do you help create a sense that this time, now, in this seminar or workshop is being well spent? Obviously you cannot anticipate or pre-empt the ebb and flow of interest or boredom within each participant. But by your own commitment and planning, by the seriousness with which you take students and subject matter you can help establish a consensus that what we are doing now is worth doing.

Activities within this resource

- Relevance and red herrings
 - Weighing up the elements
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2 | This resource is part of a set of professional development resources for Higher Education English (including English Literature, English Language & Creative Writing) called 'The Pool'. The resources were developed by the English Subject Centre in 2011 as part of a JISC/HEA Open Educational Resources (OER) Project.

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Resources in the Small group teaching collection

- Small group teaching: introduction to the collection
- Seminar design: resource overview
 - Seminar design: individual activity
 - Seminar design: group activity
- Peer reviewing a seminar: Oliver Twist : resource overview
 - Peer review: individual activity
 - Adjusting the level
- Peer reviewing a seminar: The Bonesetter's Daughter : resource overview
 - A complex dialogue
 - Negotiated authority
- **Thinking about seminars: resource overview (*you are here)**
 - Relevance and red herrings
 - Weighing up the elements
- Nightmare scenarios: resource overview
 - Facing up to nightmares: group activity
 - Comparing notes
- Transformative writing: resource overview
 - Transformations: individual activity
 - Transformations: group activity

