Seminar design: individual activity

Collection: Small group teaching

Resource: Seminar design

Approximate duration

45 minutes

Learning outcomes

After this activity you will have

1. gained knowledge of a wide range of different seminar structures useful for teaching the discipline;
2. gained experience of detailed seminar planning;
3. thought about the links between the characteristics of particular seminar groups and seminar structure.

Introduction

Alongside other parallel activities in these collections, this task should help you to think of a repertoire of activities geared to specific needs rather than mechanically applied. So it is also aimed at a higher pedagogic level: as an invitation to articulate to yourself the principles involved in thinking up group activities, and the need for sensitivity to particular situations.

The activity

1. Read Chapter 3 of the Subject Centre's *Small Group Teaching in English Literature: A Good Practice Guide*. You will find many ideas for designing seminars in this chapter.

2. Choose a topic or text you have taught in seminars, or that you will soon be required to teach, or that you are interested in teaching.
3. Bearing in mind the possibilities listed in the small group teaching guide, consider what seminar structures might be useful for teaching your chosen topic or text.
4. Look at the list of teaching situations listed below. For each situation, write a seminar plan (geared to your chosen topic or text), together with a brief rationale of the thinking behind your choice.

Situations

Situation 1

A first-year seminar group of eight students you have never seen before on a compulsory introductory module taught by several different lecturers. This is the first seminar of their degree. They will have been sent information about preparation for the session before their arrival at the institution.

Seminar plan:

Rationale:

Situation 2

A second-year seminar group of fifteen students in the middle of a compulsory module taught by several different lecturers. Three of the students are very highly-motivated and vocal in class. The others seem exhausted and faintly bored. The course is on a wide range of topics, so not all students on the module will be writing on the topic of this seminar.

Seminar plan:

Rationale:

Situation 3

A group of four students on a third-year option course focused on a topic in which you have strong research expertise. All students are very bright and interested in the topic.

Seminar plan:

Rationale:

Situation 4

A group of 12 students on a popular second-year core module, attended by students majoring in other disciplines as well as by English students. Your group is enthusiastic but very varied in ability. One student in particular tends to be very talkative, not always in a helpful way.

Seminar plan:

Rationale:

Example

Your second year group seems in many ways baffled by what they are supposed to be looking for in Conrad's *Victory*. Last week (*Typhoon*), those who were willing to offer opinions were coming up with what seemed to you inauthentic and A-level-ish thoughts about themes and the character of Captain McWhirr. You're worried that they are looking to you for what to say, and that they need more help with reading closely and attentively than you have given them so far. (You might even resentfully feel this isn't your job: they should be able to do this already. You'll have to get over this. It's everyone's job.) So your plan involves getting them to focus on the opening of the novel in considerable detail. In small groups they will list anything that strikes them or puzzles them about the opening. After a brief sharing of notes, you then invite them in the same groups to look for heavily semiotically charged items. Those are shared on the whiteboard / flipchart. Individually, they now choose one item, and write six lines of notes or speculations on how (on the strength of their reading so far) that item might prefigure or offer a clue to the subsequent narrative. There is then a full group discussion of what arises, out of which you draw up an agreed agenda of topics for next week (let's assume you have two weeks on this text).

A variant on this would be to use cards. After a group discussion, each person writes an item or a phrase on a card. The cards are then mixed up, and each student picks on. They then have individually to make a case for the narrative significance of the item on their card.

Relationship to the Professional Standards Framework

- **Core Knowledge 2:** Appropriate methods for teaching and learning in the subject area and at the level of the academic programme
- **Professional Values 3:** Commitment to the development of learning communities
- **Professional Values 4:** Commitment to encouraging participation in higher education, acknowledging diversity and promoting equality of opportunity

More information about the Professional Standards Framework can be obtained from the summary factsheet in the *Subject & Pedagogy* collection in HumBox.
http://humbox.ac.uk/2731/

Resources in the Small group teaching collection

- Small group teaching: introduction to the collection
- Seminar design: resource overview
    - **Seminar design: individual activity (*you are here)**
    - 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
    - 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