

Negotiated Authority

Collection: Small group teaching

Collection: Peer reviewing a seminar: *The Bonesetter's Daughter*

Approximate duration

1-2 hours

Learning outcomes

To enable productive focus on the relation between the authority vested in the lecturer / tutor and the formation of competent knowledges in a group of students. To achieve a degree of self-awareness about the languages and registers you make use of as a tutor and group leader.

Introduction

This activity is a sequel or complement to the activity proposed in A Complex Dialogue. It focuses on how - in the context of a textual discussion - authority is negotiated within a group and between tutor and group. The transactions of the seminar go to the heart of the literary subject. (And arguably have implications for the teaching of Creative Writing, too.) The breadth of space for interpretation or the framing of significance means that students too have the scope to say new and significant things. Professional knowledge may on occasion be authoritative, but on the whole you as tutor are also going to have to argue for your reading. From the other end of the spectrum many students may desire authoritative knowledge. One form a seminar can take is to try to lure the tutor into purveying the sort of information that can be captured in notes and subsequent assessments. This activity invites you to focus on the process by which valid knowability is established in a seminar group. How does a group try out and negotiate forms of critical utterance? Who authenticates what is said? What is the tutor's role in affirming the validity of the discussion.



1 | 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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The activity

This involves you individually or in a pair or group watching the Amy Tan seminar. If you have already watched the seminar for A Complex Dialogue, you may want to look at it again, as this activity asks you to look out for different things. In making your notes for further discussion (or individual reflection) we suggest you focus on the following issues.

1. Stance and footing. How do students or tutor gain or hold the floor in this seminar? If they make assertions or propose interpretations how do they enter? Roughly speaking, how many interventions take the form of agreement? Or disagreement? If a speaker disagrees with another speaker, how do they try to avoid another speaker losing 'face'? (E.g. through hedging, or giving signals of uncertainty or self-deprecation.)
2. Questioning: who asks questions and of whom? How effective are questions as an element of a tutor's kit?
3. Negotiation. How and by what steps does the group come to agree on a proposition or interpretation? How involved is the tutor in this process? How far are students either: a) contradicting? b) agreeing? c) instantiating? (e.g. by producing fresh examples). If agreement is not reached, how does the group collectively decide to let the subject drop? d) changes of direction: who initiates changes of subject or direction?
4. One way of thinking about a seminar (as thinking about a text) would be in terms of the forces and processes that make for cohesion as in tension with centrifugal or disintegrative forces. Despite English Literary Studies' long affair with modernism, our pedagogy is apt to affirm the values of cohesion, closure, and a hierarchy of voices. Taking this seminar as an example, how does the group - aided by the tutor - manage its own coherence? How much work does the tutor have to do to connect one element of the seminar to another? How much of this cohesive work involves dealing with observations that threaten to go off at tangents, or distract the work of the group?

Possible Approaches

We invite your attention to the tutor's role in this class in authorizing or validating the trend of discussion. For example, Dr Palmer makes use of the board in order to jot



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headings or notes. What is the significance of this? Or again, you might consider tutor body language. Around 38 minutes in to the tape, she kneels, then subsequently sits, leans, and sits again. One obvious explanation is that she is getting tired. But nevertheless in a class where (possibly because of the interference of camera and outside watcher - the experimenter influences the experimental object) the tutor characteristically stands, a movement towards sitting is clearly itself open to interpretation.

Links & References

- See also A Complex Dialogue (in this resource)
- Knights, Ben. *From Reader to Reader: Theory, Text and Practice in the Study Group*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester. 1992.

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
 - Seminar design: group activity
- Peer reviewing a seminar: Oliver Twist : resource overview



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- Peer review: individual activity
- Adjusting the level
- Peer reviewing a seminar: The Bonesetter's Daughter : resource overview
 - A complex dialogue
 - **Negotiated authority (*you are here)**
- 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

