

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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Leading the Seminar: Graduate and Undergraduate

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Background Although many teaching methods in higher education have changed over the past century, the research seminar has remained largely untouched by innovation. Following a model created in German universities, the seminar is a course in which advanced students conduct original research under the close guidance of an expert in the field. The basic format is still used today for graduate and undergraduate seminars in many disciplines.

Typically, in graduate seminars students are expected to write "publishable" research papers and write and deliver critiques of selected readings from the course bibliography. The syllabus, if one is provided, usually consists of a term calendar that specifies the deadlines for assignments. Class meetings are taken up with discussions of these readings, and it is not unusual for class to be dismissed for the last third of the term in order to provide more time for students to research and write their papers. Undergraduate seminars often follow the same pattern, albeit with lessened expectations for student performance.

This approach to conducting seminars is often successful, but a number of problems are also associated with the model. For example, students may find that the subject matter is so complex that they have difficulty selecting a research topic until late in the term, which usually results in haphazard research and sloppy writing. Some students may elect to take "incompletes" (if that is an option) so they can produce a better paper, but this practice leaves them with a debt

that drains time from future courses. The usual class format, critiques of readings followed by discussion, can become extremely boring and students may fail to connect the readings with important issues in the course. If a teacher narrows the seminar topic to conform to his/her current research interests, it can become too specialized to stimulate student interest. Finally, seminars may fail simply because teachers don't prepare for them as carefully as they do for other classes, out of a conviction that it is the students' responsibility to "find their own way." These problems can be avoided (in both graduate and undergraduate courses) if we conceptualize the seminar differently, clearly communicate our expectations and outcomes, and experiment with more creative assignments and cooperative classroom activities.

Remedies As a first step, it is useful to think of a seminar as a course in which students practice critical thinking about the discipline and learn about research methods commonly used in the field (rather than a course in which students write an extensive research paper). The emphasis is on thinking about the discipline, an activity that should occur frequently in both graduate and undergraduate courses. Students can still be required to write traditional seminar papers if that activity is appropriate for achieving the course outcomes.

Planning the Seminar

With this definition in mind, the operative questions for planning a seminar might include:

- What are the disciplinary issues associated with the seminar topic?
- Do these issues suggest a framework for studying the topic?
- Which issues are appropriate for investigation by the students I will have?
- How will I provide the background and context for students to understand the issues?
- How can I relate these issues to the students' lives and academic interests?
- What excited me or stimulated my interest in this topic when I was

a student, and how can I use my experience to motivate my students?

- How can I present the readings in such a way that students will think critically about the topic?
- What classroom activities can I use to stimulate critical thinking?
- What are the basic research tools in the discipline that students need to know
- What classroom exercises can I use to help students learn about (or use) these tools?
- From my own experience, what insights about research can I contribute to the class?

Answering these questions will help us write more specific course outcomes so students will understand the purpose of the seminar and what they can expect to get out of it. Examples of outcomes (from different seminar syllabi) include: "develop and test a hypothesis about...", "devise an experiment to test...", "develop a theory about...", "construct a treatment plan that addresses...", "design an intervention to solve...", "develop a critically annotated bibliography about..." The syllabus should also explicitly address most of the planning questions above in order to show the cognitive structure of the seminar and how the exercises and assignments will help students achieve the course outcomes.

Research has shown that this approach to course planning and syllabus construction yields positive results in undergraduate courses, but there is also empirical evidence that graduate students value it as well. In one of the few available studies on graduate instruction (Lowe & Brock, 1994), the authors found that psychology graduate students felt that effective courses are those having clearly defined objectives, relevant readings/textbooks, and clearly defined assignments and course requirements. They also felt that the most effective instructors provide useful feedback to students and clearly define their methods of evaluating student work. The evidence suggests that all students will have a more positive attitude

toward the seminar if the syllabus addresses these expectations.

Leading the Seminar Improving the way the seminar is conducted is just as important as improving the design. A distinction that seems to have been lost over the years is that lecture courses were taught, whereas seminars were led. A seminar is supposed to be less authoritarian and more collaborative than other courses. Good seminar leadership consists of (1) providing sufficient direction to students so they can fruitfully explore the subject matter on their own and (2) fostering a classroom climate that encourages cooperation, collaboration, and the free exchange of ideas.

Cooperative learning models seem well-suited to this idea of seminar leadership. Cooperative techniques have been used successfully in undergraduate classes for years, and teachers who adapt these strategies for their graduate seminars are finding that their students also respond enthusiastically. In a study by H. W. Hughes and A. J. Townley (1994), the authors described how they adapted standard cooperative learning approaches such as "Jigsaw," "Pairs and Squares," and "2 x 4 Debate" for their graduate courses. Students felt that these techniques enhanced their skills in decision-making, human relations, communications, and academics and even improved their subject-matter knowledge.

Some teachers also allow students a greater voice in deciding on the focus of the seminar. To provide context, in the first seminar meeting the teacher describes the work being done in the field, outlines the more important questions and issues, and relates these questions to the discipline as a whole. Students read selected pieces to fill in the background and, in a class discussion, the teacher and students together select the specific issues the seminar will address. This approach allows students to choose areas that interest them most, but within parameters provided by the instructor.

Joint academic authorship is common in many academic fields, and assigning collaborative research papers can teach valuable lessons about the benefits of scholarly cooperation as well as the difficulties involved. Pairs of students can research and write full-scale seminar papers or a series of shorter papers. For this strategy to work, the teacher must explain the purpose of the exercise and carefully

specify the ground rules for working together, describing how to divide responsibilities for research and writing, share knowledge, and work efficiently as a team. Evaluation of the product of this collaboration should also include a mutual assessment of each student's contributions to the work.

The traditional seminar paper can sometimes be replaced by a series of research/writing exercises that replicate portions of a full-scale research project. For example, an early assignment might be to compile a list of researchers (perhaps five) who specialize in a particular topic or research question, read an article by each of them, and write a short paper that analyzes similarities and differences in their approach to the problem. Subsequent assignments might require compiling annotated bibliographies, evaluating various research tools and techniques, developing research hypothesis, or writing a research proposal. This approach is particularly useful in undergraduate seminars.

Summary In a well-conducted seminar, students and teacher work together as a community of scholars engaged in a common academic endeavor. Students should experience the same intellectual excitement and joy of discovery that faculty members enjoy in pursuing their own scholarly interests. To achieve this goal, we must re-think our standard approaches to seminar teaching and adopt techniques that foster collaboration, cooperation, and critical thinking.

References

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