

What's in a Seminar

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The book seminar is the primary mode of learning in a coordinated studies program. The seminar in coordinated studies is what sets this class apart from other types of classes. So what is a seminar? How do you prepare for a seminar? What and how do you learn in a seminar?

A seminar brings together an interested group of learners who have done some preparation, including having read, thought about and written about a particularly good book. This solitary preparation should include marking the text for interesting passages, reviewing those sections, organizing one's thoughts on paper and producing significant questions that need to be explored.

In the seminar the group is responsible for exploring the text and probing the ideas people have brought from their individual reading of the text. It is a time to "mine" the text, to work it over as a group, to think aloud about it, and to test some ideas against the group. For example, the following might be overheard in a seminar: "I don't know if this is valid but it seems that the author is saying..." Or: "This part connects interestingly with this other part."

A seminar is not an arena for performance to show you've read the text or a reporting session to read your papers. It's more than a class discussion and it definitely is not a time for a lecture from an expert who will tell the group what they should get from this book. There may be places for those activities but not in seminar. Seminar is a special time for a unique intellectual activity. The exchange of ideas is focused on a source (a book, play or film) and is aimed primarily at getting more deeply *into* the source.

A good way to keep focused on the text at hand is to respond to the following three questions:

- 1. WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?** — Point to the exact page and paragraph so everyone can read along.
- 2. WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?** — Explain or interpret the passage in your own words.
- 3. WHY IS THIS POINT IMPORTANT?** — Agree or disagree, or compare it to other ideas or experiences.

Make sure you keep these three questions distinct, because each question forces the group to discuss the text in different ways. The first one asks for the facts. The second searches for concepts or interpretations behind the exact words or inferences between the lines. The third seeks an evaluation or hypothesis — your own

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analysis, reaction, or evaluation.

Sometimes the seminar will be focused and free-flowing. Sometimes it will be searching, questioning, going deeper to understand ideas from a book, from others or from within yourself. Sometimes the group will come to some conclusions. Sometimes it will seem like a series of disconnected activities, like a popcorn popper, with ideas jumping around the table without clear connections. In either case, the seminar is a place to discover new ideas, to re-look at old ideas, or to develop insightful connections among ideas.

The teacher's role in a seminar is, at best, to be a model of an experienced learner; not to be the focus of attention, or the authority who will tell you what you should learn. Don't let the faculty member give a lecture in seminar! Everyone must take responsibility for co-leading and sharing ideas.

Participants must learn to actively listen to each other and speak openly to the whole group, not just to the leader. The group must learn to be sensitive to the needs of all. The natural talkers must be disciplined in order to learn how to listen better. The quiet people must learn to be more assertive and to share their insights, even if they are not comfortable doing that. Everyone should speak during each seminar.

Speak in turn and allow others to finish their thoughts. Do not interrupt one another. Silent periods are OK. Silence gives time to process thoughts, so try to become comfortable with it. Address an idea or argument by connecting it to what someone else has said. Summarize the point you are responding to, then provide your own idea.

Finally if things are not going well, it is our responsibility individually and collectively to put things right. Keep taking the pulse of the group and make adjustments so that everyone can have the opportunity to have a meaningful intellectual experience in seminar. The best question to ask is not "how am I doing," but rather "how is our seminar going?"

Leaving the seminar with more questions than you came with, or being somewhat confused and overwhelmed with new ideas, is a sign your seminar is working. You will come to realize in seminar that a great book is not something you read once and then feel satisfied you have learned all you can learn from it. Rather, a great book is one which stimulates continuing intellectual curiosity and which demands from you a re-reading and a continuing discussion of it — maybe for the rest of your life.

For more information and inspiration, watch "Seminar: A Skill Everyone Can Learn," a video created by instructor Margot Boyer on approaches to and benefits of the seminar. <http://scctv.net/play/?p=scctv&f=seminar.mp4&w=720&h=480>