

## Conducting Seminars

Is this your experience teaching graduate seminars? One of the most satisfying aspects of scholarship is the opportunity to share your experiences and knowledge with others—to make your experiences available to the insight and understanding of students. This often leads to an increase in your own insight and may extend discovery, and most certainly will lead to the expansion and refinement of yours and the students' ideas.

The Oxford University definition of a seminar is a “small class at a university, etc. for discussion and research; a class meeting for the systematic study under the direction of a specified person.” That specified person is you. It is you who is the instructor/facilitator who prepares the topic, and arranges sessions that encourage and enable all to participate and contribute to each other's learning. Many will feel that this is what a workshop is: where the presenter presents and allows a short time for questions. As the instructor/facilitator you will be responsible for:

- Identifying the weekly topics
- Planning the readings, case studies, or articles
- Providing a scholarly framework
- Devising a learning stimulus
- Helping students to learn
- Encouraging learning reflection for other as well as for yourself.

These activities can be organized into three stages:

1. Preparation
2. Implementation
3. Review and Evaluation

### Preparation

When designing the seminar, write a few lines in answer to these questions:

- What are the learning objectives for the week?
- What readings are appropriate?
- What do you want students to learn?
- How can you help them achieve their own and session objectives?

*Planning the class.* Each session should have one or two clear objectives, and point three above should provide some basis for their development. The following will assist in development:

- Be quite clear on the session's objectives, hopefully in advance.
- Prepare a reading list for the session including the text and scholarly articles.
- What is the relevance of this session to the overall objectives of the course?
- What are your desired learning outcomes? What will students learn from this session?
- Prepare a series of Socratic-type questions that will help students make links between their own experiences and what is being presented and use these to guide the discussion.
- What will be the balance between lecture, presentations, and activities?

### **Implementation**

Remember, you set the tone for the seminar. It is important to strike a balance between having a well-organized class, but not controlling the session too tightly. Writing on the board or the syllabus the topic and the session plan is a useful method of staying on track.

*Lecture.* You need to strike the right balance between your telling and the students discovering. The formal lecture should be kept at a minimum, remember that the purpose is “for discussion and research, a meeting for systematic study.” Your remarks need to be the catalyst to allow students to explore the topic for themselves. As the facilitator of this learning experience, you are to guide the discussion with a series of questions that ask people to make connections between the topic and their own readings and research—this allows learning integration. Your task is to outline the issue(s), and provide sufficient context for people to understand the connection between the learning objectives and the readings and discussion.

*Presentations.* Oral presentation is a wonderful method for students to relate their discoveries and formulate findings and recommendations. Presentation should be assigned in advance to allow students an opportunity for research. As facilitator, you should guide the questions and discussion regarding the presentation. Defense of a position is an important element in oral presentations, so questions should be penetrating and demanding.

*Activities.* Well-chosen activities are an excellent way to enable all to participate, contribute to a sense of camaraderie, and increase the energy level of the group. The activity needs to be relevant to the session’s topic and provide an opportunity for students to draw on their own experiences and knowledge. Conclude the activity with the purpose of the exercise, and enlist discussion on the activity and its relevance to the session’s topic.

*Learning reflection.* Use some further questions to bring the session to a close. These questions should be reflective, focusing on what has been learned during the session. Conclude with a short remark indicating how the discussion has enlarged your own view and thanking the students for their participation.

### **Review/Evaluation**

An important part of scholarly practice is reflection and evaluation. Reflection to consider what happened, what was observed, what was learned, and what outcomes were achieved. As you replay the event in your mind, make a note of anything significant.

As in all evaluations, be clear about what you want to know. You probably want to know the extent to which you achieved your learning objectives and gain some insight on how to improve future seminars.

- Were objectives clear to students? Did I introduce the topic sufficiently?
- Were readings appropriate?
- Was I properly prepared? Was the session plan appropriate?
- Was there a balance between telling and discussion?
- Did the activity achieve its purpose? Did all participate?
- Was there any feedback?