

## SEMINARS

### A Collection of Materials on Seminar Approaches and Evaluation Strategies

#### Resources on Seminars

A hallmark of many learning communities is the seminar. It is NOT a seminar in graduate school sense, where individuals or teams of students prepare research presentations and receive critiques. Rather, it is a focused collaborative group discussion of a text or another common academic experience. Often but not always, the faculty member takes a back seat in seminar, and asks that students develop responsibility and skills in working with their peers to understand the texts and their relationships to the learning community themes.

This packet is a collection of materials on seminar approaches and seminar evaluation strategies from The Evergreen State College and other colleges in the Washington Center network.

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## WHAT'S IN A SEMINAR?

by Jim Harnish, North Seattle Community College

The book seminar is the primary mode of learning in our coordinated studies program at North Seattle Community College. The seminar in a coordinated studies is what sets this class apart from other types of classes. So what is a seminar? How do you prepare for 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. The 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 overhead in a seminar: "I don't know if this is valid but it seems that the author is saying. . . ." Or: "Here on page 15 at the bottom of the page there is this passage [read from text]. This seems to be an important passage. It is worth looking at closely. . . ." 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 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 to 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.

Jim Harnish, December 1995

## Suggestions for Seminars

*This set of suggestions has circulated in coordinated studies programs in the community colleges in the Seattle area for several years; we aren't certain who the original author was.*

### Some Common Seminar Features

#### 1. Open with questions about the text:

If you have questions about concepts, terms; words that you don't fully understand, ask the seminar about them at the start. This is important for establishing common ground, for facilitating an atmosphere in which it is really okay not to know everything. It is not okay to pretend to know what one doesn't, because that simply inhibits participation and diminishes the richness and diversity of the group.

#### 2. Tie up the discussion with a summary:

After a discussion, take a few minutes in which to summarize the major ideas discussed and the insights and conclusions arrived at. An alternative is to have five minutes of silence in which we can review our notes. Each person could write down the biggest idea (aha!) or the most important conclusion we established. Then, we could go around the room for ten minutes (each person having the right to pass) everyone stating his/her big insight. Perhaps a seminar member could gather up the big ideas, collate them, type them up. Then, we could copy them for everyone. Spending some time summing up is a good way to reestablish a common understanding of what we have learned in this seminar. It is useful also for building skills in summarizing, connecting ideas and synthesizing them into meaningful generalizations. or conclusions.

#### 3. End the seminar with a brief group process discussion:

How did everyone feel about today's seminar process.? Estimate the quality of the interactions. What worked? What didn't? Why? Why not? Most importantly, how could we improve? This work, to understand our seminar process, is vitally important.

#### 4. Remember:

The quality of our intellectual insight and of our interaction is usually directly related to how we approach our texts. The text is what we share in common. We have to have some kind of common understanding of the text itself before we extend outward into what we think of the text and what connections we bring to it from life experiences and other texts. Thus, we must be exegetical, that is, text-centric.

### **Some seminar strategies:**

#### 1. Bonepiling and Skeleton (Schema)-Building:

- Everyone throw out your ideas about the text. Build a bonepile. Everyone try to put a tag on each bone. That is, record the ideas on the board.
- Once the ideas are out, shift gears. Begin figuring out how to construct a coherent skeleton using as many bones as possible. We may want to have a few silent minutes to review our notes and to work our connections between ideas. Are there some bones which are more important than others? Is there a femur which can help the skeleton stand up, or some vertebrae which can help it stand up straight? Do we need one skeleton or two? Are there some bones which don't fit? (If so keep them to one side, but don't throw them away. They may come in handy later.)
- Once we have the skeleton at least roughly built, shift gears. Begin trying to flesh out the skeleton. Try to figure out the meaning of the skeleton's shape. Does this skeleton look like any others we've built? Is its heart beating and in the right place? Does it move awkwardly or naturally? Why? What adjustments or fine-tuning would make it more comfortable? Are there weak spots in the body?

#### Variations:

- After bonepiling, let's take turns identifying an idea that we really like from the text. Let's make sure our list is complete and accurate. That is, let us hear what was said. Hold off a little on what we think about what was said. Let us look over the list with an eye to common themes (ribs?), and collate them with an eye to generalization. Then, begin skeleton-building.
- Having built the skeleton, make sure everyone understands it and how it works. Then, write for 5 minutes on its advantages and limitations relative to the text. Does it have a good "fit?" Are there alternative ways of organizing the bones (counterskeletons)?

This is a good strategy for getting ideas out, hearing as many voices as possible, checking that we are hearing clearly and not just overlaying our own judgments automatically. It is good also for building skills in pattern detection, generalizing, developing schemas, and for putting the developed schema skeleton itself into critical focus.

#### 2. Small Group/Large Group Discussions

- a) Divide into groups of three or four. Develop a different question about the text for each group to discuss. Each group chooses a recorder (a responsibility everyone should have at least once in the term) to jot down the group's ideas. Discuss the question, leaving time to help the recorder turn the ideas in to a brief, coherent statement which can be presented to the full seminar for further discussion/analysis.

Return to large group. Each recorder presents her group's consensus (or lack of it). Each report is followed by further discussion.

- b) Divide into groups. Each group examine the text asking the big questions (BQs): What is the text about? What are the author's main ideas? How are the ideas conveyed? What are the author's conclusions/recommendations? What are the author's claims? Are there connections between the ideas in this text and those in other texts we have read? Having worked through these questions for a period of time, each group should formulate one issue about which to bring a question to the full seminar group. The question should not be tricky, and the full seminar should be able to cooperate in addressing it by examining the material in the text itself.

Small group seminars are useful in several ways: many people get to talk simultaneously: there is more active participation happening at any given moment. Many students are reticent to participate in a full seminar and are more comfortable testing out their ideas in a group of three or four. Small groups also facilitate experience in figuring out strategies for effective interaction. They can also be valuable for setting up a closely-text-centered analysis while reducing the white noise which sometimes occurs in the full group, when too many people are so anxious to talk that no one really listens.

### 3. Brainstorming and puzzling through questions

The full seminar begins by asking questions about the themes of the text. Some one writes the questions on the board. A suitable number, which can be suitably discussed in the time available, is selected and ranked. An equal amount of time is assigned for the discussion of each question. With about one-third of the discussion time remaining, each student attempts to write an integrative, summative statement in answer to one of the questions. Perhaps a new question is raised by the answer itself. A few volunteers read their writing. If there are dissonances among the answers, we analyze how and why they arose. If they seem substantial, we try to figure out if they can be resolved. This process is easily adaptable to small group processes. It is good for getting straight into the problems, or most puzzling aspects of the text, and-for using the text in detail for addressing the questions. It's valuable also for moving from free discussion to summative analysis (pattern-finding, skeleton-building, schema development).

### 4. Round-robins

Round-robins are good for enabling everyone to participate without interruption. They are also valuable for making connections/extensions, instead of making individual statements in an unconnected series.

- a) Go around the seminarers one by one asking for reactions to, reflections or questions on the text. Perhaps spend 10 minutes allowing everyone to write down an idea/insight/critique before beginning. If you wish to remain thoughtfully silent, you may pass..

- b) Begin by brainstorming questions only. Begin with one question and go around, one by one, requiring that prior to stating one's own position/reaction/connection/analysis, one must first briefly paraphrase the main point of the previous discussant. This purpose here is to deepen and extend our understanding of a single idea by a process of shared accretion and accumulation, as well as to practice making transitions from one statement to the next.

## 5. Fishbowls

There are numbers of variations for fishbowls. Set question, theme, or idea agenda. Four, five or six people (the "fish") volunteer to begin the seminar discussion sitting in a small circle in the center of the group, with the "non-fish" watching. Only fish can talk. Non-fish should observe, listen closely, and take notes on the issues under discussion while also attending to the dynamics among the fish. After an agreed-upon time, the fish come back into the full group and the discussion continues as a plenary. Or, the fishbowl continues with new individuals volunteering to join the chairs in the center.

Another variation: After the fishbowl conversation unfolds for a designated amount of time, everyone is silent for a few minutes, writing down the major ideas they heard generated by the fish, and any insights they came to about the fishes' dynamics. The non-fish now discuss the main ideas as well as the fishbowl process, with the fish corroborating or clarifying.

### **Some trouble-shooting strategies**

1. Problem: There are only a few dominant voices talking in seminar, and nearly everyone else is silent. Possible strategies: Round-robin. Fishbowl. Give each participant 3 pennies or poker chips: each person spends a penny (or chip) each time he/she speaks and cannot speak again until everyone else has spent their all their pennies. Move to small groups, locating the dominant voices in their own group(s). Ask the group to confront the dynamic and to consider ways to change it.

2. Problem: the faculty seminar leader is dominating too much: setting the agenda, talking at length, being critical of student ideas. Possible strategies: Request a halt in ongoing proceedings, state your position and ask for student input. Ask the faculty member to be quiet for a while to see what you can do on your own. Ask the faculty member to share with small student teams the power to determine seminar structure. Ask the faculty member not to intervene except to make occasional summative statements at agreed-upon times. Ask the faculty member to leave seminar for a day.

3. Problem: men's voices are dominating women's or vice versa. Possible strategies: Break into all men's and all women's groups, and have each discuss an issue, coming back to the full group to report and do further analysis. Each group member should observe the dynamics and be prepared to comment on observed differences in dynamics between the mixed and single-gender groups. Have a women's fishbowl, then a men's, then discuss the issues raised and the observed dynamics in full group. Have one or two

seminar members volunteer to simply keep a list of who talks, and whether what they say is an interruption, a question, a connection, an extension, or a statement. Read the list for men and the list for women, NOTE: One gender's interaction style is in no way intrinsically superior to the other's. They are often different, however. The issue is to become more conscious of both styles of interaction and to learn how to be conscious of how to use elements of both.

4. Problem: Everyone is throwing out ideas and it is becoming impossible to keep track of them all. It feels as though there is too much noise and not enough music. Possible strategies: Skeleton-building, round-robin with paraphrasing and connections required. Silence in which to think, write, collate notes and then establish common questions.

5. Problem: No one is listening closely enough. It is as though we just don't hear each other's points. Possible strategies: Round-robin or fish-bowl. Go to small groups. Require questions/connections/extensions subsequent to paraphrasing the comment of the prior speaker.

6. Problem: We're not sticking to the text. We're throwing out ideas and personal experiences but haven't mentioned or established a common ground about what the author actually said. It feels as though no one has read the book. Possible strategies: Go to the Big Questions (BQ) sheet. Agree that no one can comment unless he or she refers directly to the text, giving a specific page citation, and allowing time for everyone to read the relevant material. Require seminar papers and build the discussion from points made in them. Do a jigsaw seminar: that is, go to small groups, each group taking a chapter or portion of the reading. Re-organize the groups so every group has a representative of every previous small group, whose job it is to "teach" their group the key ideas, themes or questions from their part of the reading.

7. Problem: Ideas come out so rapidly in seminar that some students say they cannot keep up and cannot concentrate. Possible strategies: Slow things down. Have silence for 5-10 minutes so that everyone can write ideas down and get specific and focused. Suggest that we formulate questions to guide discussion. Bring in a large ball of wool: only the person holding the ball of wool can speak. The speaker shall choose who to throw the ball to next, while holding onto the end of the strand of wool. Of itself, this will cool things down. In addition, we will be able to see, by looking at the spider web we are creating, the distribution of offerings to the discussion. Then we can ask if the pace is slow enough. If not, we can require that before making one's own comment, one must paraphrase that of the previous speaker. In addition we can agree to stop for silence at regular times in order to process what we've heard up to that point.



## **Approaches to Assessment in the Collaborative Learning Seminar/Discussion**

K. Ann McCartney

*Contributors to this article explain their assumptions about the practice of seminars and offer several models for assessing seminar process in order to help students engage in the active ways that result in effective seminar.*

The collaborative learning seminar has long been a central component in learning community and coordinated studies courses and has increasingly found its way into traditional, stand-alone classes. The seminar, when it works, actively engages students in learning.

How can we promote this active engagement in learning? Faculty and students alike become frustrated when the seminar does not seem to work. Our own frustration when the seminars didn't work and our excitement when they did, led each of us to consider using assessment procedures to nourish the ongoing life of the seminar. When assessment procedures are used this way, the procedure becomes an integral component of the learning and thus vital to the quality of the seminar. Through ongoing assessment, students are encouraged to be reflective, to think about their own thinking, to become actively and responsibly engaged with how the seminar is working and what they are doing as part of it.

We have experimented with several different assessment approaches and instruments in our seminars. This section of the handbook is organized around the questions that led us to develop our instruments: What do we mean by seminar? What is the goal of this type of seminar? What is our philosophy of assessment in this setting? How do we assess our seminars? (Examples of a few assessment instruments that we use are located in the appendices of this article and the next.)

### **What Do We Mean by Seminar?**

The vision of the seminar is crucial. The type of seminar we are talking about is not a class discussion with its usual instructor-student interaction. It is not a debate with students focusing on defending a particular point of view and critiquing the view of others. It is not a graduate school seminar where students present their papers for critical review. Nor is it a cooperative learning group or workshop which focuses on problem solving or creating a specific product.

If a seminar is not these things, what is it? Perhaps three images will help to clarify our vision of the seminar.

Imagine a vase sitting in the middle of the seminar circle. Each seminar participant can see only part of the vase. Each participant describes the vase from her particular

perspective. When all become involved in sharing their perspectives and working together to create a complete picture of the vase (including the parts none of them can see such as the inside and the bottom), then they are transformed into active learners and creators of knowledge. (See how Margaret Scarborough uses this imagery in her article, "Circumscribing Seminar Space.")

Imagine a jazz combo. Each instrument is individual and has an important part to play. There is no musical score, no predetermined composition to simply replicate, no conductor who controls what each instrument does, no set part for each player. Each must listen to and play off the others and respond while being intent upon his own expression of the improvisation. Each member goes his own way in concert with the group. The creation of the jazz combo is spontaneous, dynamic, and never the same. The jazz experience gives voice to each unique component while creating a unified composition,

Imagine building a structure. To build a structure, you need a solid foundation, stable, strong enough to hold the structure. If you make any modifications in the plan for the structure, you must recheck and strengthen the foundation. Then you need the building materials -- the nails, screws, wood, etc. Those materials must be delivered to the site. But it is not enough just to dump out the materials; you must somehow organize them, grouping them where they are needed and with what they are needed. As you do this, you can start to build the frame for your structure. To finish the structure and make it usable, you must fill in the frame with wall board, doors, windows, and all the details which make this building unique.

The images of the vase, jazz combo, and the building of a structure begin to capture our vision of the seminar. We see the seminar as the creation of a learning space in which, in the words of Parker Palmer, "the community of truth is practiced," truth as "an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline" (12). The heart of our conception of the seminar is the development and creation of a learning community which provides a safe space for learners to bring their knowledge and experience to interact with other learners and with texts, to create meaning together.

The seminar creates a space where respect for other learners is paramount in the midst of the exploration of ideas and concepts. While the seminar should be a safe place, it is not necessarily a comfortable place. The exploration of new ideas and concepts can threaten students' already established meanings. Students are encouraged to take risks in the seminar, to assert long-cherished ideas about the world and struggle to reshape old knowledge and/or create knowledge with others. Students engage with and reflect on the material and each other. In this way, risk and respect become polarities that together create the learning environment.

The seminar is not just another learning strategy that is appropriate to those students whose learning style works best in a group, but in itself plays an essential role in learning. A good seminar is a powerful tool of learning for all students. It is the collaborative context that shapes meaningful learning. As Paulo Friere asserts,

In the act of thinking about the object s/he cannot think without the co-participation of another Subject. There is no longer an "I think" but "we think." It is the "we think" which establishes the "I think" and not the contrary. (137)

This is echoed by Stephen Brookfield in his book on adult learning:

There is a limit to the extent to which any individual can engage in self-scrutiny without the stimulus that fellow learners can supply . . . But it is when one's nascent, inchoate ideas and concepts are tested out in the' company of others that a certain creative tension comes into play. (135-136)

The seminar experience is both an instance of learning and an instrument of learning. It is an end, not just a means. Participants find their voice, they commit to working with others, and the implications extend far beyond the seminar. In this process, the word seminar becomes a verb. It is something that we do together. The defining aspect of the seminar is that students learn actively; they are constructing their knowledge through listening to others, speaking their ideas and creating meanings. Students are encouraged to do the "important things that need to be done to information by an educated adult: choosing it and finding it, weighing it, criticizing it, analyzing it, comparing it, reflecting on it . . ."

### **What is the Goal of the Seminar?**

The overall goal of the seminar is to create a space and time for students' engagement-engagement on the idea level (the intellect, the intuitive, the emotions), the individual level (unique perceptions), and the social level (community). Intellectually, the seminar serves to help students explore a diversity of perspectives, to see the complexity and ambiguity of the content, to help them recognize the underlying assumptions of their habitual ideas and behaviors, to develop higher level critical thinking ability, and to encourage active listening. Emotionally, the seminar serves to increase students' affective connections to the content, to show students they are heard and that their voices matter and their experiences and thinking are valued. On the individual level, the seminar helps students to test, expand, revise, create their individual meanings in the context of the group. Socially, the seminar serves to build relationships with other learners in a way that creates a community of learners who bring knowledge to life with mutual exploration, both consensus and dissensus ("an agonistic framework of conflict and difference . . ." (609). In this community, knowledge emerges, is brought to life in the social interaction of the learners. The total engagement of the learners-intellectually, individually and socially-leads to the learning.

The seminar has no expected formal product. The product is meaning, not an answer or a task accomplished. In fact, more questions may be raised than answered. If there is a product, it is inspired learners: learners who are developing a habit of inquiry that transforms the way they approach issues, knowledge, others. These are habits of mind and heart, a search for connectedness and relatedness.

## **What is Our Philosophy of Assessment in the Seminar?**

In our seminars, assessment is not a terminal episode; it is not primarily to grade the students. For us, assessment is formative: our assessment can be a monitoring tool to provide information that will empower students to become more effective seminar participants. Seminar assessment helps students to consciously develop seminar behaviors, to work more effectively in the seminar through conscious development of productive behaviors, and to develop behaviors that take them beyond the seminar.

We believe seminar is not something that comes naturally; it needs to be taught. Assessment of the seminar and participation in the seminar can help participants learn to seminar. Since students approach a seminar situation with different notions about learning, from different cultures and learning styles, with varying levels of interactive skills, we need a clear vision of the seminar process and behaviors. In our view, assessment instruments offer a notion of what is possible, point toward how to achieve the possible, give feedback on progress, and enable users to talk about, intervene if necessary, and consciously improve their seminar.

Thus, the sample assessment tools at the end of this article and the next provide information to the students to encourage meta-communication about seminar, to shape and hone to peaceful, productive ways of discourse; to participate fully in a community of learners.

## **How do We Assess Our Seminars?**

At the heart of effective seminar is the development of a community of learners, and all the techniques in the world cannot create this heart. However, we have found that attention to the seminar process can contribute to the desired effect of a community of learning. By helping students assess, talk about, and consciously improve the vitality of their seminar process, we can encourage the development of strategies of learning throughout the course, throughout their academic experience, throughout life. Assessment can become a door into the seminar, a way of entry for the student into the seminar process.

We offer two tools for seminar participants to use in assessing the individual's and the group's progress in learning effective seminar behaviors. These tools work best if they are introduced in the context of careful planning, preparatory work and initiation into the role of seminar in your particular learning community or collaborative learning setting.

The tool appended to this essay, "Seminar Process Assessment," allows group members to give a general assessment of the seminar/discussion and then assess specific group processes as a way of diagnosing what might be happening to lead to the general assessment. Using this strategy, group members develop a common vocabulary for talking about how the group is working.

The seminar metric, developed by Margaret Scarborough and located in the appendix of her article, is based upon seven levels of interactive behavior that are likely to result in optimal learning. These levels move from the least interactive, which she calls “silent,” up through other levels of interaction to “engaging,” without which students are unable to reach the top interactive levels of “understanding” and “discriminating.” Margaret’s instrument describes these seven levels and includes a three-step process for assessing self and peers along the seven levels.

We have found that these methods-and there are others-enable us to use assessment in the formative way that can help us and our students improve the process of seminar.

## **Appendix 1**

### **K. Ann McCartney**

A seminar or discussion can be examined by looking at common characteristics of an effective group. The scales on this assessment are based on such characteristics.

The first section examines the members’ general perception of the discussion session including satisfaction, personal involvement, personal learning, and climate. The second section is more analytical and diagnostic in nature and includes ten behavior categories that make the seminar successful or not.

Some ways to use this instrument:

- 1 . Have the descriptors read aloud to highlight the differences between the opposite sides of the continuum. This can be a class participation activity with all sorts of “hamming” up of the readings. This alone can call attention to how people can behave in a group and I have seen significant behavior changes following such a reading.
- 2 . Have the students fill out their individual scales and then place their scores on a large group scale. The members can see graphically where they are in relationship to others in the group. There can then be a discussion of the differences and the patterns.
- 3 . Collect the individual sheets and calculate the mean and standard deviation which you then provide to the group to discuss. It is interesting to do the assessment again later in the group life to see and discuss any changes.

Thanks to my colleagues William Munns and Margaret Scarborough for their contributions to the ideas expressed in this article.

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## SEMINAR PROCESS ASSESSMENT

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These scales represent your general perception of your seminar experience today. The descriptions represent each end of the scale. Place an "X" to represent your evaluation of that scale.

### Satisfaction with discussion

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Seminar was a waste of time							Seminar was useful to my learning		

### Contribution of seminar to personal learning

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Discussion did not aid my understanding and learning about course theme							Discussion added a great deal to my understanding of course theme		

### Personal involvement in discussion

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not involved at all, participation limited, not interested							Totally involved, active participation, interested in topic and discussion		

### Climate of discussion

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I felt judged, criticized, not listened to; I did not feel safe in the group							I felt free to share and participate The atmosphere felt trusting and respectful		

## SEMINAR PROCESS ANALYSIS/DIAGNOSIS

The following scales represent some of the specific behaviors that can help make a seminar work well. By looking at your perception of how the group did on each scale and then comparing your perception with other members, you may gain understanding about what your seminar is doing that makes the seminar successful or not. Place an "X" along the continuum to indicate your perception of that scale.

### Climate creation and maintenance

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No attention paid to involving people, setting goals/time, discussing process, support/confirmation, tension relieving							Attention paid to encouraging participation, goal setting, time keeping, supportive listening, discussion of process, etc.		

### Goal directed activity

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Aimless, topic jumping. Excursions into trivia, no directions at all. Structure is non-existent, is resisted, or is seen as limiting.							Total occupation with working on discussion goals. Structure is flexible, appropriate to situation, open to negotiation.		

### Response to contributions

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Members ignore and do not respond to contributions; discussion is scattered; same points made over and over; members feel no progress is occurring.							Members respond to contributions so that speaker knows how contribution is received. Discussion is cumulative and the group moves together.		

### Information follow-through

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Information 'dumped', no connections no follow through							Information clarified, added to, connected. Chains of ideas created.		

### Function in group

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Members use dysfunctional roles each member always participates in the same way.							All members participate in different and complementary ways.		

### Safety/trust

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Members are distrustful of one another, are careful, guarded, listen superficially but reject what others say; are afraid to criticize or be criticized.							Members trust one another; all use and respect the responses they get. All freely express ideas, opinions and reactions without fear of reprisal.		

### Spread of participation

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
A few dominate, some passive, some not listening, some not listened to. Several talk at once. Interruptions.							All get in. All are involved. All are listened to. Participation is active and intense.		

### Checking for meaning

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Members assume they know what others are saying and evaluate and judge what others say before checking for meaning.							Members use paraphrase, perception checking, provisional summaries to check their assumptions of what others are saying.		



**Creative Conflict**

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Group is uncomfortable with differences in thinking and either avoids the conflict or focuses it on attacking and judging.

8      9      10

Differences in thinking are seen as useful to explore. Conflict is focused on checking, correcting and enlarging knowledge.

**Authority/leadership**

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Group needs for leadership are not met. Certain individuals are seen as having the authority. High dependence; one or two dominate; no sharing of leadership.

8      9      10

As needs for leadership arise various members meet them; anyone feels free to volunteer as s/he sees a group need; leadership is distributed almost equally.

## CIRCUMSCRIBING SEMINAR SPACE

by Margaret Scarborough

Creating effective seminars takes careful preparation and continuous assessment. A veteran of the seminar approach explains how to prepare students to seminar and how to set up an assessment of the seminar process that cultivates students' lively engagement in the seminar.

There's an old story about a magician's apprentice who, convinced he had learned everything after ten years of study, took the opportunity of his master's absence to work a little of his own magic. As the story goes, he did possess great skill, and almost immediately succeeded in calling up exactly the powerful spirits he desired. But as he stood there in the middle of his laboratory, greatly pleased at what he had accomplished, the spirits slipped through a flaw in his magic circle and unleashed terrible forces upon the little medieval village. The moral, we are told, is that one must never engage in magic practices without careful preparation-without, that is, thoroughly circumscribing the circle.

Long before trying seminars in my own classroom, I heard faculty and students speak of them, almost exuberantly, as a kind of magic. "This is the best! I have never learned so much!" one student said on a video presentation. "I'll never lecture again!" said a colleague after facilitating a very good seminar. "The students said everything I would have said and more," remarked another colleague after one of his seminars.

"So what is a seminar?" I asked skeptically.

"A conversation among your students," came the answer.

"About what?"

"Anything. A book or text, an essay, a film, a work of art, a poem, a piece of music, a play, a performance. All of these can be the centerpiece of a seminar."

Flexible enough, I thought, but maybe just a little too flexible. What's the teacher doing during this conversation? So I dismissed seminars and went on with my usual lesson plans, feeling seminars were an abrogation of my own teaching responsibilities. Eventually, however, I was persuaded to try seminars-or seminar-ing-in my own literature classes, with a text at center, and, surprisingly, I soon heard myself telling my colleagues about them with the same enthusiasm I'd heard others express.

What is this seminar I had become so enthused about? Students use the seminar space to explore a topic, text, idea, piece of art, film or whatever from their many different points of view. My best seminars happen when students try to understand, explore, and express to each other what an author or text means to them. Students share mutual and different observations and insights about the topic. They dig into the material together, respectfully, like archaeologists, to excavate whatever meanings and appreciation they glean from their working and thinking together. And they learn to be careful about their interactions (see Appendix I: "The Seven Levels of Seminar Interaction").

Simply putting students together to "seminar" doesn't guarantee success. As one colleague remarked, "The work of exploring and entertaining ideas together is very hard work." It is especially hard, I believe, in the preparation that needs to be done beforehand, in "circumscribing the seminar space." I think of this circumscription as creating a hedge around the seminar space and time so that it will become a safe haven for students. That's when the surprising magic of learning and discovering happens. When the hedge is carefully in place, students feel supported and free to take risks.

In the rest of this article, I will describe what we, my students, my colleagues, and myself, have designed for the sowing, the cultivating, the fertilizing, the pruning of the hedges that make many seminars seem like magic, like "the best." My main purpose is to lay out the ways that we have found to create conditions that will help seminars work consistently for us. These ways are many, but students report feeling freed by them, not restricted or bogged down. In fact, Seth Frankel, an observer from The Evergreen State College, reported, "The elements of structure were not constraining, but, rather, became invisible." Here is what we do to create that invisible hedge.

### **Creating the Environment**

The first thing we do is consider the environment. We think it's important for the students to feel safe even if not totally comfortable with each other. We've found that undergraduate seminars require some sense of trust to work well, and trust and vulnerability seem to come when students feel safe in a given environment. At first, some of my colleagues thought vulnerability was asking too much in a classroom, but as we thought about it, it became clear that authentic learning requires vulnerability-especially in an ever-shrinking, pluralistic, multicultural world. Exposing disequilibrium, exploring threatening concepts, taking risks to assert long-cherished ideas about the world, struggling with reshaping and restructuring knowledge, or struggling to articulate a half-formed idea-happen only when students feel safe.

**Size.** The size of the seminar group can't help but affect the environment. For some students and instructors, it is the major factor in the environment. Thus, trying to keep things intimate, some educators have insisted that 10-15 students in a seminar is an optimum number, thereby precluding seminar in bigger classes. But for other educators, larger groups (I've had up to 25 students) are no barrier. I have found that seminars can (and do) work well for big groups when I include small-group, seminar preparation (described as a "pre-seminar," below) and assessments, which allow for the required intimacy.

We have also done seminars in big classes by breaking up into the desired numbers and sending part of the students to other (empty) classrooms for the designated seminar time. When we do this, we usually invite some seminar spokespeople to give a report on their seminars when they return. We've found not only that students enjoy sharing their seminar's points of view with the larger class, helping them feel more closely connected, but also that these little reports offer opportunities for some final insights or reconsiderations of the material.

My preference is for keeping the whole group together, simply because I want to hear everything, but I have done it both ways, and found both ways rewarding.

**Assessment.** Size, of course, isn't the only consideration for creating an environment that encourages active exploration. After a few years of experimenting, I discovered that a major and interwoven component of my good seminars was assessment. When I skipped it, because of pressure to "get in more content," or because of other time limitations, the next seminar with that group just wasn't as sharp-and seminars continued to deteriorate until I restored assessment procedures. Later, at the 1991 Harvard Institute on Assessment, I heard Dennie Palmer Wolf champion assessment as a crucial part of any transformative pedagogy. We can't extricate assessment from the whole process of learning, or we do so at our peril. She recommended that we look at what happens outside of school in order to get a better idea about what might work inside the walls of the classroom. "Artists, writers and performers," she wrote in "Assessment as an Episode of Learning," "insist upon . . . sustained [my emphasis] assessment, by which they mean the ongoing appraisal of their work over time in a way that allows for both self-assessment, or reflection, and social assessment, or response and critique" (9). It was affirming to hear her articulate what I had been experiencing. I also liked the idea of taking our seminars as seriously as the artists, writers and performers Wolf describes. For me that meant establishing (with my classes) routines that were agreed upon and effective, and assessing them regularly in practice, as sort of an informal "rules of order." Now, we create covenants, assign seminar roles, and leave time for assessing the seminar, all to assure an environment where students can feel safe and be vulnerable. The covenant, the roles, and the assessment strategies are all described below.

## **Introducing the Seminar**

At the beginning of the course, we describe the seminar in general terms to our students as an opportunity to grapple with the text individually and as a group-without the teacher as the center of their learning. The seminar, we tell them, is their chance to explore, discuss, discover, and illuminate the text for each other. They will need to prepare, we say, in different ways. Sometimes they may want to do a bit of research before the seminar. What can they learn about the author, if they are seminarizing on a book, or about the artist, if they are seminarizing on a piece of art, and so on? But the best preparation is to know the reading or examine the art or think about the idea thoroughly.

**Seminar Paper.** A few days before the first seminar, we return to our introduction of seminarizing. We may have two tasks to accomplish. First, if we are assigning a seminar paper, we make clear the guidelines for that paper. It is usually not longer than two pages. Most faculty prefer a one-page paper. These writings are usually typed or word-processed and follow specific guidelines of their own. Guidelines are crucial and should answer students' very legitimate question: "What do you want in the paper?"

**Covenant.** Second, and essential, we establish a group covenant. We like to establish this covenant as a group, mindful of the seminar goal of active exploration of the seminar's centerpiece. In working together to create the covenant, we ask what conditions will enable and empower seminar participants to actively explore the seminar centerpiece (e.g., text, poem, film, etc.). Some of us have found it helpful to hand out North Seattle Community College's "Guidelines" and/or "The Seven Levels of Seminar Interaction" as seeds for this discussion. However we proceed, our goal is to arrive at a list of appropriate seminar behaviors we can all agree on: attendance, preparation, and protocols for listening, contributing, and balancing participation among all participants. At Evergreen, basic ground rules are generally agreed upon early in the quarter, and then, mid-quarter everyone pulls out the covenant and amends it if need be.

Although I trust the group's ability to arrive at an acceptable covenant-indeed, some classes of mine have created covenants far more strict than I alone would create-I do have my own bottom lines. A hard one for many students (and faculty) is to agree that nothing can be done to "make up" an absence anymore than we can "make up" for missing any other important event that happens only once. If seminar papers are required, I recommend that they not be accepted if the student is absent from the seminar. To ease my problems with this "no make up" ground rule, I permit my students to drop one or sometimes two seminars with no effect on their overall grade. These allowances take into account most illnesses or circumstances beyond the students' control, which make it impossible for them to come to one or two classes. But, hard as it is to accept, long-term illness or other long-term disabling circumstances that keep students out of class generally disqualify them from the kind of collaborative work we are able to offer at our institutions and thus from any class that seminars.

## **The First Seminar**

We often use the first seminar as a brief introduction to the practice of seminarizing. As such, we give a good deal of attention to the process of seminarizing. Thus, using a seminar image (as in the vase described below), talking about assessment, and defining the functional roles we adopt for the purpose of assessment take considerable time this first meeting. After the first seminar, we needn't use a centering image, and we needn't devote so much time to talking about the purpose of assessment nor to defining the functional roles. In the routine seminars following the first, these are best understood as we practice them. We allot an hour or more for seminar, and during the first seminar, much of this time goes toward setting up the roles and processes of assessment. The times listed below add up to a 75 minute seminar and refer to this longer, more careful setup during the first seminar. Later, routine seminars omit the centering image and require just a quick assignation of roles, and we can devote more time to the exploration of the centerpiece. If you are limited to a 50-minute class period, cut where you need to, but be sure never to cut the assessments. Neglecting assessment time is like leaving weeds amongst the hedge and hoping they'll go away by themselves.

**Introducing the Seminar (5 minutes or less).** Before the first seminar, call everyone together in order to offer an image to help participants conceptualize what they will be doing. Ask them to make a close-knit circle, positioning themselves so that each participant is able to see all of the others. One image I like to use has been useful for undergraduate seminar practitioners:

### **The Vase**

The instructor asks everyone to imagine that they are archaeologists examining a large vase (Pueblo? Greek? Pre-Columbian?) in the center of the room and describes different but integrated pictures on each side of the vase (e.g., a hunting trip, a lover's pursuit, rain-making ritual). Each participant has a different perspective, but a whole description must include the pictures on all the sides. And even though there are some sides we will miss (from above, from below, from inside), we point out that the collective view is greater than the sum of each individual's response.

Correspondingly, any reading of a text offers a unique perspective. For one thing, it will be filtered through a lens of uniquely individual experience-cultural, economic, age, discipline, life. Thus, what a good seminar has to offer everyone is the exploration of many different perspectives and responses to a given subject. That is, it offers a multidimensional appreciation.

**Introducing the Assessment Process/Defining Roles (20 minutes).** The collaborative conversation of seminar is not the usual model we see in education, or, for that matter, in the political and jural models that control the centers of our present world's on-going life. Therefore, we feel it's important to assist students in learning discussion skills through taking on specific seminar roles that help the conversation develop effectively. On the most basic level, what's the teacher's role during seminar? The observer's? The scribe's or focalizer's? And more subtly, whom do students address when they speak? How does body language telegraph our selves, our power, our influence, our interactions? How are we silencing or encouraging others simply by a sweep of the hand, a tilt of the head, a slump, eye-contact?

We have found the following functional roles to be effective in moving the class toward active exploration of the seminar centerpiece. We offer them as one way of circumscribing seminar space by giving participants clear, non-hierarchical ways of engaging in the conversation. Student (and faculty) participants may want to experiment with other ways and roles.

The first role we assign is the role of the scribe, focalizer or some would say, facilitator. I have preferred the terms "scribe" or "focalizer" over "facilitator" for my seminars in order to avoid the tendency among my students to become a "teacherly" discussion leader. The scribe collects the topics that each small, pre-seminar group has generated and writes them on the blackboard or overhead. (See below for discussion of pre-seminar.) S/he then helps the class order them into an agenda. When the topics are visible to everyone and arranged as an agenda, the scribe or focalizer opens the seminar by calling for an elaboration of the question from the small group that developed the topic. Finally, s/he queries the class or gauges when it's time to move on to the next topic. Whatever the name, this role is the most challenging. While s/he is encouraged to participate, s/he must be especially careful not to dominate during the seminar, or try to turn it into an old-time "class discussion," where all questions and answers are directed to the "teacher" or whoever has been standing near the board, chalk in hand.

A second role is that of the observers. The observers watch from outside the seminar circle. If it's a small seminar (10-12), I call for one volunteer to be an observer. If it's bigger, I ask for two. In my seminars, I usually take the role of observer, until the last two or three seminars of the term. I wait this long because I want my students to feel that seminars are their time for conversation and interpretation; I take my time on the days I lecture. After one or two seminars, they prefer my being out of the conversation. The observers watch. They do not participate in seminar. They take notes on process and give reports about the process at the end of the seminar.

When I introduce the role to my students, I usually ask the observers to notice what interactions go on among the participants. What questions move the seminar forward? Are they challenging, prodding, exploring, tied to specific pages and passages? Do they make connections? When are there difficulties?

Does everyone try to talk at once? Do they know how to listen? How do we know when participants are listening to each other? What problems do they see in the interactions? The oral reports at the end are generally very specific, including the names of participants who helped deepen or move the conversation. (For a sketch of types of interactions, again see Appendix I.)

After calling for a scribe and observers, and explaining their appropriate functions, my choice is to become an observer. Sometimes, however, when information is called for from the participants, I have to decide whether or not to give that information during the students' seminar, or defer it to a lecture at another time. I have found that the tendency in early seminars is for students to pass the responsibility for the seminar (and their power) back to me by addressing me rather than the group. Often I have to remind myself and my students that seminar is not a class discussion to be led by me toward a particular understanding or interpretation of the material. Nor do I want it to be a debate. What I want in seminar is the participants' active exploration of a given author's point of view, a piece of art, a video, a film or an idea.

A final role, one which all students assume, is that of peer assessor (see Appendix I). Usually I ask students to look to their right or left to designate someone to assess their interactions. That peer will be called upon at the end of the seminar to do a quick assessment of their peer's process, and in return, are assessed by the other.

**Reflective Prewriting (10 minutes).** If a seminar paper is not required or if the seminar centerpiece is an event, a video, a piece of art, an idea, or whatever, students do a short (10 minute) freewrite before seminar. Sometimes the instructor gives a question to guide the freewrite: What was the author/creator's point or what was s/he saying? What are the major issues for them, individually? What was confusing? What was particularly interesting? Other questions may be tailored to the discussion or the freewrite may be completely free-let the students generate their own questions. After the freewrite, students then proceed to their pre-seminar groups.

**The Pre-Seminar (10-15 minutes).** This very important practice should begin just about every ordinary undergraduate seminar. In the pre-seminar, three- to four-member groups have a conversation for about 10-15 minutes before the full seminar about what they want to explore in the seminar. We have found the pre-seminar to be very important in two ways: first, it offers students the opportunity to remember key issues they have thought about and to warm up in the comfort of a very small group; second, it helps to focus the larger seminar by allowing students to practice articulating their main questions before they bring them up for seminar. I have found that in classes with a significant cultural mix or in ESL classes, longer pre-seminars may be helpful.

Usually we call the pre-seminar by asking the students to form pre-seminar or small groups. Their assigned task is to come up with a topic or question to explore in the seminar. They may want to tell others what they wrote about in order to warm up for the seminar. Though some instructors have them read their papers to each other, I have stopped encouraging the reading of papers because I want the participants to be in an interactive rather than a receptive mode. Solitary reading usually makes students thoughtful and solitary rather than thoughtful and interactive-at least for a while, but a while is all we generally have, so it's good to start out at our most interactive. But whether teachers and students decide to read or not read, or to mention or not mention their seminar paper topics, each person in the group must bring up something to discuss, and from these topics the group decides on one (or, in really tough cases, two) topic(s) to present to the scribe or focalizer for listing in the seminar agenda for the day. In the larger, open seminar, students often want to tackle something big, something that they may have been timid to write about, given the restrictions of papers. But whatever they want to discuss is usually raised in the pre-seminar and then submitted to the scribe to be listed in the agenda.

**Creating the Agenda (5 minutes).** Following the pre-seminar and the assignment of roles, the Scribe creates the agenda by orally collecting the topics from each group and writing them on the board. S/he decides in what order to tackle them, assigning each topic a number that corresponds to the order s/he thinks best.

**The Seminar Exploration (25 minutes).** When the seminar exploration is ready to begin, I check to make sure the observers and instructors are sitting outside the circle. And I ask everyone in the circle to make sure they can see and hear everyone else without straining. The scribe begins the seminar by asking the group that developed the first topic on the agenda to present it to the seminar for discussion by explaining why it is important or interesting. When the conversation about this topic winds down, or is complete (to the satisfaction of the class), the scribe moves to the next topic. Again, s/he asks the group that developed that topic to present it. This procedure is followed until the designated seminar time is over or all the topics or questions are thoroughly discussed. Remember, the instructor enters the seminar conversation to let the participants know that they need to close the conversation and move to assess the seminar process.

**The Assessments (8 - 15 minutes).** Five quick assessments from different perspectives help to close the seminar.

1. **The Group Assessment** (1-5 minutes): The instructor first asks for a group assessment: "On a scale of 1 - 5, 5 being high, how would you score this seminar?" Each student writes down what score s/he would give, and then the instructor addresses the class and asks what score they came up with. Most everyone speaks up. If there's much discrepancy, the instructor may ask each student (or selected students who gave scores that varied from the general opinion) in turn about the score they wrote down. Why high? or Why low? If the seminar is ranked low, s/he asks the group (or individual) what they believe they need to do to make it better next time. This part of the process is usually a very brief group summary. Move quickly to the next part.
2. **Observers' Process Report** (about 1 minute for each): Following the group assessment, the instructor calls for a group process report from the observers. The observers speak only about process: What did they observe that moved the seminar forward? Did participants point to the text to support their positions? Did questions follow each other, more frequently making connections than statements? Which thoughts were well-articulated? Were participants unafraid to be exploratory with new and partially formed thoughts, calling for help from others when appropriate? Where was reasoning sharp? Where were comments heartfelt? Were participants watching each other and sensitive to the dynamics of the conversation?
3. **The Instructor's Process Report** (about 1 minute): The instructor follows the group process report. Where s/he can, s/he supports what has been said by the participants and observers. Where s/he must, she disagrees. But mainly, the job is to recognize what has been done well and thereby encourage repetition.
4. **The Self-Reflection** (about 1-5 minutes): It's very important that participants reflect upon their participation in seminar. There are numerous ways this may be worked out; we recommend that you look over the "Seven Levels of Seminar Interaction" (see Appendix I) and the "Seminar Process Assessment" (at the close of Ann McCartney's article) to get an idea of two methods. Or, your class may want to develop their own interaction guidelines, in which case students are asked to consider their participation from the point of view of the agreed-upon guidelines. Or the instructor may have presented specific seminar goals to the class, in which case the participants will consider how they met these goals. Whatever the instrument of self-reflection, it is crucial to the on-going development of the seminar as well as to that of the participants that self-reflection be a routine part of the process.
5. **The Instructor Assessment** (about 1 minute per student): The participants' self-reflections are handed to the instructor, who offers an assessment comment, mainly by way of her or his individual reflection on each participants' self-reflection. Usually a brief note will do. Look over the accompanying self- and instructor-reflection sheet to get an idea about a format in which this may be done. What's important is that the instructor respond as quickly possible. That same day is best.

**Closing Seminar Space.** With these final reflections, you exit your seminar space—a space that is designed to assure participants that their interactions are intimately intertwined with their learning and knowing; that as a community, they create their knowledge; and that in the best communities, of which we want our seminars to be examples, each individual's thoughtful contribution is given dignity, recognition and respect as an essential, interconnected part of the larger fabric of life.

## **A Note on Process Difficulties**

Of course, our seminars aren't always examples of the best communities, and difficulties of two general types often mar the process. The first type of difficulty is that created by dominating or silent members. The second is that created by irrational conflict. The seminar assessments often provide strategies for dealing with these difficulties. I like to encourage the assessors, that is, the observers and peer assessors, to highlight the seminar strengths, and subsequent seminars usually build on these strengths. However, sometimes we instructors need to intercede when difficulties arise.

Some of my colleagues maintain relatively equal conversation flow by playfully getting students to identify themselves (early in the course) as "mouths" or "ears" and periodically reminding the "mouths" to let the "ears" have a word. If some "mouths" tend to dominate in seminar after seminar, silencing the quieter "ears," the group urges them to hold their comments for an agreed-upon time.

But sometimes participants are habitually silent or on the outside of the discussion. I have found it useful to raise this habit during the assessment time at the end and ask the silent individuals to let us know what we can do to help. Generally students decide to address the silent ones by name in future seminars—and that has proven to be an effective way to "get their toes wet." Usually, however, the practice of the pre-seminar is enough to support shyer people and help them past problems of silence. As a rule, I have found that the students take on the responsibility of encouraging general social interaction, and bit-by-bit, outsiders feel welcomed rather than put on the spot, as they often feel when I do the encouraging.

Occasionally, seminars break down into unproductive and polarized conflict. I have found two reasons for such breakdowns. One, students have not fully grasped the idea that the seminar is an opportunity for exploration; and two, they haven't agreed upon ground rules. Like a flash fire, suddenly it seems like everyone is talking at once, accusing each other of being "narrow-minded" or "racist" or "simple-minded." When this happens, I do not try to put the fire out with a mere, "Please, take turns." I ask them to close their texts and take a few minutes to write a reflection (see Reflection Sheet attached to "The Seven Levels" assessment handout) on their participation in the conversation, which they hand in to me. I ask them to reflect on these questions: What do you perceive is going on here? How are you doing in this seminar? Participants do not need to show what they write to anyone (although I want to see it as part of their required reflection). Their homework assignment is to re-read North Seattle Community College's "Seminar Behavior" and my "Seven Levels of Interaction."

This strategy is my way of dealing with irrational conflicts. After the writing, if we have time, I break them into small groups again. Their task is to try to identify the problems and brainstorm solutions, before we re-enter the larger group. In these cases, the necessary conversation is about the process itself; the purpose is to develop or agree upon ground rules. In rare instances, when one or two students are regularly disruptive and don't figure out better personal strategies to interact with the text and the group even after I've made suggestions on their required reflections, I will pull them aside and talk to them. If this intervention doesn't improve their seminar behavior, I will stop the seminar and ask the group what they want to do about them. Another general point: in cases of frequent miscommunication, we may ask participants to paraphrase a preceding point before making the next.

I'm happy to say, though, that most conflict has to do with disagreements about meanings of the text. These are easier to resolve and part of the regular seminar process. The rule: return to the text when there is disagreement. Or return to the simplest points (who? when? where? what?) when ideas get tangled or the seminar gets bogged down with observations like "There's nothing here to seminar about," "I can't make any sense of this," "It's just a stupid love poem," or "I hate it; let's seminar on something else." Mostly, everyone in seminars is working to make them work better and wanting to know how to do them better. My approach is to acknowledge the many positive things that are going on in the seminar and watch them increase in frequency over the term.



## Final Notes

Preparation and regular assessment lead to high qualities of interaction and exploration and make seminars worthwhile. When seminars are good, most if not all of the students are deeply engaged, including students who are not normally engaged. The almost exhilarating energy in the atmosphere is irresistible. Conversations spark with good questions and responses. Students frequently say they "love" them. When this happens, I can't help but think that my job is being done, seemingly by itself-but more accurately, by the students themselves. I've merely prepared the learning situation.

Second, when seminars are good, I see students take responsibility for their learning, which becomes more deeply interwoven in their lives. Experiencing their power to contribute to others' learning as they are learning, they look at themselves and the teacher differently. On their own initiative, they vigorously undertake educational quests-some making extra trips to the library for background information, others, taking seminar material outside of seminars to have conversations with family or friends even before, and often after, seminars.

Third, when seminars are good, students learn the material better because they enjoy seminarizing on it. They come to expect lively, sometimes slow and thoughtful but often rapidly moving conversations, and they learn how to prepare for them. They come ready to call upon a passage, support an assertion, and remember.

Fourth, they learn, first hand, how knowledge is not only constructed socially, it is driven socially. Students regularly report that they understand a book or a text better after a seminar on it. They say they have heard points of view or ideas that never occurred to them and that were very worthwhile-important-for them to hear. And they intensely desire to contribute to the community of knowledge they are creating. And fifth, they see, in a safe place, how people have, maybe even how people have come to, different points of view, and they learn how to disagree in positive ways-relational ways-respecting each other, even when they are in conflict. All these benefits simultaneously do seem like magic. This magic results from our carefully, again and again, circumscribing the seminar circle.

## Appendix I

### Seven Levels of Interaction in Seminar: Metric & Reflection

**Introduction:** To a larger degree the intention of seminar is the process of active learning itself, made visible and audible to the entire learning community. It is the seminar that integrates the texts with the readers, and the readers with each other. Without a vital seminar, there is little hope that a coordinated studies class will be as healthy as it could be. The following is a seminar metric to help participants evaluate and consciously improve the vitality of the seminar. However, it is crucial to remember that no seminar will work if the participants have not read the material.

**Metric:** Because of the difficulty and complexity in discussing anyone's motivation to do or not to do anything, the following metric is based simply upon the seven levels of behavior (from least to most interactive) we have observed in seminar participants.

1. **Silent** - No response. Of the various reasons for this behavior, two need to be considered for our purposes: Lack of trust in the group and therefore the unwillingness to take a risk and share; or lack of confidence in one's own critical abilities a sense of being so overpowered by the material that it is hard to see the forest for the trees.
2. **Silencing the text** - Personal opinions, experiences and/or memories dominate, without much consideration for the text. This behavior indicates an inability to engage and is often accompanied by complacency or boredom. Possibilities for learning are greatly reduced. Often the participant is judgmental or dismisses the text altogether.
3. **Testing the water** - Some two or three general comments about the text to let people know s/he has read it. The participant is beginning to get their proverbial toes wet.
4. **Collecting** - Listing many observations and quotes from the text without analyzing them. The participant is still struggling a bit with being overpowered by the material, but what is important is that s/he is struggling with it.
5. **Engaging** - This signals real reading. In seminar it is usually accompanied by an emotional as well as an intellectual response to the material. At this level, participants are generally enthusiastic. Among the various responses possible: discussing the position and biases of the author; seeking to define terms (both the author's and the discussants'); seeking to make meaning out of the quotes; asking questions; answering questions about the quotes; asking questions; answering questions about the text posed by the group; clarifying each other's positions. This level indicates a strategy of learning.
6. **Understanding** - At this level, participants are structuring and integrating the material through association with personal experience (here, personal experience illuminates rather than dominates the text) and with other literature.
7. **Discriminating** - This level is the level of "critical" appreciation. The participant has fully understood the material from a number of perspective and now makes a conscious evaluation or judgment about it.

Participant \_\_\_\_\_

EVALUATIONS BASED ON METRIC

PEER EVALUATION BASED ON METRIC								
Seminar Number		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7	Discriminating							
6	Understanding							
5	Engaging							
4	Collecting							
3	Testing							
2	Silencing							
1	Silent							
Evaluator								

PEER EVALUATION BASED ON METRIC								
Seminar Number		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7	Discriminating							
6	Understanding							
5	Engaging							
4	Collecting							
3	Testing							
2	Silencing							
1	Silent							
Evaluator								

Participant:
<b>BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON SEMINARS BY PARTICIPANT</b>
1.
2.
3.
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## A Brief Bibliography of Resources for Seminarng

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