

Planning and interacting in seminar discussions

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Topic: Alternative structures for planning, organising and conducting seminar discussions

1. Seminars

Seminars take on a number of different forms in higher education from direct teaching to open discussions. The main idea of holding seminars, as opposed to lectures, is to encourage critical interaction and problem solving that engages students in active learning. The variety of structures for seminar discussions varies significantly though and experienced teachers often actively facilitate discussions in ways that allow ideas to evolve rather than be imposed.

As an acquired skill it can look effortless in the hands of an expert facilitator, but equally can look very awkward if the facilitator has little experience. Some of the more common activities for communication and engagement that are used to create and manage discussions are listed below.

- a) **“student group work:** e.g. problem-solving exercises”
- b) **“the lesson:** e.g. nominated students go over prepared answers to case studies”
- c) **“discussion:** e.g. of material previously read by the whole group”
- d) **“presentation:** e.g. class members reporting on reading they had done or students presenting research to date”

(Jordan, 1997: 196, based on Furneaux et al., 1991)

Many seminars will use a combination of these approaches, but what is most evident is that a seminar will often hold back from direct instruction to allow participant ideas to take shape. The goal is facilitated guidance and learning rather than prescribed ideas and teaching.

Depending on the premise of the seminar it may be necessary to provide some taught or guided input—and this may be student led—where or revised new content

is introduced. If a 50-minute seminar has one main subject focus, this could include, for example, up to 20 minutes of input and 30 minutes of discussion. The input could be concentrated in one 20-minute talk, or it could be staged with concept questions and discussion stages in between.

If individual students or student groups are required to facilitate a discussion, depending on the timing, a similar formula could be used to maximise discussion time and minimise actual input time (e.g. a 20-minute seminar activity could include something like 8 minutes of input and 12 minutes of discussion).

2. Seminar structures

The following structures for discussions are based on Wallace (1980, in Jordan, 1997). The argument or flow of exchange is based on *fact, personal feeling, opinion* and *action*.

A: Basing discussion on established fact

Formal statement		Formal question		Exploration		Conclusion
Statements or questions of fact	→	Research or justification	→	Evidence	→	Value

B: Basing discussion on personal or unsubstantiated feeling

Formal statement		Formal question		Exploration		Conclusion
Statements or questions of feeling	→	Agreement or disagreement	→	Justification	→	Objectivity

C: Basing discussion on established opinion

Formal statement		Formal question		Exploration		Conclusion
Statements or questions of opinion	→	Definition of terms	→	Justification or evidence	→	Discussion

D: basing discussion on recommended or adopted action

Formal statement		Formal question		Exploration		Conclusion
Statements or questions of action	→	Main statement or opinion	→	Practical issues	→	Discussion & decision

(Adapted from Wallace, 1980, in Jordan, 1997, adding categories of *Formal statement, Formal question, Exploration & Conclusion* to suggest interactive roles for participants)

3. Variations on a theme

The flow of information in an expertly facilitated discussion often looks spontaneous or seamless. A significant amount of planning needs to enter this process, however, as the goal is to keep participants on track, manage timing and avoid diversions that go off topic. If you do allow a discussion to take a useful diversion, always make sure you can bring it back in to focus to allow completion of the strategic cycle of the discussion topic.

- The **formal statement** in each of the structures above would generally be initiated by the facilitator.
- The interaction would begin in the **formal question** stage around the related issues using *group work, lesson, discussion or presentation* strategies. In each case it is important to try to get a balanced contribution from all participants.
- During the **exploration** considerable exchange of opinion would take place in which the facilitator's role is now to mediate rather than direct the proceedings. This allows for greater social negotiation. Many discussions stop at this point if the facilitator seeks a high level of intervention and control.
- Arriving at the **conclusion** stage ensures that the exchange of ideas and opinions has reached the end of one stage in the discussion cycle and that participants have had the chance to engage with the issues at stake.

What you see here are only recommendations for how discussions can be structured and you may choose to adapt your procedure accordingly.

4. To create your own seminar discussion

a) Choose a basis for your discussion

- Fact
- Feeling
- Opinion
- Action

Fact is the basis of all information, but what you want to explore within a single focused discussion could be different each time you do it.

b) Identify a possible structure

Will you follow the structures given in section 2, or will you adapt the structure? Create a brief diagram to show the intended flow of the discussion.

c) Identify a pattern of interaction

Discussion is the most desirable pattern of interaction for this task (though if you really want to pursue *lesson*, *group work* or *presentation* it is possible).

- What issues will you present in your formal statement?
- How will you encourage formal questions?
- How will you manage the exploration?
- How will you draw the discussion to a conclusion?

Add the main ideas for interaction to your diagram.

A well designed seminar is not a guarantee of a successful discussion, but it is likely to get people talking. Don't worry if you don't get the reactions you had hoped for and don't worry if the conclusion does not match your prior expectations. This will

lead to further consideration and adaptation for audience expectations and make you a more critical and informed communicator.

5. Referencing in seminars and presentations

A seminar, like a presentation, creates an oral record of a formal academic or professional event. In this respect it should be treated in the same way as any written academic record that you create (e.g. essay, report). The majority of contemporary seminars and presentations are accompanied by visual display documents, such as PowerPoint or Prezi. As you have seen in the university, many lectures and seminars are also captured on video, via Panopto, which creates a permanent record of your work, including any text used in presentation slides.

Any documents you create to support your seminar and presentation should include citation and referencing. Include citations in PowerPoint slides for text and images and add a bibliography at the end.

Presentation documents are, in principle, subject to the same rules for unacceptable academic practice as essays and reports.

Bibliography

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