

Book Seminar

MES: PEEP Fall 2007

So what is a seminar anyway?

A seminar is a discussion involving a group of students and a facilitator about a common experience (usually a written text). Seminars mean different things to different people but there are several things that will help you approach the seminar discussion and structure the discussion in such a way that you and your fellow students can get as much out of it as possible. It is often useful to discuss, in the first seminar of the quarter, what people expect from a seminar discussion. This helps to structure the seminar discussions so that they are more valuable for the participants.

Relevance

One way to approach a book is to ask the following three questions.

1. What is the relevance of the text to you, the reader?
2. What is the relevance of the text to the larger community (local, global)?
3. How do the ideas presented in this book relate to other texts and lectures we have read?

Levels of reading and discussing a book or text

There are three levels at which you can read and discuss or write about a text: summary, review and critique. The definitions below will help you understand these concepts.

Summary: presents the substance or general idea of the book

Review: critical report and evaluation of the book

- Author's main purpose as you see it
- Main arguments and questions presented
- Meaning for scholars within the discipline
- How effectively does the author get his/her point across?
- What is the disciplinary foundation of the piece?
- Key points of integration

Critique: critical analysis of the piece

- Strengths and weaknesses of the author's arguments
- Is evidence provided to support the arguments? Is it sufficient to sustain the argument?
- Assumptions made by the author. Should they be questioned?
- What does the author emphasize? What does she/he neglect/omit?
- What values does the author project?
- Are main arguments explicit (plainly stated) or implicit (implied by information/arguments presented)?
- Does the author show biases related to his or her disciplinary background?
- What tools of persuasion does the author use to convince you?
 - Ethos: character or authority of author
 - Pathos: emotion
 - Logos: shared intellectual understanding

In discussions and papers a summary does not bring anything of yourself to the discussion. Also, everyone else has read the book so a summary should be unnecessary and is definitely uninteresting. Review and critique brings your own ideas to the discussion. Critique takes practice, experience and background so, if you are new to the idea of seminar discussions, aim for at least review-level discussion in a seminar. By the end of your first quarter you should be comfortable contributing to a critique-level discussion.

Seminar Facilitation

A successful seminar requires a facilitator. Facilitators are responsible for keeping track of the structure and process of the discussion in order to provide some organization and to assure that the discussion is productive and interesting. Each student will be responsible for facilitating at least one seminar. Typically a facilitator does three things over the course of the discussion:

- A. Gives a **5-minute presentation at the beginning of the seminar on the text**. For example, you might research the author of the text and provide some biographical background. Alternatively, you could read reviews of the text, or research issues mentioned but not elaborated.
- B. Second, you should **explain at least two ways to structure the seminar, seeking student consent to one of them**. Will students talk for 5 minutes in order to formulate questions that they write on the board? Will students break into small groups to discuss different readings or chapters? Will we go around in a circle to hear from each person (a round-robin)? What is the best structure you can choose to cover the material?
- C. Third, during the discussion, **you are expected to pay attention to process**. Are we talking only briefly about each topic, never going into depth? If so, you might ask a question that prolongs the discussion. Or, you can ask us to pause to consider whether there are more perspectives to add. What if we are off on a tangent and you are wondering if we will have time to cover all the texts? You might ask, *how can we relate this to our reading?*

It is a good idea to talk to your faculty ahead of time to discuss strategy if you do not have much experience with facilitation. If you will be co-facilitating with another student, you will need to work together on all three aspects of facilitation prior to seminar.

Seminar Pitfalls

These are some of the major things that cause problems in seminar.

- A. *Differences in discussion style*. Remember to be considerate of other people's discussion styles. Just because someone is not confrontational it doesn't mean that they are not passionate about their views and just because someone tends to be confrontational, it does not mean they are making a personal attack on others and their views. One student interjecting a short phrase while another is speaking may not be interrupting but, instead showing support for the views being

- expressed by the other student. One of the goals of seminar is for all of the students to learn how to most effectively discuss concepts in a group.
- B. *One person speaking for the views or values of a larger group.* It is inappropriate for a single person to speak for, or be asked by someone else to speak for, a whole culture, gender, class, or race. For example: “Mary, you’re [a woman, Jew, African American, Canadian etc.], what do you think about this question?” You may speak about your own experience as a member of a particular group that you identify with but, remember, that is your experience and your views. To extrapolate and say that everyone in that group shares that experience or those views is not appropriate.
- C. *Humor not shared by the whole group.* Humor can be a good way to loosen up the group and encourage bonding but keep in mind that not everyone may share the same sense of what is funny. For example, several years ago in an Orientation Week seminar a student made a joke that involved a person whose house was robbed. One student in the group had just experienced a very harrowing break-in of her own house, which had happen while she was in it. That student was, understandably, very upset with the student who made the joke and the student who made the joke was surprised (I’m not making this up) that people “still” experienced home burglary (I guess he thought that, in an age of deadbolt locks and home security systems that didn’t happen anymore).

Seminar Papers

Over the quarter you will be assigned four seminar papers. We do not expect comprehensive essays on the material. These seminar papers will be a maximum of two pages long and should identify a core argument in the reading and assess it in some way. This assessment could take the form of a critique of its assumptions or supporting data, or a comparison with another source you are familiar with, or it could deepen our understanding of the argument by extending it to a context or application not considered by the author. Whatever you choose, your paper should be analytical.

We will evaluate the papers on the following criteria:

- *Composition.* The paper should be cleanly and clearly written, encompassing matters of word use, grammar and organization.
- *Salience.* The argument you choose to analyze should be central to the text being read. The ability to distinguish central from peripheral argument is perhaps the most important aspect of careful academic reading.
- *Accuracy.* Since you have only two pages to work with, we do not want you to use up valuable space in summarizing or repeating material in the text. Instead, we will infer your understanding from the commentary you provide.
- *Insight.* Don’t hold back your creative thinking. These are exploratory assignments and they provide opportunities to try out new ideas that you might not want to stake a longer, more serious paper on.

A seminar paper is a good place to organize your thoughts around questions and issues that you would like to discuss in seminar.