THE SEMINAR PROCESS

Over the years, many Evergreen faculty members have written about seminars, since they are a central activity in our educational system but they seem to be the source of much pain and confusion for both students and faculty members. This is a collection and summary of some of these statements. It contains multiple perspectives and, therefore, possibly some contradictory viewpoints. Each seminar leader must find his or her own style, based on personality and educational perspective; the only hope is that this compilation of thoughts may be useful.

A) What is the seminar for, and what are general rules for running it?

Byron Youtz summarized his rules for the seminar in these seven points:

1. Student seminars are not intended as a mechanism for transmitting information.Þ□ZÞ

2. They are intended as a means for a large group of students to obtain a set of common experiences, common heritage if you will which allows it to function as an intellectual community.Þ□ZÞ

3. Seminars give students an opportunity to float their own ideas,m test their analytical abilities against important books and against the ideas of their peers, develop the ability to discuss and to think on their feet.Þ□ZÞ

4. Seminars are a mixture of intellectual and experiential, an opportunity to relate universal experience to personal experience (Merv Cadwallader's moral curriculum).Þ□ZÞ

5. Seminar groups should become "home base" for students©©a natural grouping for friendships and counselling as well as for academic work, and a unit that finds ways to play together as well as to do serious work together.Þ□ZÞ

6. One of the tests for the success of a seminar is the extent to which each member of the seminar (including the faculty leader) has matured during the year; the extent to which each person has become more able to talk and to expose his/her ideas to the public glare and in turn take criticism of those ideas; the extent to which the discussions have become ”group• activities; and the extent to which people have become able to listen to each other and to value occasional silence.Þ□ZÞ

7. The seminar should provide a forum for the improvement of reading and writing and talking skills.Þ□ZÞ

All of the above are difficult to achieve, difficult to perfect, but are exceedingly important as a part of the education of any and every student.

Richard Alexander set out the following general principles for the functions
of a seminar:
Provide a forum in which each individual student is encouraged (perhaps even ”forced•) to take personal responsibility for a major contribution, thus leading the student to master the skills necessary for (a) independent research, (b) coherent organization of thoughts and findings, (c) useful presentation of the material, (d) personalizing this work, so that it becomes an expression of that student's individual learning, goals and experience, and thus (e) further the goal of the student taking charge of her own education forthrightly and up to objective standards.

Ì□□Ì2) Provide a situation in which the students as a group can eventually
take charge of their own education as a group, thus furthering skill in group organization, group research, group presentation. I want the students cooperating with each other in work that meets the group's needs, and within that the individual needs of each member.Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ì3) Conversely, to break the students' dependence on the faculty, and to short©circuit all those little games and tricks mastered from so long by students whereby they get the faculty to do all the work and all the thinking for them, and avoi putting themselves on the line.Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ì4) Incorporate into the seminar tasks which necessary require writing,
readiang, researach (of all sorts), verbal communication both oral and written, and cooperation©©for it appears to me that these are absolutely necessary skills for living productively in our society. I am every day more and more convinced that clarity, precision, logical consistency, breadth of factual information, and skill in ferrting out information and ideas from resources are majaor, fundamental and utterly pragmatic. To the degree that we do not teach these things to our students and to the degree that they fail of individual mastery, to that degree our academic programs fail.Þ□ZÞ

In 1979, Gil Salcedo wrote ”An• ”Etiquette• ”for• ”Seminar•, "some grossly
opinionated and authoritarian remarks about the connections between certain
kinds of conduct and the experience of having a good seminar," from which the following is taken. According to Salcedo, the purposes of the seminar
are:

Ì□□Ìa) to develop skills of verbal expression in the forceful and persuasive articulation of ideas;Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìb) to develop skills in the logical analysis of ideas by listening carefully to oneself and to others;Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìc) to pool or exchange information through cooperative discussion toward improved factual understanding of a topic.Þ□ZÞ

For a seminar to succeed, it is essential that its members take seriously the purpose of the seminar in general and the importance of the topic at hand. For this reason, and because a good seminar requires positive collaboration and mutual goodwill, seminar can be thought of as a public and
collective enterprise. This is why etiquette is important to the theory andÜj□□□□□□Ü
practice of seminar. Now, ordinarily etiquette is thought of as principles
of good taste in public conduct and what is typically regarded as "good manners." But, in a more fundamental sense, etiquette is about the social
necessity for a method to demonstrate esteem for, and respect toward, the other individuals (beside oneself) who are part of a collective enterprise.

When this fundamental definition of etiquette is kept in mind, it becomes clear that "good manners" or "proper etiquette" are not ends in themselves
but means to an end. The reason that etiquette is commonly thought of as a
set of rules for particular occasions is that etiquette constitutes not a purpose in itself, but a method for achieving a larger purpose. Methodological discipline means, quite simply, rules. One follows a set of
guidelines, or a step©by©step process, to achieve a particular purpose. Proper conduct is a means to an end.

Etiquette consists of rules. What are the rules for a good seminar? In other words, how does one demonstrate esteem toward others in order to achieve the collective purpose of the seminar?

Ì□□Ìa) Be willing and prepared to discuss ideas and raise questions by completing the required reading and writing beforehand.Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìb) Listen attentively to what is said by others and take notes on the
general discussion.Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìc) Speak in turn and do not interrupt another person.Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìd) Try to address an idea or argument by addressing a particular individual in the seminar.Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìe) Respond actively to what another has said ”before• you contribute your own thought.Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìf) Actively concentrate your attention upon the topic at hand and do not let your mind wander.Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìg) Do not eat, drink, smoke, chew gum, or engage in private conversation. These are private, self©indulgent activities that subvert the purpose of the seminar; they are counter©productive and completely out of place.Þ□ZÞ

Seminar is a public enterprise that depends upon individual self^{a}discipline, intellectual honesty and courage, and individual self©restraint
upon capricious whims and moods. Private self©indulgence is therefore subversive and toleration of it invites a bad seminar.

In practice, this means that when someone is speaking, everyone should be listening; no one else should be talking, or whispering, or trying to catch
someone's eye, or in any way attempting to distract the seminar or divert its purpose. Behavior contrary to this principle reflects lack of esteem for seminar colleagues.

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Üj□□□□□□ÜŒSalcedo addressed a common problem that arises after a seminar has been
going on for a few weeks. The most common violation of seminar etiquette is
failure to participate actively and with a will. Here are some common excuses for failure to participate in seminar:

a) "I was going to say something but someone else said it first."

b) "I was going to say something but was afraid to sound dumb."

c) "I would like to say something but really have nothing to say."

Ì□□Ìd) "I would like to say something but I'm afraid of disagreement and criticism."Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìe) "I would like to say something but my thoughts aren't yet worked out in their final form and I'm reluctant to appear foolish."Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìf) "I didn't read the book for seminar but I just enjoy the social aspect of getting together."Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìg) "I would like to say something but I don't understand what's going
on."Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìh) "I would like to say something but there's always someone else talking."Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìi) "I'm not used to speaking before such a larger group and I get self©conscious when everyone looks at me."Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìj) "I feel content as a listener and really see no reason to say anything. I learn a lot by not talking and just listening."Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìk) "I wanted to say something but I just wasn't in the mood."Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìl) "I really should speak in seminar but someone else can always say it better."Þ□ZÞ

Ì□□Ìm) "I was going to say something but then someone changed the subject."Þ□ZÞ

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I would argue that when people resort to such excuses the seminar is threatened by loss of purpose, self©indulgent dereliction, and demoralization. A common symptom of this degenerate situation is the commonly heard complaint that the discussion is dominated by a few people who unkindly make it hard for the others to get involved. Now, what has happened here?

What has happened is that the seminar has informally split into two large factions. One faction consists of those who have accustomed themselves to
making excuses for non©participation; they have individually abdicated responsibility and purpose, they sit passively on the fringe, and their intimidation has produced a feeling of vacuum at the core of the seminar. Üj□□□□□□Ü
The other faction consists of active participants who, sensitive to the vacuum and bewildered by the others' passivity, try to compensate for the vacuum by talking even more, only to further frighten the fringe©dwellers.

In this situation, each faction complains that the other side has produced a
poor learning environment. Some people will look to the seminar leader to
bridge the gulf in some miraculous way and unify the seminar by causing some
people to speak up and others to remain silent. But this hope mistakes the
symptom for the underlying disease. Worse than that, it assumes that the leader has some kind of magic, or charisma, that can be used to rescue the
community.

But it is not the heroism of the Great Man that is called for here. What is
needed is renewal of self©discipline and sense of purpose on the part of each individual member of the seminar, whatever his or her factional persuasion may be. Rather than depending on the seminar leader, the membaers of the seminar must exercise disinterested independence of judgement, personal responsibility and willingness to restrain private preferences in favor of conscientious dedication to the seminar as a collective enterprise. Only this sort of voluntary renewal of effort can

heal the breach of etiquette. Because seminar is a public enterprise, it is
the manners of individuals in public that count toward vitality or disease,
as the case may be. The seminar leader may, of course, do his utmost to persuade individuals, or the seminar as a group, to observe etiquette by cultivating discipline and purpose and restraining self©indulgence. Nevertheless, the influence of the seminar leader is limited.