

The "Magic" of Learning from Each Other

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Abstract: A thoughtful examination of liberal education's goals, methods, contexts, and outcomes as seen through the lens of the seminar experience.

Essay:

From its nineteenth century roots in German universities and prominence in Johns Hopkins' graduate curriculum, to its near-ubiquitous role in the American first-year experience, the seminar has become a much-honored and much-used method of instruction. Originally a forum for advanced graduate students, the seminar is now considered a central feature of undergraduate education and signature pedagogy of liberal learning. Yet despite its pride of place, the seminar is frequently misunderstood, both in practice and purpose, and unlike other pedagogical approaches it is rarely studied formally. Indeed, a colleague once remarked that a good seminar was "magic"—not something that can (or should) be learned or studied. It just happens and if examined too closely the magic goes away.

As a theatre practitioner, I have spent much of my professional life making magic, and I know that behind the smoke and mirrors, beneath the traps and above the lights, can be found meticulous attention to detail and a thoughtful commitment to craft, examination and critique. In building a platform or an argument, a hand-prop or an emotional crescendo, the processes and products are the result of careful watching and listening, constant investigation of cause and effect, and the kind of practical scholarship familiar to all researchers in all disciplines. The same is true for an effective seminar; the more faculty prepare and construct, listen to and learn from students, the better chance we have of making learning in a seminar meaningful, and perhaps even magical.

When I talk with faculty and students about the seminar, many define it by size (between

five and twenty) or configuration (a circle around a central table), by focus (the centrality of a shared text) or professorial function (director or guide, facilitator or conductor). But beneath these aspects is a deeper discussion of processes and outcomes. It is a pedagogy wherein everyone has a voice and each person's ideas are valued, a venue for exploring varied perspectives, an opportunity to experiment, a way to flesh-out skeletal ideas through the challenge of friendly critics. The seminar is a community working on the principle that if many hands make light work then many minds make deep meaning. Participation is vital, responsibility is shared, and ownership is produced. As my student Marika once said, "We are all working together to build something ... and everyone will have their own idea of how to put it together." For her, a seminar is where students "take their learning into their own hands and make something meaningful out of it." In her words:

The whole point of the seminar is that ... maybe the students don't get it right, and maybe the students don't know everything about the subject, but it's the fact that the students figured it out on their own that makes it their own, and it makes them able to internalize that subject. ... I learned more in my [seminars] than I did in all my prior learning experience. And I think mostly its because I retained more ... because I was able to take my education into my own hands ... take what I was reading and make it my own.

Marika's idea of the seminar has been expressed by authors as diverse as John Henry Newman and bell hooks, and recently appeared in AAC&U's [Greater Expectations report](#) as the intentional learner: a student who is purposeful and self-directed, an integrative thinker who makes connections between and beyond fields of study, communities of experience, and ways of knowing. Seminars support this kind of student and help them to flourish. But how do we know when students are successfully engaging in this setting? What makes the seminar valued and valuable? These are just some of the questions that need to be asked, for in some respects, the seminar is a pedagogy of questions rather than answers. What are its outcomes? What is the role of the teacher, student, community, or text? Are seminars better suited to some disciplines, and are there subjects that can't be taught this way? Is it about convergence or divergence, analysis or synthesis, autonomy or interdependence? One of my Carnegie colleagues recently suggested (borrowing the famous quip about pornography), that most of us know a seminar when we see one. But do we?

Several college and university faculty members have examined the seminar through a [Carnegie program](#) that works to support faculty inquiry, stimulate classroom innovation, and strengthen student learning. They have made transparent some of the seminars' strengths by asking specific questions and gathering provocative data about student learning: how do students learn to tolerate ambiguity and hold divergent perspectives; what motivates students to ask and answer certain types of questions; to what extent does personal narrative and emotional memory scaffold students' learning process? The chief question in my mind, and the aspect of the seminar I value most (one that has been apparent in several of these projects) is how this pedagogy cultivates intentionality, self-awareness, and life-long learning. To quote Marika again, "If your goal in life is to

continue learning and continue enriching yourself, then the seminar experience completely gets you ready for that. ... It starts you off on that path to always realize that there's always more to know. And that college isn't the end of your learning—not at all." Maybe this is the real magic; learning that there is always more to know about the seminar, student learning, and the way that these students become magicians in their own right.



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