

Introduction to Seminar in the Hutchins School of Liberal Studies

by Owen Laws

*Wise men characteristically ask interesting questions while experts usually reveal their lack of wisdom by answering them*¹

A seminar is a contract between people to be prepared—every day—to explore the boundaries of knowledge. A dynamic seminar is one in which the members work together to help each other understand the readings and the questions which develop out of the readings and conversations. There is likely to be nothing more exhilarating in your years at college than the experience of a really good seminar.

The most important part of a seminar is keeping up with, or exceeding, the reading. There is nothing more frustrating than trying to discuss a book in a seminar and realizing that the other members haven't read it.

In order to be able to participate effectively in a seminar, it is important to be aware of several basic seminar skills. If you do the reading, come to class, and familiarize yourself with the following seminar skills, you are almost certain to have vibrant, dynamic, and lively seminars:

- You are important—vital—to the seminar.
- You are the teacher. What would you want to learn?
- Try to come to class with questions, or thoughts or feelings about the material.
- Don't let the instructor/facilitator answer all of the questions, and don't direct your questions at the facilitator; direct them towards each other.
- Take risks. *Take the initiative.*
- Verbalize incomplete thoughts, feelings, or questions. Try.
- Help your fellow students build on incomplete ideas. Don't leave them hanging when they do take risks.
- Be an active listener. Write thoughts down so you don't forget them. *Ask divergent questions* (questions that permit many answers), and attempt to answer them.
- Often, asking a quiet person a question, or merely giving him or her an opportunity to talk will evoke a really interesting response and lead to good conversation.
- Be compassionate. To have a good seminar you have to make yourself vulnerable. Your feelings are just as important as your thoughts. Often others will feel similarly, and good conversation will ensue.
- Don't be afraid of adding some structure at times. Go-rounds and brainstorms can be very useful when conversation is dull or to find out quickly how everyone feels about something.
- Instructors are not perfect. Facilitating a seminar is much harder than giving a lecture. Often instructors will talk too much, either because you *aren't talking*, or because they are really enthusiastic about the material. Help them to be sensitive to your needs.
- Hutchins is an incredibly unique opportunity to learn how to learn. **TAKE ADVANTAGE OF IT!**
- Have fun.

Many of the above skills involve some sort of interaction with other people. They are geared toward helping you learn how to develop a line of thought in cooperation with others. The objective is knowledge, not self-gratification. As one Hutchins student said, “The strength of Hutchins is that it teaches you how to express yourself in a safe environment.” Hutchins does not supply positive reinforcement for competitiveness.

It is also important to begin each seminar in a relaxed way. You might want to give everyone a chance to say how they are feeling, or you might just have casual conversations, whatever it takes to create a safe atmosphere for intensive discussion.

Occasionally certain people will dominate the seminar. Here are some behavior characteristics to watch out for and avoid, in yourself as well as in others.

HOGGING THE SHOW: talking too much, too long, too loudly.

PROBLEM SOLVER: continually giving the answer or solution before others have had much chance to contribute.

SPEAKING IN CAPITAL LETTERS: giving one's own solutions or opinions as the final words on the subject.

NIT-PICKING: pointing out minor flaws in statements of others and stating the exception to every generality.

RESTATING: saying in another way what someone else has just said perfectly clearly (not always bad).

SELF-LISTENING: formulating a response after the first few sentences, not listening to anything from that point on, and leaping in at the first pause.²

All of the things mentioned in the two lists are important to be aware of, but don't freak out trying to memorize them. The objective of this paper is to facilitate communication by making you aware of the dynamic which will occur in your seminar. By learning to identify various skills and behaviors, you will be better communicators, both in and outside of the seminar.

Ultimately though,

the essence of good communication (is) trusting and being trusted . . . trust is at the heart of a program built on a sense of community³ and of the seminar.

¹Joseph W. Meeker, Academic Fields and Other Polluted Environments. Essay presented to the Innovation Conference, 3-23-70, p.7.

²Bill Moyers, "Overcoming Masculine Oppression in Mixed Groups." The International Day of Nuclear Disarmament: Handbook for Civil Disobedience, ed. by the Livermore Action Group Handbook Collective (Livermore Action Group: 3126 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, CA 94705, 1983), p. 27.

³Mervyn L. Cadwallader, "Experiment at San Jose" in Against the Current: Reform and Experimentation in Higher Education (Cambridge, Mass: Schenkman Publ. Co., Inc., 1984), p. 356.