

deliberation in seminar.

Seminars Are Designed to Foster Productive Disagreement

Seminars make special demands on their participants. At the seminar table, you assume a distinct public role—one connected to, but likely different from the other roles you assume in your daily life. Because the seminar strives to become a place of deliberation and reasoned debate, for a moment you are asked to become a *rhetorical actor* with others: someone who (1) listens carefully to others' positions and interpretations, and (2) asks questions, requests clarification, and refrains from hasty judgments. Seminar participants are typically eager to “get things on the table,” to discover where the interesting disagreements lie. The collective effort is to identify and assess claims and positions rather than to defend personal opinions. The seminar allows for vigorous exchange, but not at the expense of civility and taking one another's comments seriously.

Your Responsibility as a Student

Robust discussion in the seminar doesn't simply happen, nor does it come naturally to most people. Instead, it is sponsored by a set of learned practices that support conviviality, communication, and understanding. Each day, I evaluate you on your role in that day's seminar. To do this, I ask three questions. My default expectation is that everyone at the seminar table will have addressed at least one of them by the end of a day's session:

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| starting points | 1. | What observations, questions, analyses, or arguments did you bring to the table regarding the day's work? |
| responses | 2. | How fairly and generously did you respond to your colleagues' observations, questions, and arguments? |
| connections | 3. | What connections did you make between the day's discussion and your own work as a writer? What connections did you make between the day's work and past or future classes? |

The Daily Routine

I ask that you take four steps each day. These are designed to help our conversations most productive for you and your intellectual needs.

STEP ONE: Settling In

At the start of the class, take a moment to review the day's reading, your annotations to that reading, and other notes you've developed. If I have posed questions about the readings, go ahead and quickly review your responses to them. Locate questions you would like to pose for the group. Use these preparatory moments to shift from where you've been to where you are now. Think positively: you're now in a good place, joined by people eager to speak with you about complicated intellectual matters. Go ahead and put your “game face” on. Shift into your seminar persona.

STEP TWO: Putting Items on the Table

Decide what you would like to put on the table for the class' consideration. You may need to prioritize your items: Which concern/interest seems most pressing? Which questions/ issues do you expect will be worked with easily? Which will likely take more time and energy? What claims or interpretations are contestable, likely to be responded to differently by seminar members? Do you find yourself in disagreement with anything in the reading? Does anything in the text make you uncomfortable? Begin with comments like: “*What do you all think about X when he/she says...?*” “*Did anyone else find X's idea about this confusing in places?*” “*I envision*

that when certain people read X passage, they'll likely be put off by/object to/disagree with these elements: am I correct?" "I would like to have everyone's help in puzzling over X idea/passage." The key thing here is that you are appealing to all group members to join you in considering something that you find intriguing.

Strategies

- Identify ideas, terms, and viewpoints that deserve the group's consideration. .
- Describe passages that were intellectually/personally interesting to you
- Acknowledge difficulties and uncertainties about the texts and arguments under review.

STEP THREE: Responding to Classmates

Try to speak face-to-face with other members of the seminar. We can't get very far if you channel your comments and responses through me. I will moderate, facilitate, and attempt to lead democratically, but we must listen to and speak directly to one another. (Look directly at your interlocutors, and refer to them by name). Try to keep the conversation forward-moving and coherent, you can make use of these forms of metadiscourse:

Link your response to the comment that preceded it

"Following up on that..."
"I would like to add something to your observation"
"What you've just said reminds me of..."
"Might we return to something said earlier?"

Locate places of possible disagreement

"I've reached a somewhat different conclusion..."
"Let me offer a different sort of claim"
"I agree with you partly, but I would also like to add. . ."
"I have located a counter position in this other text, stated as. . ."
"I am almost with you, but might you limit/qualify your assertion in X way?"

Ask for clarification

"Would you mind repeating that?"
"Did I hear you correctly to say...?"
"Can you point to the evidence you're relied on here?"
"Were you assuming X when you reached that conclusion?"
"I think you're defining X in a special way"

Praise new understandings

"At first I didn't quite understand, but now that you explain it this way..."
"I now see that I was mistaken about X because I hadn't considered..."
"I like the way you differentiate between X and Y"
"Your definition of X allows us to extend our thinking in this way..."

STEP FOUR: Taking Inventory

Take a few moments at the close of the discussion to reflect on what just happened. Most conversations don't take one smooth path from a point A to another point B. Perhaps you can't recall all of its meanderings, but what do you remember most? What for you are its key points? What seemed difficult or challenging? What got said, and what was left out? What was emphasized, and what was downplayed? What still deserves our collective attention and questioning? Where might our next conversation about this matter begin? At the next meeting, how can you help the group pick up where it left off? Is there something you like to ask for at the next meeting? The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard once made a remark we'd all do well to remember: "In the realm of mind, one has the right to begin again." What would you like to see revisited or revised?