

Small group teaching: introduction to the collection

(Collection 4 of 7)

Overview

The object of this set of resources is to invite you to think about a pedagogic medium which for many years has been so familiar in English and other Humanities subjects as to become almost invisible. In the following paragraphs we offer a framework for the resources in this collection.

Teachers sometimes forget what a challenge the seminar may represent to many students. The seminar is, after all, a genre with its own (often unspecified) rules and assumptions. We cannot take for granted that this is a medium students are naturally good at. They may be uncertain about what counts as having anything to say about this subject – and anxious about exposure in front of their peers. So as teachers, we need to make our assumptions and practices explicit and visible. If we do so, and if we make some simple concessions to acclimatising our students to this form, the seminar can still be a powerful medium of learning. This is one of the places where students learn to become fluent in the discourse of the subject. And you as tutor have to be prepared to listen as well as talk. Arguably, the quality of your own listening will set a benchmark for the rest of the group.

- seminars (classes) operate simultaneously on intellectual, affective, and social levels. While the experienced group leader may not be conscious of these levels all the time, (s)he takes account of them while leading the group;
- the seminar is a difficult genre. Students do not automatically know how to participate, or to listen to each other, or even how to learn in a seminar;
- seminars are not simply about learning in a given subject discipline. They are also about learning to learn; (these are not necessarily the people among whom any



1 | *This resource is part of a set of professional development resources for Higher Education English (including English Literature, English Language & Creative Writing) called 'The Pool'. The resources were developed by the English Subject Centre in 2011 as part of a JISC/HEA Open Educational Resources (OER) Project.*

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given individual would have chosen to learn – but then their future work colleagues won't necessarily be, either!);

- All participants bear some share of responsibility for the success of the individual session or the programme as a whole, BUT
- the tutor / leader has a *particular* responsibility to
 - structure the seminar in such a way as to enable participation;
 - maintain the group's working environment;
 - establish **ground rules** about preparation and participation.

In this light, seminar tutors need to weigh their approaches within their own specific circumstances. Remember that generally speaking English students have relatively few contact hours, and almost invariably fewer than they will have **experienced at school**. The seminar is an opportunity to support / scaffold independent study, especially in the first year, by helping students plan their work, and giving models for independent study.

Links & References

- [Small Group Teaching: a Good Practice Guide](#)
- [The Experience of Studying English in UK Higher Education](#)
- Evans, Colin. (1993). *English People: The Experience of Teaching and Learning English in British Universities*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Evans, Colin. (1990) 'Teaching the Humanities: seminars as metalogues'. *Studies in Higher Education*. 15.3.
- Knights, Ben. (1995). 'Group Processes in Higher Education: the uses of theory'. *Studies in Higher Education*. 20.2.

Professional Standards Framework

How does the entire collection under this theme relate to the PSF? Fairly evidently, it bears on Area of Activity 2 - teaching and supporting student learning; Area of Activity 5 (integration of scholarship, research and professional activities with teaching ...) and Core Knowledge 2 - appropriate methods for teaching and learning in the subject area.



More information about the Professional Standards Framework can be obtained from the summary factsheet in the *Subject & Pedagogy* collection in HumBox.

<http://humbox.ac.uk/2731/>

Individual & Group Activities

In this, as in other Pool collections, some activities are primarily designed for use by individual lecturers. Others are designed for use in groups: for example in departmental development workshops, or in the context of Certificates of Academic Practice and the like. We hope that both individual teachers and course leaders will adapt resources and activities in ways that suit their own circumstances. Where we have not made a clear distinction between group and individual activity that is because we think that readers will prefer to make their own decisions about how best to adapt the item to their own purposes.

Resources in the Small group teaching collection

- **Small group teaching: introduction to the collection (*you are here)**
- Seminar design: resource overview
 - Seminar design: individual activity
 - Seminar design: group activity
- Peer reviewing a seminar: Oliver Twist : resource overview
 - Peer review: individual activity
 - Adjusting the level
- Peer reviewing a seminar: The Bonesetter's Daughter : resource overview
 - A complex dialogue
 - Negotiated authority
- Thinking about seminars: resource overview
 - Relevance and red herrings
 - Weighing up the elements
- Nightmare scenarios: resource overview
 - Facing up to nightmares: group activity
 - Comparing notes



- Transformative writing: resource overview
 - Transformations: individual activity
 - Transformations: group activity



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