

# Module # 1

## Creating an Enriching Seminar: Constructing barns and hospitable learning spaces together



**The aim of this module is to help you:**

- Define your role as a seminar leader
- Create a hospitable environment conducive to a rich seminar experience
- Work with your students in the co-creation of knowledge during the seminar

**What kind of seminar space are you creating?<sup>1</sup>**



OR



Each class presents a new opportunity to engage students in meaningful dialogue. As the instructor, you help set the tone for the seminar from the very beginning. Every one of us starts to create our classroom environment from the moment we introduce ourselves to the students; we do this by sending signals (consciously and unconsciously) as to what kind of participation we expect, what kind of behavior we will reward, and what kind of behaviors will not be tolerated. By having a clear vision of the kind of seminar space that you want to create, you can begin to lay a stronger foundation for that ideal seminar environment. So, on the first day, and every day of your seminar, ask yourself:

*A dialogue is more than two monologues.*

~ Max  
Kampelman,  
Chief US arms  
negotiator

**What kind of space am I creating with my students?**

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Michael Kahn, "The Seminar"

# The Four Types of Seminars

In his article, “The Seminar,” Michael Kahn suggests that there are four general types of seminars. While we can be comfortable in any one of these types, we must constantly ask ourselves which seminar type is most effective for creating an enriching learning space for our students. The types are:

## The Free-for-All



### What it looks like:

In this seminar, there is a prize out there in the middle of the floor. It may be the instructor's approval, or it may be one's own self-esteem. But it's there and the goal is to win it, and anything goes— elbows, knees, gouging, anything. You win not just by looking smart, but by looking smarter. And that means it's just as important to make *them* look dumb as to make yourself look smart.

## The Beauty Contest



### What it looks like:

This is the seminar in which I parade my idea to you in its bathing suit and high heels, seeking your admiration. When it's off the runway, I go to the dressing room and get ready for my next appearance while you're parading your idea. Of course, I'm not paying any attention to yours.

## The Distinguished House Tour



### What it looks like:

This seminar is similar to a house tour where you go to a stately home that's a good example of Edwardian architecture and furniture. The hosts have spruced it all up for your visit; they show you through and explain it all to you, and you ask questions. Then you get back into the bus and go look at another house, say one that is a good example of Georgian architecture, and repeat the experience all over again.

Similarly, in this seminar type, someone advances an idea. The rest

of the seminar spends some time exploring her house. They ask questions, they explore for inconsistencies, they try hard to understand the idea. When they have got a good grasp of it, one of the other members offers another idea. It may represent a whole different point of view on the same subject. The seminar members, including the first host, then explore that house. The houses are not compared, nor does one person claim hers is better. They are each thought to be interesting houses in their own right and each worth exploring.

## The Barn Raising



### What it looks like:

In frontier America, when a family needed a barn and had limited labor and other resources, the entire community gathered to help them build it. The original family described the idea—the kind of barn they had in mind—and picked the site. Then the community pitched in and built the barn. Often the neighbors would suggest changes and improvements as they built . . . in the end you have something that everyone contributed to and that everyone is proud of.

## The Instructor's Toolbox:



In reality, every seminar can go through phases when it fits each of these types. There are things that you can do as the facilitator for the seminar, however, to help move the discussion away from being merely a beauty contest, say, and toward being a barn raising. A good way to start is to help your students understand the primary goal of seminar learning. A seminar aims at fostering the skills students need to conduct a meaningful, thoughtful discussion around a particular subject, concept, or idea. Our hope is that students develop depth in their thinking, as well as appreciation for the diverse worldviews and experiences that each seminar member brings into the seminar.

In a successful seminar, students build on each other's ideas and experiences to create, collectively, a unique body of knowledge. Given the distinctive nature of seminar learning and what it attempts to accomplish, the important consideration for you is to define and understand the role you will play.

Studies in this area tend to define the role of the instructor as facilitator, architect, or coach. We would summarize the key research findings as follows: *The role of the instructor is to create and sustain a safe learning space where students are valued as unique individuals capable of developing their own ideas as well as contributing to the learning of their fellow students.*

It came as no surprise that the exemplary SAGES seminar practices clearly mirror the above statement. Students reported a great deal of satisfaction as well as a high level of engagement in seminars where instructors were successful in providing structure, guidance, and process that allowed them to experience meaningful and enriching conversations.

What follows is a set of basic seminar tips we thought might help you create an optimal learning experience. In assembling these tips, we have relied on the current research on seminar practice, the experiences and practices of SAGES instructors, and the SAGES students' perceptions and experiences in various seminars. Our intent, again, is to offer these suggestions as a guide; they are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. We encourage you to add your own seminar tips to the list and share your insights with your colleagues and students.

*To me education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul.*

~ Muriel Spark  
British novelist

### 1. Choose a comfortable seminar setting

A comfortable classroom arrangement has a great impact on your student's ability to conduct good conversations. For the most part, students seem to prefer a configuration of desks and chairs that allows them to maintain face-to-face interaction. When students can interact with each other at a verbal and nonverbal level, there is a greater chance they will engage in discussions with enthusiasm and focus.

### 2. Create an open *and* bounded seminar space

A learning space must be open as well as bounded if true learning is to take place. A good seminar has in place a clear structure and a set of guidelines all seminar members have collectively agreed to observe, and the students hold one another accountable to the guidelines in a respectful manner. Within those structures and guidelines, students are free to express their thoughts, explore new ideas, and create stimulating knowledge together. (Refer to **Module #5** for more details on this.)

### 3. Have everyone do a "Check-in"

This helps get everyone's voice into the room and sets the stage for their being "present" in the seminar space. Check-ins can take a variety of forms:



- *What was a question that came up for you during this week's readings?*
- *What is one thing you are working on this week?*
- *How is your paper writing coming along?*

### 4. Encourage expression of feelings and emotions

You may ask, "*Why personal feelings? A seminar is supposed to be an intellectual discussion of scholarly ideas!*" But there is more to a seminar than discussions about abstract ideas and theories. We are often taught that seminars are for cool, clear thought. That turns out to be a restriction. The most exciting seminars are those in which students express their feelings about a book or about what someone

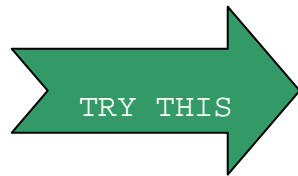
*Feelings of worth can flourish only in an atmosphere in which individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are used for learning, communication is open, rules are flexible, responsibility (matching promise with delivery) is modeled and honesty is practiced.*

~ Virginia Satir,  
U.S. family therapist and author

else has said. In such seminars, thinking and feeling are freely blended.

### **5. Model respect for all contributions**

Every contribution to the seminar can add something, even if it seems trivial. As the instructor, you can convey to the class that whenever someone takes the trouble to say something, it deserves to be heard. The whole point of the seminar is to explore every idea and try to build upon it. You can model this approach both through your comments and through your nonverbal reactions. For example:



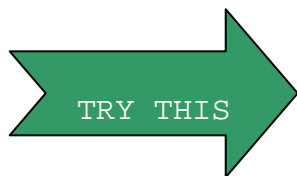
- *That is an interesting point. Can you link it to what we are discussing (or to the reading)?*
- *Thank you for sharing your experience; what made you think of that just now?*
- *(Nonverbal) Nod and establish eye contact with the student.*

### **6. Encourage curiosity and effort, before precision**

A seminar space provides opportunities for students to find their own voices and discover their deep interests. Particularly in the early stage of the seminar, students need to feel safe to voice opinions and ideas that have yet to mature into a coherent thought or argument. Celebrate the students' spontaneity and curiosity, and express enthusiasm for their unique ideas and interests. Their ability to conduct a scholarly discussion will develop over time through your patient guidance, appropriate seminar structure, and process.

### **7. Follow tangents and try to integrate them into the discussion**

Even a seemingly irrelevant comment may enrich a seminar if students consider its implications and then set about relating it to the theme of the discussion. This is really quite advanced seminar-ing, but it can be done. When necessary, you can help bring the conversation back on track by saying things like:



- *That is an interesting idea. Can you relate it to what we were talking about earlier?*
- *That could be an interesting conversation, but I want to make sure that we have finished discussing the topic we are on...*

### **8. Make space for silence**

What about the quiet person problem? On the one hand, many of us tend to be uneasy about inviting students into the discussion, for fear they will feel coerced. On the other hand, experience indicates that many people who have been having trouble talking are considerably helped by having room specifically made for them.

There is another aspect of silence you may want to consider. Imagine a seminar cluttered with noise and chatter, where everybody talks and nobody listens. Silence creates opportunities for reflection and the reframing of one's thoughts and beliefs in response to someone else's perspectives. A collective moment of silence now and then may in fact enhance your students' ability to develop a thoughtful and respectful attitude toward others. It can be very difficult to remain quiet, but try **counting to 50** or **writing notes to yourself** to keep from jumping in too quickly.

### 9. Make space for the voice of the individual and the voice of the community

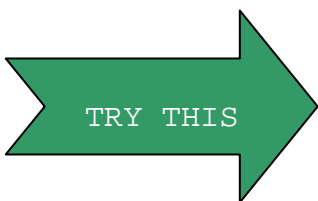
Remember barn-raising: A seminar must invite the voice of the individual, but it should not end as a random collection of individual expressions. The various ideas need to be thoughtfully discussed, debated, and integrated if knowledge is to emerge from the students' collective effort. Your role is to echo the voice of the community by summarizing the main ideas, bringing to a clear focus what has been said and heard, and challenging the students to listen with care for the emergent communal wisdom that may alter their ideas and beliefs.

*The truth is an eternal conversation conducted with passion and discipline*

~ Parker Palmer

### 10. Make space for shared expertise and responsibilities

In a seminar, students and instructors share their expertise and responsibilities in an egalitarian manner. While it is your responsibility to share knowledge in your area of expertise, students need to feel that their knowledge and experience are equally valued. Instructors and students should also share responsibility for the tasks associated with maintaining the seminar: leading discussion, paying attention to the seminar process, and so on. Protecting the egalitarian nature of the space will ensure that everyone can share the spotlight in a collegial and respectful manner. In cases where a quiet student consistently shuns the spotlight, you can say things like:



- *I'm worried that we have been talking so much, you haven't been able to jump in. Is there anything you would like to add to this conversation?*
- *I don't want to put you on the spot, but if you have something to add, we would love to hear from you.*
- *I can tell you are thinking lots of things. Can you share some of those thoughts with us?*

In addition, there are things you can do:

- *Encourage quiet students to prepare questions and responses in advance.*
- *Create small groups in which quiet students will be more comfortable talking freely.*
- *Speak privately with these students to help them feel more confident talking in the seminar.*

### **11. End class with shared reflections or “Check-outs”**

As a counterpart to the “Check-in,” take time at the end of every session to review the process of the seminar, to see how the students did, and to ask what they would like to do differently next time. For example:

TRY THIS

- *What surprised you most during our discussion today?*
- *What questions do you have left in your mind?*

**May you have many barns built in your future!**



# ?? Questions for Reflection

## ?? Questions for Reflection

### ***Questions for personal reflection:***

- When have I been part of a discussion or group that took on a “barn raising” quality? What did individuals do? How did I contribute to the group? How can I apply these insights to my seminar?
- What do I see as my role during the seminar?

### ***Questions for reflection with colleagues:***

- How have you helped students move to deeper conversation, as is typical of the “barn raising” seminar?
- What did your most effective seminar look like? What did you do to help lead it?