

Module # 2

Designing an Effective Seminar: Building your class from the ground up



The aim of this module is to help you:

- Create a class syllabus that will work for you
- Identify issues and activities to include in your class planning
- Identify and maximize your natural teaching style
- Understand the mindset of your students as you plan your class

Now that you have signed on as a SAGES instructor, you are ready to begin designing your class. The SAGES program has created various resources to help you think through your course creation, including a website—

http://www.case.edu/sages/fac_info.htm

—where you can find a syllabus template. Before you start, however, get to know the three people who will have the greatest impact on your seminar: **yourself**, **your students**, and **your co-instructor**

The final aim is not to know, but to be.... You've got to know yourself so that you can at last be yourself. "Be yourself" is the last motto.

~ D.H. Lawrence

First, Get to Know Yourself...

You may not have expected this module to start out with a quiz for you. But before you can help others learn, it is important to learn a little bit about yourself. Which of the following sounds like your dream first day of class?

- I am standing before an auditorium of 100+ students, who are waiting to hang on every word of my lecture
I am sitting at a table with 15 students, who ...
- I don't even have class, I meet with students on an individual basis
- All of the above
- None of the above

Regardless of what your preference is, you can be a great seminar leader. The important thing is to know your natural style and preference when it comes to teaching, and to work with your own style. This will help you enjoy the class more, which, in turn, will make your students enjoy it more.

Your style **should** color the way that you read this guide. You will find some tips that work for you, and decide that others do not fit what you want to do in your seminar.

**As you think about creating your SAGES class, ask yourself:
What kind of teacher am I?**



Telling



Molding



Leading



Cultivating



Or _____?

Second, Get to Know Your Students...



The students sitting in your seminars have not experienced the same generational milestones that you have. Most were born in the mid-1980s, over 15 years after Neil Armstrong made his famous moon walk, and were only toddlers when the Berlin Wall came crashing down. They have grown up on the internet and with all their friends only a cell phone call away. In order to relate to them, it is helpful to understand the world in which your students grew up. As you design your syllabus, keeping in mind your students' mindset and life experience will help you create a successful seminar.¹

¹ Resource: Beloit College Mindset List created for every cohort: <http://www.beloit.edu/~pubaff/mindset/>

Third, Get to Know Your Co-Instructor...

One unique facet of the First Seminar is the participation of co-instructors. The term “co-instructor” was selected consciously, with the idea that each seminar will be a team-taught venture. While faculty bring content expertise, the co-instructors bring their own expertise around writing instruction.

Establishing a true collaboration with your co-instructor is key to having an effective seminar. As SAGES participants have reflected:

- *“I think having a writing co-instructor is great. . . . I have benefited from this; my writing has improved too.” - FS Faculty Instructor*
- *“It is hard for the students when the instructor and the co-instructor are not on the same page. If one of them is giving different feedback and suggestions and even different grades, then this hurts the students. We are never sure who is grading so we do not know how to write things because when they are each looking for different things, it hurts the students writing wise.” – FS Student*

Instructors have found it valuable to meet with their co-instructor well before the semester begins. Ideally, they will craft the syllabus together, selecting readings and assignments that support not only the content agenda but the writing agenda as well. Deciding how you will manage the details of the seminar—from grades to class discussion—can help get your course off to an auspicious start.



Designing Your Course

While there are many things to keep in mind while designing your course (such as the SAGES goals and objectives discussed in the **Introduction**), focusing on three core elements may help guide you in creating an effective seminar: 1) Learning Goals for the Seminar, 2) Seminar Activities, and 3) Assessment and Feedback.

1. Define Your Seminar Learning Goals

Clarifying the learning outcomes for your seminar is a critical first step in planning your class. Before deciding on specific goals for each class session, think about the course as a whole. How would you answer the following?

At the end of the semester, my seminar will be a success if the students have explored ____ and learned ____.

Once the overall course objective is clear, you can begin to design individual classes to advance toward that goal. Not only will this process help you keep the seminar on track during the semester; it will also help you prepare your course description prior to registration. (The course description is an ever-important recruiting tool that often determines which courses students select.) Clear articulation of goals establishes the students' expectations for the course from the outset. You don't want to promise that they will be able to split the atom by the end of the term if they are only going to be finding their way to the microscope.

! Your students will also have individual goals they may want to achieve in the seminar. They may be working to attain a specific level of writing proficiency or planning to explore a certain topic. Faculty have found it useful to encourage students to articulate these personal learning goals when the course begins, so that instructors and students both can monitor progress toward those goals throughout the semester. Additionally, since SAGES is designed to help students integrate learning across the curriculum, you may want to help your students think about how your course will build upon what they have learned in other classes. For example, you may have students:



- **Write their goals down in a memo to you**
- **Discuss their individual goals with the class**

- Meet one-on-one with you to talk about individual learning objectives
- Reflect on how your course links to or builds upon other courses they have taken

2. Design Your Seminar Activities

Now that you have promised to make all your students Nobel Prize winners, you can begin to design seminar activities congruent with your course goals.

! Many of us have the tendency to jam-pack a syllabus with all the stuff we think our students “should” know. As a result, students (and you!) become exhausted from concept and activity overload and are unable to engage effectively in the seminar. **(First-time Seminar-ians often fall into this trap!)** While we all know that more is not always better—sometimes, it is just more—we often try to fill the seminar with lots of things. To help balance this tendency, one seasoned SAGES faculty member gives the following advice:



TRY THIS

Many times we as teachers fall into a “just-in-case” mode of teaching, where we try to give students all the information about a subject they may ever need, just in case they need it. Instead, I try to teach using the “just-in-time” approach; meaning that I interject content materials when it becomes relevant to the conversation. I watch the conversation unfold and then, when I see that a piece of information will help inform the conversation—providing an alternative point of view or an important fact the students need to know—then I offer it up in the context of the current conversation.

Regardless of what activities you put on your syllabus, your presence in the room will affect how the various activities unfold. **Module #1** discusses in more detail how to create an enriching seminar space. There are other things to consider, however, in designing your class that can help set the stage for an effective seminar. The following section discusses the importance of finding a structure that works for you, selecting readings, creating purposeful assignments, and bringing the “real world” into your class.

√ Creating a structure that works for you

SEMINAR MYTH #1: Seminars do not have any structure; whatever happens is considered a “seminar”

SEMINAR MYTH #2: Seminars have one ideal structure, or else they are being done “the wrong way”

There are many “myths” regarding what a seminar looks like. While some think that it is a free-for-all where you just show up and talk with students for 45 minutes, others treat it like a lecture course where there are only 15 students instead of 100 sitting in the seats. In fact, a seminar is meant to be more than a “show-up-and-let’s-talk” session, yet it is less structured than a lecture.

Ultimately, there is no one **TRUE** way to run a seminar—each one takes on its own shape and structure. What matters is keeping your seminar goals in mind in every class, and always trying to move your students forward in their learning and development. Know what points you want them to explore in the various readings and assignments. While the conversations may vary from session to session, attending to the larger goals will help make the seminar experience cohere.

As you design your course, you can institute various structures to help shape the seminar and encourage students to come to class prepared to engage.



- **Have students come to class each with a “cosmic question” that emerged for them from the reading. You can have students go around and share these questions, and then decide as a group where you want to go with the conversation. Or, you can ask students to post their questions (anonymously or not) on Blackboard, and then select one or two to help spark discussion**
- **Have students take turns as the “discussion leader” for each class, so that they come prepared to share their insights or questions regarding the reading**
- **Ask students to end their statements with a question for the class, to help the discussion continue on around the room**
- **Have students write down questions and pull them out of a hat to start conversation**

√ Selecting appropriate readings

At the core of every SAGES seminar are texts which become the catalyst for discussion, writing, and critical thinking. As one SAGES instructor comments:

Whatever you are trying to teach the students, it must be used for self-reflection, it is my role to help the students do that reflecting. Education should be in the context of your life, so your life is transformed and you can look at yourself in a new way. The texts should be springboards to help the students make meaning of their own lives.

When it comes to selecting readings for your course, veteran instructors give the following tips:



- **Talk to your co-instructors; they often have ideas (or even experience) about what kind of readings will work in your seminar**
- **Be aware of the ebbs and flows of the semester; there will be times when students can handle heavier reading loads and other times when they struggle to get everything accomplished (i.e., midterms)**
- **Try different ways of assigning your readings, such as having one reading per class or one set of readings for the entire week**
- **Keep in mind your students' level of understanding when selecting readings; you want to stretch their minds, but you also want them to understand what is being asked of them**
- **Look for readings in creative places, such as newspapers and magazines, internet sources, and even your own articles**
- **Take a few minutes at the end of each session to introduce the readings to come. This can be motivating and also provide clarity and direction**

Whatever readings you choose, referring back to your learning goals will be useful. Every text should provide content or context that helps you move closer to these overall goals. Having a clear idea of what you hope to do with each text and how it links to the overall agenda for the class will help keep you and the class focused. The text becomes not just a routine assignment, but the foundation for your seminar discussions.



“I don’t like to give a lot of homework over the weekend, so just read every other word.”

! Many faculty have found it helpful to build in “space” in their syllabi—weeks when no reading is assigned. This allows opportunities both for catching up (as it often takes longer to get through readings than we plan) and for exploring new topics that have come up in the seminar.

✓ Creating useful assignments

In addition to your readings, assignments are another important building block to help you reach your learning goals. While you may have a range of assignments, many of them will likely revolve around writing, as developing students’ writing skills is a critical goal of the SAGES program. As you plan your writing assignments, the following advice from the Writing Center may help:



- **Writing assignments can build upon each other, with each assignment informing the next**
- **Consider assigning a variety of kinds of papers, i.e. research, persuasive, synthesis, etc.**
- **Build in opportunities for feedback, requiring students to turn in drafts before the final paper is due**
- **Have students give each other feedback on papers**

You can also make your assignments engaging for yourself and your students. For example:

- **Break students into two groups, assigning each one to take a particular stance on a debatable issue. Have them research the topic and develop their argument (as well as potential counterarguments). Each group submits a “brief.” Then, during class, the instructor moderates a debate between the two groups.**
- **Have students write letters to their grandmother (or anyone outside their discipline) explaining their research topic in lay terms**
- **Have students research and write a project proposal (in response to an RFP)**

For additional advice on writing instruction, please visit the **Writing Resources** website: <http://www.case.edu/artsci/engl/writing/pedagogy>

√ Bringing the outside world into the seminar

Another aspect to consider when designing your course is the wide world that exists beyond the walls of the university. In addition to three hours of class time each week, First Seminar specifically includes “fourth-hour activities” at the scientific and cultural institutions that constitute University Circle. These include the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Cleveland Institute of Music, the Cleveland Botanical Garden, the Cleveland Institute of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, and the Western Reserve Historical Society.

Students and faculty alike have found these visits to be a very rich addition to the classroom experience—if **they are linked to the course material**. Building in visits to University Circle Institutions in a meaningful way can be done by:



- **Creating an assignment for students to complete based on their visit**
- **Selecting readings that will highlight an issue you can discuss using illustrations from your visit**
- **Using an aspect of the visit to spark discussion in a subsequent seminar**

BRINGING IN GUESTS: In addition to the visits that occur in First Seminar, you can bring the outside world into the classroom through trips, meetings in a unique place, or invitations to guest speakers. Students often enjoy the change of pace and perspective that a guest speaker can bring to the seminar. Previous SAGES instructors have invited:

- Faculty colleagues, including members of other departments
- Doctoral students studying the topic at hand
- Academics from other institutions with relevant expertise
- Professionals engaged in the area being discussed in the seminar
- Authors of articles the students have read

! While there is a great potential advantage to obtaining alternative knowledge and perspectives from outside guests, it remains important to keep the visits linked to the topics of the seminar—and to keep the class run as a seminar. As with every element of the seminar, each visitor should somehow be helping you move toward your course goals. Sometimes, if a visit is not carefully planned, the seminar can quickly turn into a “beauty contest,” with the visitor in the middle of the room doing “show and tell” without engaging the students in dialogue and reflection.

3. Incorporate Assessment and Feedback

Students receive grades in their SAGES seminars, just as they do in their other university courses. From time to time, it is good to remind our students (and ourselves alike!) that while grades are important, there is much more to learning, and especially to seminar learning, than grades. Still, the issue of how to grade cannot be evaded forever.

The SAGES office has grading rubrics for writing as well as a suggested percentage breakdown for semester grades. (See the SAGES Blackboard site for the relevant documents.) Also, **Module #3** goes into greater detail about the spectrum of possible assessment methods and feedback processes you can incorporate into your seminar. For now, the following tips may help you think about this important aspect of your course as you design it.

First, while your seminar may include a variety of assignments (written, oral, individual, group) not all of them need be graded. Rather, you can use other feedback mechanisms for some assignments, always selecting

meaningful assessments that help students progress toward their learning goals.

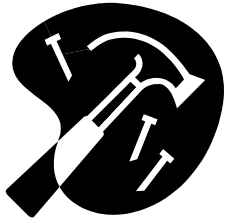
Fellow faculty suggest the following approaches for building assessment into the seminar:



- **Consider having a conversation with students regarding grades, explaining your expectations and letting them share theirs. Some faculty have even co-created with students a process for assessing class participation.**
- **Build a variety of feedback mechanisms into the class—i.e., a midterm assessment where students can give *you* feedback on how the class is going**
- **Use an array of feedback mechanisms for student writing, including written feedback, writing conferences, and peer evaluations**
- **Try using Blackboard as an outlet for informal feedback and discussions**

Do your children view themselves as successes or failures? Are they being encouraged to be inquisitive or passive? Are they afraid to challenge authority and to question assumptions? Do they feel comfortable adapting to change? Are they easily discouraged if they cannot arrive at a solution to a problem? The answers to those questions will give you a better appraisal of their education than any list of courses, grades, or test scores.

~ Lawrence Kutner, U.S. child psychologist and author



SPECIAL TOOLBOX:

Going Beyond the Syllabus – Looking for the Teachable Moments

While we often focus on crafting an all-inclusive syllabus, moments will arise in your seminar which you have not planned for, but which present valuable teachable moments. Because the SAGES seminar is an environment where students may be more casual and open than in typical lecture settings, they may sometimes share personal experiences and look to connect what they are learning to their lives. The topics that emerge under these circumstances may inspire some of your most memorable seminar discussions. As the example below illustrates, even braids can open the door to a valuable learning moment.

Dr. Holden's class began as usual; everyone is sitting in a circle and talking about the upcoming week's events. It is the end of the semester, so choosing classes is in the forefront of most students' minds. Dr. Holden chimes in from time to time when a student asks his opinion or advice, but the conversation evolves unguided by him for the most part. The atmosphere is relaxed and friendly. Soon, Sally walks over to stand behind her fellow student Jason and begins to braid his long, straight hair. The co-instructor begins to talk about the week's readings. The conversation twists and turns, as the class explores the ethics of using human subjects for scientific research. Soon, the conversation returns to practical matters, like when will the students' class presentations be scheduled. As all the dates are solidified in the various palm pilots and date planners, Sally proudly announces that Jason's new coiffure is complete. The entire class pauses and takes in her accomplishment, and a round of applause ensues.

Picking up on the potential for a teaching moment, Dr. Holden does not miss a step and immediately jumps in, saying, "Sally, what you did was a cultural performance. Can you explain it to us?" Honored by the recognition of her talents, Sally gives a brief tutorial on how she managed to tame Jason's locks into two fine double braids. Dr. Holden continues the lesson, asking the class if they know why it is called a French braid. "No," Sally replies. The class echoes Sally's laughter, as she takes the two ends of the braids and places them on top of Jason's head like a halo. "Then do you know why they call them pigtails?" asks Dr. Holden. A student pipes up, "Because it makes your hair curly when you take them

out?” Dr. Holden responds, “No, but good guess. Actually, in Dutch, the word for girl is *pigge*—so it has nothing to do with pigs, but actually means ‘girls’ tails.’ The co-instructor adds to the conversation, saying, “In my country they call them peasant braids, because farm girls wore them.” The class erupts in laughter once again as they direct their gaze back on Jason’s hair, which has become the focus of their conversation.

Suddenly, the room is bubbling with stories from the female students about their prom hair nightmares, which often included the jabbing pain of bobby pins and intricate up-hair styles. Continuing to follow the conversation and use it as a teaching opportunity, Dr. Holden asks, “Why is it that girls have so many hair stories but men do not? This is a good example of how gender is played out in our culture.”

The class was captivated as Dr. Holden discussed the intricacies of hair and gender. A conversation ensued with students exploring the nature of gender in our culture—a conversation that was nowhere to be found on the syllabus, but that will linger in the students’ memories for many seminars to come.



?? Questions for Reflection

?? Questions for Reflection

Questions for personal reflection:

- What was my best course as a student? What were the aspects of that class that made it so memorable to me? How can I bring those elements into my class?
- What kind of assessment do I feel will be most effective for the learning goals I have created?

Questions for reflection with colleagues:

- How do you select your readings?
- What do you do when a particular reading or assignment does not go over well?
- What kind of outside speakers and guests have you brought into your class, and how did they influence your seminar?
- How do you assess your students?