

GETTING THE FLOOR

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
METHODOLOGY . . . . .	8
NEW FACTORS THAT GAINED PROMINENCE IN GETTING THE FLOOR . . .	10
GLOBAL EVALUATION OF SEMINARS: CASE STUDIES . . . . .	15
A Highly Coherent, Successful Seminar . . . . .	17
Getting the Floor . . . . .	20
A Competitive Seminar . . . . .	21
Getting the Floor . . . . .	24
A Quiet Seminar . . . . .	26
Getting the Floor . . . . .	29
A Coherent But Uncomfortable Seminar . . . . .	30
Getting the Floor . . . . .	33
STUDENT SURVEY . . . . .	35
Appropriate materials . . . . .	36
Preparation . . . . .	36
Group harmony . . . . .	37
Goal articulation . . . . .	39
Recognition of cultural ways of speaking . . . . .	43
Roles . . . . .	51
Success . . . . .	54
Collaborative Learning . . . . .	56
CONCLUSION . . . . .	58
Useful strategies to encourage participation . . . . .	60
Quiet students . . . . .	61
Preparation . . . . .	61
Respectful atmosphere . . . . .	62
APPENDIX A: References . . . . .	63
APPENDIX B: Student Survey . . . . .	64
APPENDIX C: Seven Levels of Interaction in Seminar: Metric & Reflections . . . . .	65

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INTRODUCTION

I began the present study with the aim of understanding who gets the floor in seminar and how it is maintained. This focus evolved from the findings of my first assessment study, "Seminar Talk," particularly the notion that students need to create their own voice. The notion of voice described by my colleagues is rather broad, but I understood them to mean learning/establishing one's own point of view on issues as well as the literal meaning of contributing verbally to a dialogue (as in "voicing an opinion"). Clearly, seminars are designed to encourage both of these types of development: they are places where students formulate, discuss, and often synthesize ideas, and where they can offer disagreements and supporting comments. Seminars provide an opportunity to test the expression of ideas as well as the ideas themselves and testing expression can lead to the development of voice. In writing, Peter Elbow (1981) says voice has to do with resonance which is the speaker's own, and it is powerful because it is authentic. In speaking, a student who has developed a voice can produce powerful, evocative statements AND effectively shape the discussion.

Voice, then, can serve as a metaphor for the kinds of skills we hope our students gain from the seminar experience: critical

thinking; creating or forming opinions based on a common experience and shaped by the discussion of it; building collaboratively on ideas; synthesizing information, ideas, and experience; and recognizing the importance of process in investigating ideas.

One of the questions raised by students and faculty alike concerned the attention ideas received in the seminar. What are some of the ways in which ideas develop among seminar participants? How can individual students make themselves heard? Clearly, getting the floor is an important means of being heard, contributing to the discussion, and developing a voice. Learning to maintain it in various ways is also important in order to explore an idea in some depth.

Floor is most often understood as part of the language of meetings. In that setting, getting the floor means having the right to be heard, and that right is recognized formally by a leader of some sort. In multiparty conversations, however, the floor is the acknowledged topic within a psychological time/space (Edelsky, 1981). The participants in a conversation or discussion can, if asked, explain the topic: "We're talking about page 44," or "She asked a question and we're trying to answer her". The floor in a conversation is not just a turn, because someone can offer an observation either briefly or at more length and not be acknowledged as having changed or even contributed to the flow of the discussion. In addition, a turn could be a side comment such as a request for clarification. It is even possible to have the floor without talking, as when someone is looking for a

passage in a text, and other people's comments are hushed in recognition of the topic: ". . . waiting for him to find the right page."

My first study, "Seminar Talk," was based on in-depth interviews with 15 faculty members and detailed study of six seminar discussions in one Core program; the present one is based on a survey of 66 students and a detailed study of 16 seminars. In both the previous study and the present one, I continually asked, "Which elements need to be present for a successful seminar?" I was interested in discovering what sort of discussion would be considered fruitful for the development of voice.

A major finding of the present study (which comes from the student survey and the playback interviews) is that a successful seminar is one in which all seminar members are receptive to different perspectives. This receptiveness is described in a number of ways, but most often students say they want people to listen.

At first glance the development of voice may appear to contrast with the development of listening skills; however, one of the most effective ways students gained the floor in the seminars I analyzed was to indicate that they had listened to another person's idea by connecting or contrasting it with their own in a verbally explicit way. Furthermore, analysis of successful seminars indicates this strategy for getting the floor also serves to make the discussion coherent because students introduced their contributions by referring to previous comments: "As Sarah was saying. . . ." "Well, I'm not sure I agree with your idea." By

marking their observations with verbal cues, students indicate their approach to the discussion topic, a practice which is useful for them and for the group.

A previous finding, underscored in this study, is that gender issues and racism as topics of discussion cause conflict and tension at several levels in the seminar: in the discourse itself, in the relationships between seminar members, in the personal struggle students have to voice their opinions, and in the global assessment of the seminar discussion. Two seminar groups in the present study discussed racism as it related to their texts. The majority of students in those two groups did not find the seminars successful. One of the primary reasons for lack of success in these seminars is domination of the discussion by one or very few students, and a veering away from the seminar materials to a reliance on personal experience alone. Just as important are the issues of power which are usually being raised about other cultures and times, but which can play out in the seminar in present-day (or age-old) patterns.

In my first study I emphasized that process is as important as content in the seminar: expressing an idea in a relevant and clear manner allows others to understand it. Knowing how to get the floor, and introduce and develop a topic in a group dialogue are skills which can be taught. Therefore, my research in the present study centered on possible factors which enable students to get the floor. These factors are linguistic markers, student roles, gender, goals, and topic interest.



Linguistic markers examined here are of two types: the use of metastatements, or statements which refer to the talk itself such as, "I'm not sure where this discussion is leading", or "What I think you're saying is. . ." and coherence markers such as "To add to what Jessica just said. . ." or "I think I disagree with Gary's interpretation." Both of these markers connect the speaker's contribution to a previous speaker and provide coherence in the discourse.

Students recognize roles others play in the seminar (e.g. facilitator, supporter, listener, summarizer) and often voluntarily identify them in the playback sessions of their seminars: ("She always tries to summarize"). Students in the survey, however, usually identified more than one role for themselves or were indefinite about specific roles. This discrepancy between self-perceived roles and other-perceived roles is explored in this report.

The student's gender could be an important factor in getting the floor in some seminar groups. In one seminar which had divided according to gender, women discussed their perception of not being able to get the floor. In the survey, too, many students perceived differences in getting the floor based on gender.

Goals for the seminar, whether explicitly or implicitly stated, could determine whose topic is given the floor, and therefore the vested interest in the process. Interest in the topic for discussion, the text itself, or the seminar agenda is another important factor in how the floor is allocated.

Clearly, the most striking finding in the present study is that most students have either no goals or very general ones when they go to seminar. The goals mentioned most often in the survey (of 66 students) were hearing what others thought of the materials (20), sharing/developing them with others (22), and getting a better understanding of the materials (21). While useful as general goals, they do not serve to shape discussion for any one session. Furthermore, in all the seminars I videotaped, only one faculty member explicitly stated the goals of the seminars he facilitated to the group, so, except in this case, there was no match between faculty members' articulated goals for a particular seminar and those of the students.

If each student operates solely according to individual goals, it is quite possible that the resulting dialogue will be evaluated as unsatisfactory by someone (or many). One student, for example, stated that if she says two things, she has met her goals. Another reports that she needs to get her own questions answered, be stimulated by the discussion, come to some sort of new, deeper understanding, and at the same time she expects every member of the seminar to benefit in some way. These qualitative expectations for participation differ radically and no doubt produce very different attitudes towards the discussion.

If, instead of individual goals for the seminar, the seminar group developed its own set of common goals, students would have common measures to define its effectiveness and be more committed to the resulting dialogue.

Setting explicit goals would also result in better facilitation of seminars. Time and time again in my ethnographic work on seminars, students and faculty pointed out problems in the seminar discussion and explained they were waiting for somebody to change the direction of the dialogue. What intrigued me about this pattern (the Godot syndrome?) in the comments of participants is that no one indicated who that person ought to be or suggested that they themselves ought to have stepped in. It appears that it is not a question of blame, but a sort of wonderment about why process doesn't just take care of itself. If the goals are clear to each participant at the beginning of the discussion, the direction of the discussion will be clearer and facilitating tactics made more obvious. In fact, one of the goals could be that students try stepping in to steer the discussion.

Teaching students good skills in seminar process is something a few faculty do. Most of us, however, seem to assume that students, like ourselves, will learn to be good facilitators over time. We may model effective facilitation moves, but forget to call students' attention to them. I have four seminar discussions on videotape which were officially facilitated by students. In most cases the students raised questions and directed the discussion in that way, but in no case did a student attempt to move the discussion to a new direction when problems occurred.

## METHODOLOGY

Nineteen full-length seminars (about two hours each) were videotaped, then edited to 30 minutes, and played for the participants in order to elicit comments about what was going on. I invited core (first-year) and advanced interdisciplinary programs and group contracts to be videotaped both fall and spring quarters in order to trace development in students' use of strategies for getting the floor. As one might expect, not all programs were willing or able to schedule videotaping both quarters, and even when this was possible, the composition of the seminar groups changed at least somewhat. I foresaw these problems, but reasoned that development could occur over time in any circumstance.

Seminar groups in one core program and one advanced program volunteered to be videotaped three times each, seminar groups in a core program, one intermediate program, and four advanced programs were videotaped once, and three seminar groups were videotaped twice as I had originally planned. In all, four core programs, one intermediate program, three advanced group contracts, and three advanced programs took part. These programs represented the sciences, arts, humanities, and social sciences.

One student assistant was present during the seminars operating the camcorder (S-VHS). We used an omni mike with limited success (fall quarter) and a sound grabber with much better success (spring). I edited the seminars to show one or two segments of the discussion in 30 minutes with some technical assistance

from student assistants. My research assistant, Siri Mehus, and I conducted the playback sessions with individual members of the seminar, but when that was not possible, we held group sessions. Group sessions were done for eight of the 19 seminars. All of these sessions were audiotaped then transcribed by Siri and Phil Roe, a second research assistant. They also transcribed the 30-minute edited seminars.

Students and faculty of each seminar group were invited to come to playback sessions. On the average, five students came from each seminar for individual playback sessions, and 12 for group playback sessions. All faculty members took part in playback sessions (all but one in individual ones). We asked three questions during each playback, the first before the viewing took place: "Do you remember the goals you had for this seminar?" At the end of the viewing we asked, "Was this a successful seminar?" and "Did the camera affect you in any way?" In addition, participants were invited to comment during the playback about the interaction whenever they wished, especially topic changes and roles. Occasionally, we stopped the videotape at poignant or problematic moments to ask if they had any comments. We avoided asking leading questions which suggested a particular analysis of the situation.

The student survey was widened (from the original proposal) to include a total of 66 students (37 women and 29 men). The surveys were conducted by six seniors (four women, two men) during spring quarter who approached students in various places on

the campus in order to find representatives of various disciplines and interests. The surveyed students ranged in time spent at Evergreen from two quarters to five years and 29 had transferred from another college. The questions asked are in Appendix A, and responses are presented in this report.

#### NEW FACTORS THAT GAINED PROMINENCE IN GETTING THE FLOOR

Before turning to the factors I originally proposed to examine for their effect in getting the floor (linguistic markers, seminar roles, gender, goals, and topic interest), I will explain two factors which became apparent early on in my work as contributing to the ways in which students get the floor. The first has to do with conversational style, the second with global evaluations of the seminars.

##### Conversational Style

Conversation Analysis is a field which has evolved steadily since the early 1970s drawing on work by sociologists, psychologists, and linguists. They have found the major organizational device speakers use in conversation is the turn, but there is still some debate on how turns are negotiated. Clearly, the negotiation occurs moment by moment in the discourse, and it is negotiated in real time. We (unconsciously) recognize the passage of real time, because whether in conversation with one person or many, we speak on tempo; an actual underlying beat on stressed syllables helps us organize our communication. All of our gestures harmonize as well. In fact, we create an ensemble

with each person or group when we begin to speak; we share a tempo, very briefly disrupted when there is an uncomfortable moment, but which quickly resumes.

There is another level to the ensemble, and that is rapport. Cultural groups share expectations about the "right" time to repair a misunderstanding, request a clarification, or, importantly, change the topic. If the appropriate time is chosen, rapport is maintained. If not, misunderstandings can occur. (See Fiksdal, 1990 for more detailed explanation of how these two aspects of time -- tempo and appropriate time -- govern conversation.)

These two aspects of conversation are clearly present in seminar discussions: we take turns and we are aware of rapport relations. Unlike the two-party conversations which have been studied by conversation analysts, however, seminars have the goal of collaborative learning. This goal requires focused attention to the process of interaction, and a recognition of a long-term relationship in this particular speech event. Ideally, then, students and faculty members gain a better understanding of turn-taking features while they learn ways of getting the floor. Since most of this knowledge is not conscious knowledge, conversation analysis is useful in bringing the norms we use to light.

As in other aspects of our lives, power relationships are demonstrated in conversation. It should be no surprise to find that the dominant groups in our society also wield power in conversations. Early work by researchers claimed that in conversa-

tion between men and women, for example, men interrupted more and talked more than women. Since the power in conversation is related to control of the topic and the floor, this finding seemed consistent with power relationships in society as a whole. (For more detail on power in conversation, see Lakoff, 1990.)

More recent work adds to the complexity of who interrupts whom by demonstrating that another factor contributes to control of the topic and of the floor -- conversational style. In groundbreaking work, Deborah Tannen (1984) studied "New York Jewish" style and found that speakers using this style are high involvement speakers who routinely overlap other speakers. Pauses mean there is trouble in the conversation. She distinguishes between interrupting, which changes the topic of the conversation, and overlapping, which contributes to the topic and is a display of rapport. On the other hand, speakers with a low involvement style demonstrate rapport and interest by allowing pauses. Clearly, misunderstandings regularly occur between speakers having different styles, although they may not recognize the reasons for those misunderstandings.

In her popular book, You Just Don't Understand, Tannen claims a general pattern exists: women use this high involvement style while men use the low involvement style. If we substitute the sex-based terms "women and men" for the socially constructed term "gender" and understand that there is certainly a continuum, not just polar opposites, this finding becomes quite useful. For example, it is possible that at some times a man may use a con-



versational style that is closer to the female end point of the continuum than the male end. Clearly, our conversational styles are not static, but adaptive to social situations. It is important to realize that we socially construct our roles through talk.

It is important to realize that we may confuse conversational style with personality factors. As part of the present study, my assistant videotaped my own seminar. Students engaged in a heated debate in which emotions ran high, and no pauses occurred. At one point, a soft-spoken woman tried to get the floor. As the facilitator, I immediately called on her so that she would be able to contribute. She had difficulty expressing her idea; she said a few words, paused, then verbally searched to say more. Another student, who had been actively involved in the debate, immediately began overlapping the quiet student, reinforcing and elaborating what she was saying (or trying to say).

In the playback of that seminar, I asked the quiet student how she felt at that moment. Possibly because my students were familiar with Tannen's theory, she had understood the other student's use of a high involvement style and was grateful for the help. The other student noticed how often she had overlapped. Even though her comments had been quite helpful that time, the playback of her interaction and the group's laughing reactions helped her recognize there may be times when her style could offend another speaker. For all of the students, this was a

useful demonstration of what really happens in seminar when speakers with different conversational styles come into contact.

Another important aspect of conversation is silence, manifested in pauses. Speakers usually allow a pause of about .5 second between turns if they have a low involvement style. Many Native Americans, however, use much longer pauses. If speakers from these two groups come together, it is quite possible that even low involvement speakers will appear to have a rapid and aggressive style to the Native Americans. In seminars where thinking and talking should both be going on, allowing longer silences at times can be useful for people with different conversational styles, just as it can be useful as a time to reflect.

Becoming aware of process does not come naturally for all people. Students with low involvement styles sometimes fume about "aggressive speakers" for their entire four years at Evergreen. Students who are more confident in voicing their opinions wonder why other students get scared, defensive, or take conflict seriously. Part of the reason for these different reactions has to do with conversational style.

In several cases during the course of this study, students and faculty remarked on the benefits of seeing their interaction on videotape. In one memorable seminar, students seemed to have several different agendas for the discussion, and despite a stated goal, the discourse jumped from topic to topic and back again while frustration grew. At one point, the faculty sponsor made a clear attempt to help the group focus on their group

process, but the word "process" was understood by one of the students differently, and the topic moved yet again. By watching the edited version of their discussion, the students made discoveries about how to focus on their goal while paying more attention to group process so that more people could contribute and so that the topics under discussion received closer attention.

When we videotaped this seminar group again in the spring, it was clear that they had benefitted from that experience. Their dialogue was coherent, respectful, energetic, and thought-provoking, but even better, they knew they could and would create more quality seminars because they had learned how to work together effectively.

During that second playback session, the students urged me to suggest that all seminars be videotaped so that students would be able to see their own interaction. One student even proposed a propitious time: week six of the quarter. From my own experience of being videotaped, I fully support this proposal. Faculty and students alike can benefit from seeing their interaction and discussing it because we are much more likely to accept the perception of others with evidence before us.

In the next section all names used in the analyses of seminars presented are fictional.

#### GLOBAL EVALUATION OF SEMINARS: CASE STUDIES

I have discovered that an important factor affecting how students get the floor in seminar is the type of seminar the

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group has created. I suggest that seminars can be globally assessed as operating along at least three continua: a cooperative/conflictual continuum; a coherent/unfocused continuum; and an energetic/quiet continuum.

In the highly cooperative seminar, ideas are built collaboratively, and many different speakers get the floor. At the other end of the continuum, speakers have difficulty getting the floor because of the conflict, and usually a small group of students dominates. A coherent seminar is generally one where ideas are clearly introduced in relation to previous ones. An unfocussed seminar occurs when students "throw out" ideas with little regard to previous ideas. In an energetic seminar, everyone has the feeling of momentum; it can be difficult to get the floor. In a quiet seminar, there are long silences because no one has anything to contribute, there is little commitment to the seminar, or high tension has built up over time. Naturally, seminar discussions can move along the continua throughout their duration, but it is possible to make a global assessment based on these measures. Here is one possible model which illustrates these continua:

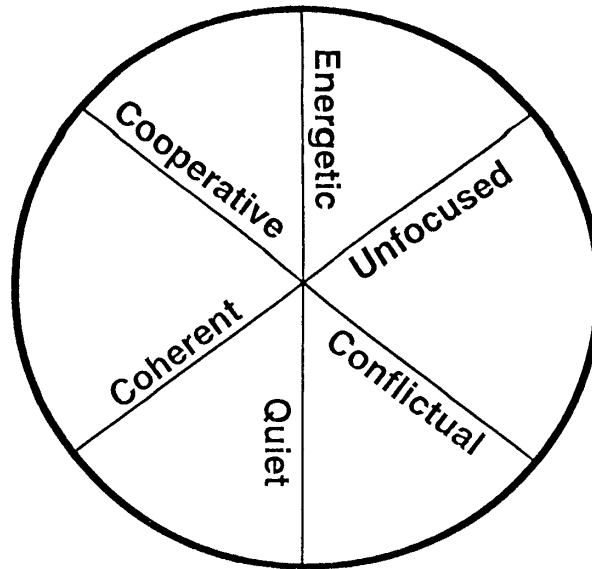


Figure 1

The dialogue moves along each of these continua in a seminar discussion, so it is possible to have a coherent, relatively calm, and yet conflictual seminar. Each seminar discussion is also, of course, dynamic and not static, so it is important to keep this in mind when we look at the model. What the model attempts to do is represent key aspects of the seminar, seen from a global point of view after the fact. Probably the best way to demonstrate the possibilities, and show the connection to getting the floor is to describe a range of seminars. (Please note that in all descriptions of seminars I attempted to guard identities by using fictitious names and only vaguely identifying topics.)

#### A Highly Coherent, Successful Seminar

This was a core seminar, videotaped in week eight of fall quarter. Students in this seminar had already been videotaped

once, and did not pay attention to the camera. In addition, this was their second seminar on this text. Their focus was a novel which several professed liking very much as they moved around the circle at the beginning of the seminar, each expressing their particular interests (a "round table"). The edited version centered on the discussion as it built towards a synthesis of various themes and descriptions which students had noted in their round table. Probably most exciting for the participants (and observers) is that students and the faculty member contributed several ideas which were elaborated to formulate a new understanding of how images were interrelated by the author. The faculty member was quite familiar with the novel having read it five times, and perhaps because of this close familiarity, became personally involved in the excitement of discovery. The moments of enlightenment fit the mythological description of Evergreen seminars; it was a true "aha!" experience which had developed through collaboration.

Signs of success during the seminar discussion itself come from the students:

- \* this is so exciting
- \* I'm just amazed that we come up with these ideas. I mean I'm just like sitting here listening and thinking wow you know I never in a million years would have thought of half of this stuff
- \* I think that S sums it up best on page 97: 'hey man everything means something there ain't nothing that's an accident'

At the end of this discussion, the seminar group again went around the circle, and one student who had not yet contributed

verbally explained how two dominant images in the text which they had been discussing fit together. During the playback session, the faculty member recognized the contribution and said, "Now that's what I call active listening."

In the playback interview, the faculty member also gave some insight into why the discussion had been so fruitful:

I think it shows what you can do when everyone in the class is really focused on the text. There was relatively little movement away from the text and an awful lot of searching [and] connecting with one another. [That] forwards the process.

Only three students volunteered for the playback session, but they emphasized the importance of having good materials for the discussion. One said that because everyone liked the book so much, they were motivated to learn each other's views.

This seminar was a highly cooperative seminar whose energy and coherence built perceptibly as the ideas gained depth. The discussion is not coherent all of the time, of course. There are moments of intensity broken by students with contributions that don't seem to fit. In one instance, for example, a student burst into the discussion with a quote that she felt compelled to share, but which she did not attempt to relate to the discussion at hand. She seemed to realize that fact when she said, "Thank you for letting me share that." Students seemed to understand that she might make this type of interjection, however, because as she introduced her quote, she had to pause to find the exact page number. During this pause, a student asked her if she drank a lot of caffeine. This sequence of turns on a topic other than

the major one is what we call a "side sequence" in conversation analysis. The group listened to her quote, but she did not derail or sidetrack the discussion; it immediately moved back to the previous topic.

Getting the Floor. The student who burst into the discussion took seminar time to look up her quote, took several speaking turns, and read. She succeeded in getting the floor, but because she did not provide coherence with the discussion, her topic was treated as a side sequence. Her role as a student who makes outbursts seemed (at least momentarily) defined by the comments on caffeine. In this case, then, the student's role and lack of coherence markers were important factors in her getting the floor, but then losing it immediately.

Getting and maintaining the floor in this seminar was prefaced by metastatements and coherence markers such as "getting back to colors," and "along those same lines," or just, "also." These statements demonstrate the strength of the topic for the speakers; they have a clear focus and the topic holds their interest. The pace is measured, not frenetic, but the "clicking along" metaphor mentioned by several students in the survey when describing energetic seminars is appropriate here to describe the interaction.

The other important factor in getting the floor was the interest in the topic apparent by metastatements ("I'm just amazed that we come up with these ideas. I never in a million years would have thought of half of this stuff"), as well as



gasps, smiles, and other nonverbal behavior: the seminar group maintained the topics so that they achieved some depth in their analysis and the interconnectedness of their findings became apparent to everyone.

We can represent this seminar on our model as coherent, cooperative, and energetic with the movement of the seminar towards the outer circle as though it has centrifugal force. (This idea of movement is not represented in the model.) Clearly, the model should not be conceived as static in time but as dynamic.

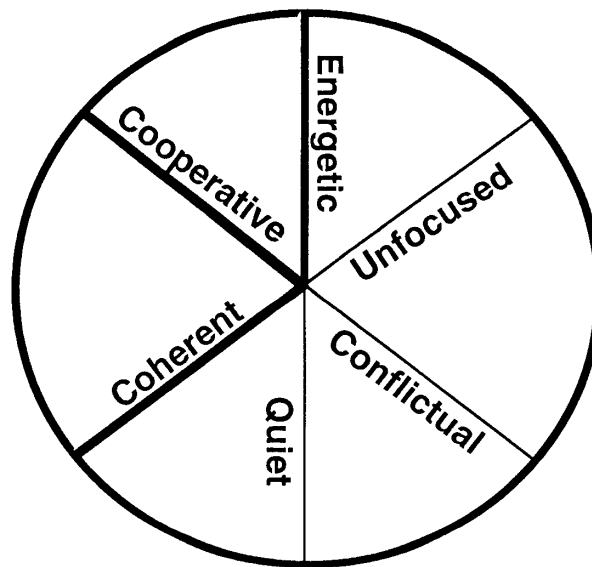


Figure 2

#### A Competitive Seminar

This was a seminar in an advanced program where the topic of discussion was the first half of a book on the history of science. The students were videotaped during week four of the quar-

ter and did not report noticing the camera after the first few minutes of the seminar. There were two student facilitators, a man and a woman.

This seminar became completely centered on one man's ideas. When students raised objections, this man handled their ideas at times with seriousness, and at others with derision; when the faculty member raised objections to specific ideas, this student obligingly shifted them a bit. He spoke loudly, and by leaning forward and using his arms, he created a dominating space. The dialogue is characterized by metastatements indicating problems in the discourse: "Right, but what I'm saying is. . . , " "That's what you're saying; that's not what I'm saying," "Wait wait," (all of these are often repeated), and one facilitator introduces one of his quests for the floor, "You guys let me say a couple things (laughter from group). Ok first of all and let me finish here. . . ." These metastatements indicate it is difficult to be heard on two levels: students do not feel their points are being considered and the pace is so rapid, it is hard to break into the talk. Getting the floor is made even more difficult by the unidirectional flow of the discourse -- to and from a single seminar member who becomes quite angry at two points in the discourse.

Of seven topics introduced in the edited version of the seminar, the dominant student introduces four. He effectively holds the floor for 25 minutes forcing everyone to address his ideas. The faculty member (at different times) refocuses the discussion, summarizes it, and finally says, "I don't know. I'm not sure

where this discussion is going." Note his symbolic removal from the discussion with the adjective "this" rather than "our." At this point one of the facilitators asks the group to move on to another point, ending the focus on the dominant student.

Students in the playback sessions understood the problem in the seminar:

At this point it's kind of strange. Usually when we talk there's a mixed amount of people that are supporting one side or the other. It's kind of all focused on poor Peter here in that he's having to answer to a lot of these things rather than us having a discussion.

Peter is new to seminar this year. I wonder how much he gets out of seminar. I don't think he gets much 'cause he always seems to be arguing rather than learning or at least trying to understand what other people say.

I don't know. He was getting a little too far off the subject, I think, and also there was a big conversation. Now [that] I look at it, I realize there was this huge conversation going on between like two or three people in the whole class which is I don't know not really a seminar.

Here's a problem in seminar when almost all the seminar [members] think that one person is wrong factually what do you do? I mean if you just disagree with their opinion that's one thing but if you think that they're just factually wrong how do you enlighten them without making it be intrusive or offensive to that person?

I think in some seminars you reach a point where there's just some basic ideas that are different and you can't get past those because nobody can convince each other. You have to just stop and say, 'You know we can't agree on this so let's go on', which took us a while to do.

Peter, the dominant member of the seminar that day, made the following observation:

I saw the seminar as, you know, everybody was just kind of agreeing [with the author's thesis]. I mean it just seemed like we had just discussed everything everybody wanted to. And all of a sudden I hit on this and I threw it out and then everybody jumped on it. It was just one of those weird things that happens in seminar. I didn't really expect

everybody to go for it and they did so I was, I was left playing devil's advocate for most of the rest of the seminar.

None of the five students who viewed the playback considered this a good seminar. Peter, however did:

Yes because there was a lot of discussion and a lot of learning going on even with what Andrea said. I think she was the minority. [She expressed feeling that one person had dominated the discussion.] I think that a lot of people got a lot out of it. I do agree with her that there were a lot of people who wanted to jump in, but when they wanted to jump in, they got to jump in. I just think that most people were able to get a better view of what was going on in the book rather than just saying this is right or this is wrong.

Only one student specifically commented on Peter's contention that he was playing the role of devil's advocate. This student said, "If that's true, that was the best acting I've ever seen by a student."

Getting the floor. Clearly the role chosen by this student was the most important factor in his getting the floor. Besides the dubious pleasure this student took in playing the devil's advocate, dominating the seminar, and maintaining a weakly structured, highly contentious (some would say racist) viewpoint), his performance also demonstrates the tenuousness of focus in a seminar. It is important to note that if the seminar group as a whole does not understand how one idea leads to another, the level of coherence drops. A single person (or small group of people) cannot presume coherence exists for everyone as it exists for them.

The next quote illustrates this presumption. The comment comes in a playback of another seminar. This student claims that

he, a woman and another man are often on the same wave length.

We have a dynamic going on that we can complete each other's thought, you know, or build on each other's thoughts. So quite often we'll start off with incomplete thoughts and build on those and there's a real dynamic going.

I was not able to check this perception with the people he referred to in this comment, but five other students who watched the playbacks specifically commented on their difficulty in understanding his contributions in seminar.

Returning to this conflictual seminar, the metastatements and coherence markers used by other students to get the floor were rendered ineffective by the dominant student and his antagonistic stance.

The model below illustrates the high energy, high level of conflict, and low level of coherence which characterize this seminar.

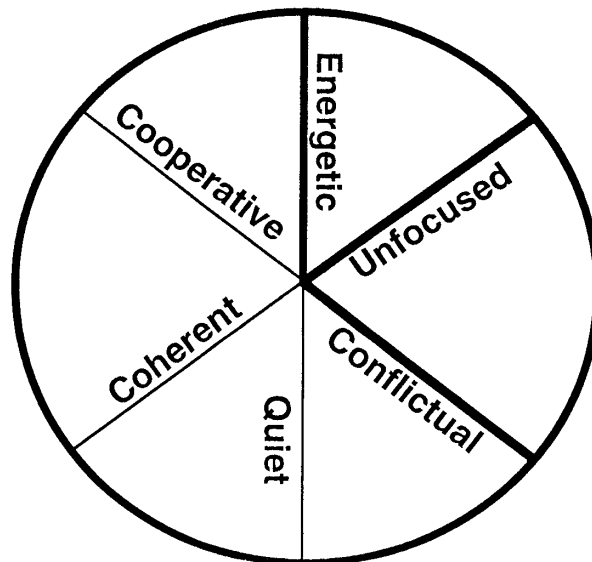


Figure 3

### A Quiet Seminar

This seminar discussion was the third in a series on one book -- a revaluation of human perception. The program was advanced and the students in this particular seminar were in their program of choice for the most part. This was week six. Our informants emphasized that this seminar group is a very cohesive one who socialize outside of class, and easily fall into discussions of program materials outside of class. They see themselves as advanced students who work well together, and who want to stay together throughout the year if possible. Usually they have stimulating, courteous discussions where most everyone participates and listens carefully. They urged us to come again and videotape a more representative seminar discussion.

We showed the edited version of the seminar individually to seven members of the seminar including the faculty member. Most agreed that this seminar was not very successful. The first hour was characterized by one student trying to bring focus to a disjointed discussion. This period was very frustrating for the faculty member because it began with observations from a student who openly admitted he still hadn't finished the book: "I was fussing about what do I do about people who say, 'Here we are three seminars into a work and I still haven't finished reading it.'" Students for the most part saw the unprepared student as having his own agenda, talking at length, and being hard to understand.

During the first hour, the discussion was based entirely on personal views of one of the concepts discussed by the author and one student's crusade to discuss the author's view. Getting the floor was easy because of the very slow pace and long pauses, but the lack of specific focus created another difficulty: what constituted an appropriate contribution to the dialogue?

In the second hour, despite a question from the faculty member designed to inspire a discussion of the thesis, four students dominated the discussion on another topic making any attempt to get the floor by other speakers quite difficult.

The students we interviewed had very general goals: to get through the seminar, to listen to other people's ideas, to talk more. The faculty sponsor had hoped students would work towards a synthesis of some of the major ideas, and that students would build upon each other's ideas.

Several factors were mentioned as having affected this seminar. First (and most important it seems) was the book. Students were not attracted to it. Two described it as a 600-page, very abstract book. Others mentioned it was based on scientific premises, and although they had criticisms of the author's argument, they did not know how to ground them in fact. (This was not a science-based program.)

Second, it was the third seminar on this book, and apparently some students did not feel the discussion needed to be "dragged out." Two of the six students said their goal was to "get through" the seminar. Third, not all the students were well

prepared. Not everyone had read the book (two of the six students interviewed had not finished it, and they indicated that many others had not). Certainly the discussion centered on selected ideas rather than examining or evaluating the author's complete argument.

Two students pointed out the importance of a third student in always making their discussions more stimulating. He was regarded as more experienced in seminarng because he tried to facilitate (trying to focus the discussion on the author's ideas). One of his attempts at directing the focus follows: "And I mean I don't want to -- if I'm trying to redirect this in the wrong way just stop me." He was also described as always being prepared and wanting to learn something. These students respected his input, and one said his role was to help them when the material was difficult. This reliance on one seminar member to keep the discussion moving, underpreparation on the part of the students, and unwillingness to engage the materials meant there were many silences, short discussions on each topic, and little continuity of topic or coherence.

In addition to these problems, there was a nonfunctioning "agendist." In this seminar this person is responsible for writing ideas generated by seminar members on the board and prioritizing them. This person usually facilitates the discussion to some degree. The agendist, however, only wrote ideas on the board. These ideas were never referred to again.



Did the participants see it as successful? Most said no, but that they felt some important ideas did come out. The faculty member's comments follow:

No. It was a processing discussion for staging seminar. I went off thinking well we've still got a lot of work to do to try to make sure people stay inside the text, you know. For me anymore a very successful seminar is one where I sit and I'm able to sit and listen and enjoy and track the discussion without having to talk much at all because I've discovered that faculty seminars allow me to talk in many ways. And if I can just make sure they're not tripping all over each other and just sort of play traffic cop, that's a more successful seminar for me, although I confess I get drawn into good discussions and end up participating more than I had planned. It was a 7 1/2 [on a scale of 10].

Getting the floor. Getting the floor meant reliance on phrases such as "I think. . ." rather than the coherence markers which build on a previous speaker's idea or contrast ideas. It also depended on the role of the speaker; the respected facilitator maintained the floor collaboratively in both hours. The primary factor mentioned by students for the low energy in this group on this particular day was due to lack of interest in the topic.

This seminar was of low intensity because of a lack of engagement in the materials and a reliance on one prepared, experienced student to maintain the floor. The low level of cooperation results also from general underpreparation. At the level of actual discourse, there was difficulty during the first hour of achieving coherence in the topic (because of the unprepared, floor-grabbing student) which meant frustration. In the second hour, there was some coherence but it was maintained through

domination of the seminar by four speakers. The model of this seminar follows:

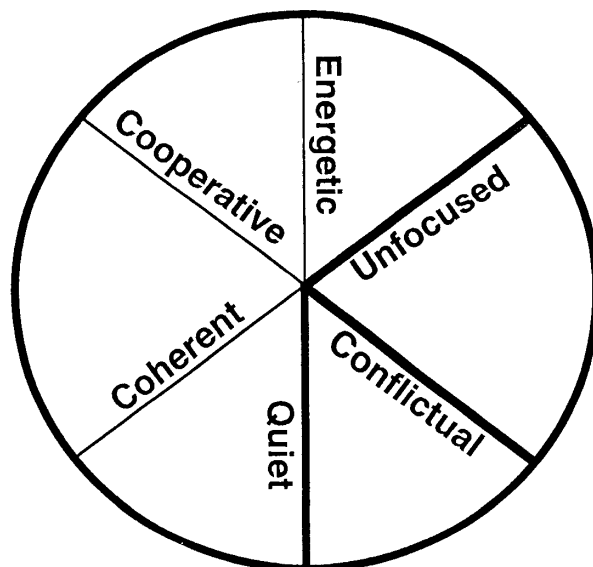


Figure 4

#### A Coherent But Uncomfortable Seminar

This seminar was videotaped week three of spring quarter in a core program, and some of the students had been videotaped previously in the fall. The faculty member elected not to specify the day of videotaping previously to the students because he was convinced many of them would not come. In the playback group discussion, it turned out that five students said they would not have come. This was a group made up of 90% introverted students (according to the Meyers-Briggs Personality Scale, which had been administered to the students). This seminar was highly coherent and focused on the text -- a discussion of various analyses of dream states. Students consistently referred to the previous

comment with such phrases as, "As Sean was saying. . .," ". . . and I think that -- to answer Gary's question -- according to the lecture. . .," "On that note, as far as controlling. . .," "Ok, going along with that, I think perhaps the best way to look at that would be. . ."

As I watched this seminar, I marveled at the superb listening skills these students had developed. To get the floor, students signaled verbally (but mostly nonverbally) to the previous speaker, and this person passed a ball of string. This device put the turn-taking process on center stage, and greatly slowed the time between turns.

Observing the videotape, however, does not tell the whole story. In previous discussions, according to the faculty member, this seminar group had been having problems staying focused. There had been many side conversations and the topic usually changed quickly without being explored much. The faculty member had chosen a group to facilitate this seminar -- the first student facilitation -- partly to ensure that some chronically unprepared students would read the material. One of those students explains their ideas:

We wanted to focus the discussion and that way, instead of having one discussion for the whole two hours on one point that everyone felt was controversial, we wanted to get an overview of the whole book in the order that we read it, and focus for short amounts of time on specific parts of the book.

The facilitators asked students to divide up in small groups where each group focused on one chapter and wrote questions on the board. Next, they wrote privately a few minutes "to focus

their thoughts." Finally, they came together in the large group. In order to talk, students had to request a ball of string, which got passed around the room. The idea was to see the pattern of interaction.

The introduction of student facilitation, the innovation of the ball of string, and the sudden appearance of a video camera and camera person was overwhelming to most students. During the playback, most remarked favorably on the coherence the ball of string imposed on the discussion, but they also mentioned the unsettling presence of the camera. For most, this was not a comfortable seminar, but 75% of the students felt it was successful in some respects. The camera posed a major problem for these students, especially those who weren't prepared. The faculty member described the seminar as successful on the bottom line because of its coherence:

I actually thought it was more on track than most of our seminars and the string actually had a large role to play in that even though it's bobbling. For example, when I brought up that question about action versus thought, Richard counters with a couple of points. Len says something. Ned says, 'Well, it depends on the person.' Neil says, 'Well, let's experiment.' It was a theme for four minutes. Brent even brought in boundaries as related to that and then it took a turn.

After pausing the videotape at a pause in the dialogue, students made some comments:

I'd like to see more of those pauses in seminar. I think people were reassessing the direction of where things were going. I think that it was a useful thing. People weren't leaping into this performance thing or something like that.

It seems like the silences have become more generally acceptable. People are more comfortable with them since the beginning of the year.

After the viewing of most of the edited version, a discussion about the seminar took place:

The one thing that was nice about that seminar [was] that nobody interrupted anybody else and everybody was careful about what they said. It was nice to have those little pauses where you can gather your thoughts and look at what's happened and where the direction's going. Sometimes it moves so fast you don't have time to realize where it's going and before you know it you're on this totally different tangent [and it does not have] anything to do with the chapters in the book.

The string was a good way to show who hadn't spoken. I think it sort of forced people to want to have one part of it to make sure they were in that web and not sitting there and having everyone around them in it.

I think it forced people to think about what they were going to say because it would seem kind of pointless to toss the string and say something silly or not well thought out so I think it made people be more introspective.

The consensus of the group was to try to maintain coherence in the next seminar, but to use a long stick which would be passed from one speaker to the next. That way, no trail would be left, and no one would feel left out verbally and visually.

Getting the floor. In this seminar a potential speaker made a nonverbal signal to the speaker finishing a turn, and the ball of string was tossed. This method of getting the floor is quite close to the assignment of rights during a meeting. Clearly the roles of speaking and listening were visually marked as a result of this process, and those who spoke more for whatever reason were also made apparent by their handfuls of string at the end of the discussion. No comments were made on specific roles within the seminar, but one male student clearly dominated the discussion in terms of the quantity of his talk as well as his chal-

lenges and corrections of other speakers. Only two women spoke, one only briefly. In this case, it seems, the most important factor was the structuring of the talk rather than any of the factors I had hypothesized as important (linguistic markers, roles, gender, goals, or topic interest).

The model we could draw for this seminar shows the high coherence, low intensity, and high level of discomfort in the group.

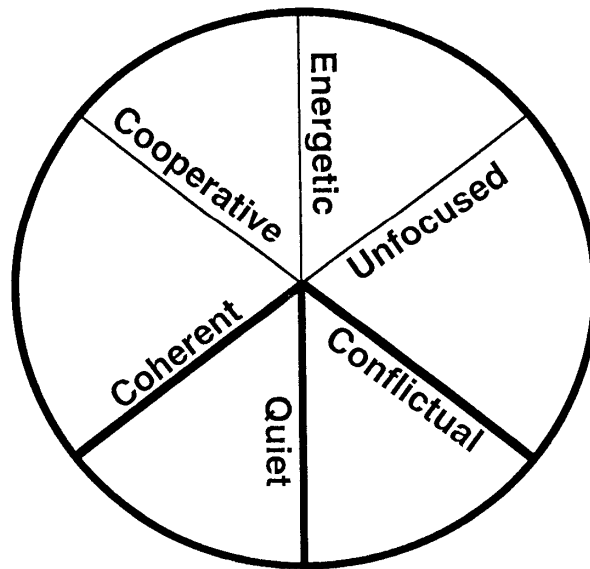


Figure 5

These case studies demonstrate several factors which are essential for a seminar discussion to be successful: quality of materials, preparation of students, strong group dynamics, and clearly articulated goals. It is also apparent that the more cooperative the seminar, and the more coherent the dialogue, the easier it is to formulate effective phrases to get the floor. Since several of these factors emerged only in analysis of the

videotapes and playback interviews, I did not address them in the student survey. Still, some of the responses reinforced the conclusions I drew. The next section of this report will focus on the findings of that survey.

#### STUDENT SURVEY

In my quest for a description of successful seminars, I have found that the definition I proposed in "Seminar Talk" must be expanded. I wrote,

The seminar is a discussion involving a group of students and a facilitator (often a faculty member) about a common experience (often a written text). It takes place at an identified time and place, and the facilitator (or some other designated leader) opens the discussion. The group sits in a circle or modified circle of some sort and it is preferred that everyone can see everyone else's face. The discussion is expected to remain "on track" to some extent and the track is traceable by the common experience the group has had. The facilitator has the responsibility to keep the discussion on track, to shape the discussion to some extent, and to encourage discussion. The reason for this organization of talk is for students to learn from each other as well as their faculty, to sift through ideas, to learn to read, write, and think critically, to learn to respect/accept differences of opinion, to learn to work and create collaboratively. The faculty member is responsible for documenting this learning and evaluates student performance in seminar.

This definition was coupled with a discussion of structures which are also essential for an understanding of seminars. I now believe some criteria are important to include as prerequisites for the seminar discussion to be successful: appropriate materials, student and faculty sponsor preparation, group harmony, goal articulation, and a recognition of cultural ways of speaking. I will explain these prerequisites in the order I have listed them

above, drawing primarily from the student survey for their expression.

Appropriate materials. There was not a question specifically addressing materials, but students mentioned the necessity of having good materials in response to several questions. Some indicated the materials should be controversial or inspire different interpretations. Textbooks, for example, are not considered good material for seminar. This expectation for materials comes from the strongly expressed desire students have for diversity of opinion in the seminar, and the assumption that some materials, while useful as background material in the coordinated studies program, simply do not inspire discussion. Most faculty members assign primary materials for reading, but some materials may serve the purpose of thematic continuity more than as a topic of discussion.

Specific materials may pose particular problems. For example, students in the Quiet Seminar described earlier in this report emphasized the difficulty they had in dealing with a book that was wieldy and based on scientific findings which they could not evaluate; they had not been trained in scientific principles. Its density probably contributed to their abandonment of the text before completing it. Clearly, getting the floor may be avoided by students if they don't see the text (or central experience) as meriting discussion.

Preparation. Again, there was no specific question on preparation, but for a successful discussion, many students specifi-



cally mentioned that preparation was essential in a focused, energetic discussion. Part of good preparation includes clear communication from the faculty about the level of commitment expected from the students:

We had so much reading that we barely had time to get through the book and really digest it. I did the best I could to be prepared like everybody else, but I just could not actually reflect on the book enough to have an extended conversation about it.

Seminar from hell: 70% of the class shows up -- some of them late. People don't have their books, they haven't read the assignment, they haven't thought about the assignment, they haven't taken any notes, and they all wait for someone else to start the discussion.

If everyone tried to create their own understanding and then they came to seminar and shared it all, then maybe there would be something there. But people generally show up unprepared and just sort of talk about whatever they want to and it never gets to the level I'm interested in.

Underpreparation results in individual perceptions of focus rather than any shared one. This in turn affects strategies for getting and maintaining the floor since some students may decide any talk is better than none in such a situation.

Group harmony. Students often mention the importance of commitment to the group and harmony within the group as essential to success. I believe the musical metaphor of harmony fits well with the notion of ensemble I mentioned earlier: when we engage in a conversation, we speak and move on a tempo we have established ourselves. The recognition that we are fundamentally a group when we come together and not a collection of individuals can be helpful in establishing rapport and guaranteeing access to

the floor for all members of the group. Some quotes from interviews point out the importance of harmony:

The better the group process is the better the learning is, and the easier it is to look at the material.

If a seminar has good spirit then when everybody notices that it's going wrong, then everybody will sort of grunt and make one next attempt to fix things. I've seen miraculous turnarounds. Whereas if the spirit is bad, then people just look at the clock and wait it out.

People are just being thrown into these situations and they are trying to learn how to swim without being taught how.

When the participants aren't really committed to being there, they won't care about the content of the conversation or whether or not anything is resolved or even discussed. They won't feel like they need to change anything.

[It's unsuccessful when] 15 people are talking about 15 different things, interrupting each other, shouting over each other -- nobody's listening or responding. It's just like bullets flying.

Group harmony includes a commitment to the group and its work together, learning respectful ways of responding to ideas proposed, paying attention to quiet seminar members, and being open to diverse perspectives. One student, when talking about roles, pointed out nonverbal ways in which students show boredom or disaffection from the group:

Men often lean out of the circle back in their chair and fold their hands in front of their chests whereas women are more apt to lean over [the table], put their face in their hands and pout.

It is clear from videotaped seminars that there is a particular physical alignment with respect to the circle, which, when broken, parallels the student's withdrawal from the talk underway. Students have often told me during the playback sessions

that the camera did not capture the huge amount of nonverbal communication going on in the seminar, communication which is just as essential to describe as the verbal component.

Goal articulation. Is the purpose of seminar to say something -- anything? For some students the answer is yes. These students feel pressed to talk because they know if they do not, their "non-participation" will be mentioned in their evaluations. One student said his presence would not be valued unless he spoke. Talking is important in the development of voice, of course, but as a goal, talking for the sake of talking is antithetical to the purpose of the seminar.

Students in the survey mentioned three goals most often:

- \* to hear what other people thought about the material
- \* to share ideas with other people
- \* to understand the materials better

Mentioned by eight people were two goals: to learn something new, and to help the seminar process.

One student emphasized the importance of a round table at the end of seminar where everyone shares their opinion of the seminar because she had been in seminars where she felt enriched, but other students had not:

I think it's important for people to be open about what they want out of [the seminar] so that people can work towards everyone's goals, not just one person's goals.

Except for this lone student, this question of goals seemed to confuse students. They usually came up with some ideas, but it is clear from their responses that goals are not usually

explicitly discussed in Evergreen seminars. In playback interviews, we asked about goals before watching the seminar tape, and the results were similar. Most students hesitated and admitted to either having no particular goals or only very general ones as stated above. The reason I had asked this question about goals is that in all the sources I consulted about small group interaction from psychologists (the only academics to have extensively studied small groups), the assumption was that the first order of business was to clearly articulate the goals.

In a group playback session, when one man asked who had specific goals for the seminars, one woman answered, "I think it depends on the book. Sometimes I get all passionate about a book and other times I just show up."

In contrast, faculty members always came up with clear goals during playbacks of their seminars. Sometimes these goals were related very clearly with the materials:

- \* discuss issues of gender and science as they related to this particular book.
- \* tie in the discussion of values they're abstracting from this case study to their personal approaches to problems
- \* move from reactions to the text to an analysis which ties in program themes

Or they were related to the dynamics of the group:

- \* let the students run the seminar; help empower them
- \* the last seminar had floundered a lot, so I hoped for a more focused discussion and in this last seminar [on a book] we would achieve a synthesis about some of the issues

Interestingly, I found only one faculty member who stated the seminar goals overtly at the beginning of the discussion. It appears that most of us hope our goals will be realized, but we do very little to ensure that they will. The one faculty member oriented towards goals had explained to the students that on Tuesdays (for example) the goal would be to focus on the text, and analyze it. Wednesdays the goal would be to relate the ideas culled from the text to their personal experiences. This was a core program, and students coming into the playback sessions could always identify the goal for that particular seminar, and they related their evaluation of its success to the group goal.

In the survey, students reported problems with two extreme approaches faculty took with regard to seminar goals: the laid-back approach and the domineering approach. A faculty member using the laid-back approach says, "This is your seminar. You can do what you want. You have the responsibility to make it work. I'm just an observer."

My faculty I had in the plugged-up seminar said, 'I will sit here forever and not say anything. Look, I'm not a kindergarten teacher. You guys can do this, so think about how you want to structure yourselves.'

Students we interviewed find this to be an ineffective method because a good facilitator enriches seminar process and content. They also see a lack of commitment on the part of the faculty to the group: if the point of seminar discussions is to collaborate, everyone should take part. One student pointed out that if the faculty member sits back, then the point of the seminar appears to be performance rather than learning.

A faculty member using the domineering approach insists there is only one way to run a seminar. The faculty member tends to lecture a lot in this format or allows only certain kinds of comments to be voiced, making the atmosphere very tense. As a result, some students report they are afraid of saying anything; other students feel continually frustrated because only one set of goals is considered important.

One way of understanding this problem of goals was articulated by one of my faculty informants:

As much as what you're engaged in is a kind of collaborative democratic educational process; nevertheless there's an expectation on their part to some degree that I'm setting the agenda. And there's an expectation on my part that there is an agenda. There's a little bit of a guessing game that goes on about what's your agenda versus our agenda.

Many students in this survey find the seminar experience exciting and important to their learning when their faculty has dialogues with them as a member of the seminar group. The faculty member offers insights, but so do other seminar members. Still, there is recognition on their part that the faculty facilitator is not just a member of the group, but a leader and an evaluator:

Professors are sneaky about trying to not kill the impulse to look to your fellow students for answers because if the student knows that the teacher is going to answer everything, even if that was possible, then they might not go through all the pain and the effort of learning how to find things out through fellow students.

A professor outside of Evergreen has been developing goals for seminars. In a compelling report for Edmonds Community College, "Turning Seminar into a Verb: A Classroom Alchemy,"

Margaret Scarborough describes a well-developed and -tested system for evaluating seminar process during the seminar. She lists seven levels of interaction: silent, silencing the text or others (by expressing personal opinions with little consideration for the text), testing the water (some reference to the text), collecting (bringing in quotes with no analysis), engaging (digging into the text, clarifying positions relative to it), understanding (integrating the material with personal experience and other material), and discriminating (evaluation or judgement of the material). By handing out an explanation of each level and explaining the sort of development she expects to see in seminar process, students know what their goals are for each seminar.

At the end of each seminar, students and faculty rate each student's individual participation and discuss the quality of the seminar in a global way, reinforcing the value of paying attention to process. In this way, students become adept at facilitation at a number of levels. (See Appendix C for more details on the seven levels of interaction.) Scarborough assigns certain parts of the texts for discussion and students write papers due prior to the seminar. In addition, her seminars are always preceded by small group discussions to develop the agenda. Because of this structure and the emphasis on interactional goals, Scarborough reports students have no difficulty in gaining or managing the floor in her seminars.

Recognition of cultural ways of speaking. Because there is a large body of work on dialects and some on conversational

style, I was interested to discover whether students were aware of sociolinguistic differences which manifested themselves in conversations. Specifically, we asked whether our informants noticed cultural differences in speaking. If cultural differences were perceived, it would seem students are consciously aware of some factors affecting getting the floor.

Students were not asked to identify themselves with an ethnic group, but two volunteered that information. One was Hispanic, the other Hawaiian. Both felt strongly that they were singled out in seminar discussion yet neither wanted to be in the position of representing their ethnic group. Several other students remarked they had noticed students being singled out, and that this was undesirable. This singling-out process can happen overtly, "Tamara, you're black, tell us about X." Or, it can be perceived:

There was a Hawaiian girl in my seminar. We were talking about exploration of the Americas by the Europeans. She felt the implication from the conquest of the Hawaiian Islands by Cook and his expedition and all the later explorers. It made all us white people feel really guilty. She was the only non-white person. She felt bad, too. She felt very victimized. She felt it affected her cultural identity today, too, even though we all really respected her. We carried on these roles somehow through history that had been portrayed in the explorers we were studying. That was a very vivid experience.

This feeling of being assigned the floor by default contrasts with a lack of empowerment in another case. This student talked about how the tone of voice of Euro-American men can sound aggressive. She continued, "And also I think there's a pattern where especially women of color will bring up a topic and a lot



of times students will move beyond that topic without really dealing with it."

Several students mentioned the greater diversity of perspectives when cultural background is discussed: "In a good seminar people will try to translate ideas for those who don't have the cultural experience." Three students specifically mentioned the value of having older students present for seminar because of their life experience and perspectives.

On the other hand, cultural differences such as regional or religious differences are sometimes used to wield power: "Some people become a representative of their culture. They become experts so there is no way to respond."

I found it quite disturbing that fully one third of the 66 students said they were not sure about cultural differences because they had no experience with it. This is an issue that needs to be addressed in each seminar because some students may expect ethnicity to be the sole determiner of difference. Age, gender, religion, family relations, previous schools, regional identification, social class, and political/sexual orientation are a few cultural indices that many students seem to ignore but which can affect conversational style, and, of course, ways of getting the floor.

In one group playback session, cultural differences in conversational style appeared in graphic relief. During the seminar, a woman of color corrected a fellow student on his use of the term "minority" in a question he raised, explaining that the

appropriate term was "person of color" since most so-called minority people are actually the majority of the world's population. We stopped the tape, inviting comments from the group. The woman in question (the only person of color in the seminar) was not present for the playback. The student who had been corrected remarked that the woman of color had taken up too much seminar time with this point and that she could have discussed it with him after seminar in the hall. In support of his view, another male student said, "But [your] question wasn't even addressing her as a minority or a person of color or anything, right? You were just bringing the point up about women and minorities. The question wasn't directed at her." The issue was seen as an irritant to the corrected student because it did not connect in a coherent way with the topic at hand. However, the woman of color clearly recognized a topic at the level of word choice and cultural assumptions which she felt should be raised immediately even though she was not being personally implicated.

From his tone of voice and the length of his comments on this episode in the seminar, the corrected student clearly felt personally attacked; yet, the person of color used many meta-statements ("I just want to say. . . , no offense but I'm just saying. . .") to soften the personal impact of her words on him. Her choice of an appropriate moment to discuss the term "minority" was different than his choice of appropriate moment. Seizing the floor for particular issues may be seen as an individual power grab by one cultural group when in fact it is a way of

expressing group membership by another cultural group. I believe there are times when the coherence of a seminar discussion at the level of explicitly stated ideas should and can be suspended in order to deal with issues that are implicit to the discussion. With more discussion either during the seminar itself or in the playback with all seminar members present, a deeper understanding of cultural or individual differences might have emerged.

As a second probe in this question, we asked if students noticed a difference in ways men and women expressed themselves. Instead of addressing expression, 11 students pointed out another difficulty: "We can't seem to discuss women's issues." They indicated tension in their seminars because women are more likely to bring up sexism in the materials and because they have a more passionate interest in women's issues in general.

It is not clear from the responses precisely which issues might comprise "women's issues," but two seminar discussions I videotaped for Seminar Talk serve as examples. The seminar text in one case examined women's work in India; the other identified and compared men's and women's work, education, and family roles in several impoverished countries. Tension rose quickly in both seminar discussions because of the connections made (sometimes implicitly) with conditions in the United States. One male student who felt embattled described his seminar as a "feminar." At issue here is a complex range of responses from both men and women to the text which became reduced to judgments of people in

the seminar itself rather than discussion of social groups or broader issues raised in the texts.

Twenty-eight students discussed the differences they saw in the ways men and women talk in seminar. They were not unanimous, but, significantly, the majority (26 of 28) listed the following distinctions: women bring up emotional or personal reactions; men rely on facts. Women hedge; men assert themselves and use louder voices. Women wait for a solid idea to explore with the group; men throw things out. Women listen better and follow up more; men like to initiate new things, lead the conversation. Women don't trust their knowledge; men talk for the sake of talking.

One woman spoke about an issue that several students raised: women aren't willing to speak up:

I think men assume that they're going to be heard and women assume that they're not. And when I say something, what I say has to be paraphrased by a man before it will be taken seriously. Men aren't used to listening to women speak and women aren't used to listening to women speak. If [women] are heard, then they're considered aggressive and people are either afraid of them or angry at them for speaking out, whereas if it was a man, it would be perfectly acceptable.

One woman talked about the silence among women in the sciences: "Whenever we do something scientific in origin in my program, it's like all the men will ask questions during the seminar and during the main lecture, and women will be entirely silent. She recalled an evaluation of that program she had received:

I was really into the science section -- one of the few women who were -- and so my faculty told me in my evaluation that he was glad that I was a woman who was speaking up. I took it as a compliment but it could be taken as a severe

insult. I just sort of let it pass by 'cause you hear that stuff all the time.

Without exception, women in this group talked about men as being more dominant and having power. Two men talked about powerful women in seminars they have had and did not bring up the position of men. Twelve students said there were no differences between the ways men and women expressed themselves, and five didn't know if there were. (These students were nearly equally divided in terms of their gender.)

I was able to test the notion of genderlect (or gender-based conversational style) in one fishbowl seminar because the faculty member divided the seminar according to gender. (Fishbowl seminars are those in which half of the group discusses the material while the other half listens, usually sitting around the outside of the circle; then they reverse roles. The outer group cannot participate in the inner group's discussion.) In this discussion, students and faculty in the playback sessions identified differences in the ways of talking:

The women, I think, generally are much more demonstrative in their support for one another. I mean that's the difference, it seems to me, in the dynamic of the women's group and the men's group. When the women throw out ideas, the others support them and they sustain that atmosphere in support. When the men throw out the ideas oftentimes like Chuck, they'll state the idea and then pull back, 'Well I don't know whether that has anything to do [with it] you know' or like Barry, use the authority of the text, 'Well there's this quote the one about the Nazis. . .' and then not make his own point so the men are much more tentative and not as supportive of one another.

When [the men] listen, they don't look at him they just look at their books. When he started to talk none of them looked up at all.

Even if every seminar discussion does not fit the description students paint of genderlects, it is important that we understand that the perception of power imbalance may be present. A man may not feel he has exerted power if he has not convinced other seminar members of his point of view. However, the fact that he controlled the floor may be seen by others as powerful. Controlling the floor can mean introducing and maintaining a particular topic, interrupting other speakers and regaining the floor with a louder voice with some frequency, even opting out of a discussion when it changes course with nonverbal disapproval. One student described this stance:

[Men] will go as far as to push their chairs back to show that they are too superior for this group and cross their legs way out in front of them and put their arms in front of them and look down.

Power is usually identified with manipulation of topic and time. In a highly conflictual core seminar not yet described in this report, for example, four students dominated the seminar. Three of these were women who initiated seven topic changes -- far more than the single man, who initiated four -- and they argued with zeal. However, two of the man's topics dominated the seminar time, and he became the center of the discussion during one lengthy exchange. (None of the women dominated the floor in this fashion.) This imbalance of power by men occurs rather often in the seminars I videotaped. In an advanced seminar, for example, there were only four men (including the faculty member), and 12 women. Yet two of the men succeeded in spending more time on their issues than the women's.

It is clear that there are different ways of speaking, whether one holds it to be individual or cultural. Since some students may feel targeted or may feel powerless, the seminar group must stay "attuned." It is not enough to announce that everyone's perspective is valued if only a few students routinely control the floor. Round table discussions at the end of seminar can be useful, but students need to alter their behavior if it is inappropriate. Everyone needs to realize that not everyone contributes in the same manner. In addition, not everyone feels the need or has the confidence to talk. A student remarked:

I think that there's a lot of things that go into the formulation of your speaking voice and I think a lot of it has to do with your inner voice and how you listen to that and act on that. And if that inner voice has a different cultural or social or ideological foundation than the others, then I think absolutely that [your voice] would be affected.

It seems clear that some discussion of ways of getting the floor in our seminars which includes cultural, social, and ideological perspectives is an essential step in finding one's voice.

Roles. When asked if they play a particular role in seminar, the largest number of students identified themselves with no specific role in seminar (19). Fourteen saw themselves as facilitators (one said she was a "seminar mommy"): eight were women, six were men. Two of the women who said they were facilitators in this group also said they played the role of devil's advocate. Four men said they were devil's advocates, but made no mention of facilitating. Two roles which were only claimed by women were mediator (three) and starter (three); these women did not place themselves in other roles (such as facilitator). Five students

saw themselves as listeners (four women, one man). Two roles were only claimed by men: synthesizer/clarifier (three) and introducer of new topics (two).

These gender-specific roles fit well with the perception of men and women about the genderlects they encounter in seminars. Women mediate, men initiate (topics or syntheses). Others do not seem to be gender-specific, however.

Several students talked about imposed roles:

Often when there's a discussion about a certain topic, I feel like people are targeted to talk about that topic and that definitely affects them in seminar.

This reluctance to identify roles (and the limited number of them) contrasts markedly with observations during playbacks of seminars. Students easily identified routine behaviors with specific people. Of course, these behaviors were not always coupled with a specifically named role, but rather types of behaviors: "abstracting from a specific point" or "complicating the picture." It seems that if students became aware of the roles they play in seminar discussions, they might be stimulated to move around to see what they could learn by playing a less familiar role. Clearly, we do not always choose the role we play in a discussion, but most often the groups assign particular roles to its members quite quickly. One student, interested in group dynamics, discussed her seminar group in a playback interview:

We didn't come in knowing [that] being a group would actually take some work, you know, with the storming and forming. I think some people didn't realize how it was headed and then it became a problem that everybody outside of class could acknowledge. We were beginning to see the speaker, the listener, the monopolizer, the devil's advocate, the



gadfly. We talk a lot about the bonding and getting together outside of class helps, too.

In a group playback interview, a student commented on the roles assigned to seminar members:

Well, you definitely get the floor in our seminar by your voice and by being a particular person because. . . Mary, you could yell and we probably would still pass you up; we've already established your place in seminar.

For "Mary" to change her role (she had expressed frustration with not being heard), she must acknowledge what it is, and that may mean a discussion of roles inside or outside the seminar, and a willingness of the seminar members to allow the reassignment of roles from time to time.

Some students consciously change their roles. One male student discussed his development in seminars over the three-and-a-half years he's been at Evergreen:

Throughout my college career, I've modulated between [not speaking] and some kind of levity. At first, I kind of turned things into jokes a lot because I was one of those rambunctious people that wanted to make a lot of noise or something. Then I kind of wandered into playing this passive role. It was masculine because it was separated and detached, kind of like 'Well I'm too mysterious to be sharing my wisdom.' Eventually I compromised. I don't think either one of those two approaches is necessarily that productive. I decided to be a sensible participant.

Roles are very important to discuss with our students because we may not always be perceived as having the role we believe we have. In addition, we may feel we're assigned certain roles with no choice in the matter. However, playing a role can clearly disrupt collaborative work if the role becomes more important to maintain than the work of the seminar.

As the student talking to Mary above indicates, seminar roles are established early, and they can become the most important factor during an energetic discussion in whether or not a student gets the floor. If we recall that getting the floor means not just having a turn at talk, but being recognized as a contributor to the discussion, roles, whether real or perceived, need to be recognized as part of the seminar discussion.

Turning now from prerequisites to the seminar discussion itself, I asked students to describe successful and unsuccessful seminars.

Success. Each of the criteria mentioned by students have clear connections to ways of getting the floor which have been explored in this report. For a seminar to be successful, most mentioned two criteria: there should be a feeling of satisfaction that everyone learned or moved to a new level of understanding or they have more questions about the material than when they started (29); and the discussion should be focused, coherent, in-depth (19). Mentioned frequently were three other criteria: most people should talk (13); people need to have the opportunity to speak (12); the discussion should be lively/energetic (14). Other points that were emphasized were engagement in the discussion, diversity of opinion, obvious preparation, and respect for other perspectives.

One student claimed she had never had a successful seminar in three years at Evergreen, but another summed up the criteria for success mentioned by the majority of the students very well:

I would have to say that a successful seminar is when everyone feels engaged and everyone gets fired up and that progress is made with the material that absolutely couldn't have been made by these individuals working on their own. That's what I think seminar is for and that's when I think it really works. [The] discussion has a unique ability to bring out peoples' ideas and take those ideas further than the individual ideas themselves and move beyond the individuals and come to a group idea.

In describing unsuccessful seminars, students most often mentioned the problem of unprepared seminar members and no one having anything to say. In another category, students dominating the seminar or working in their own worlds and not listening to other perspectives is also a major factor. Faculty who lecture, do nothing, or lack knowledge of the seminar topic are also singled out as contributing to unsuccessful seminars. Six students singled out a focus on personal lives as being unproductive.

Students offered several suggestions for making seminars more productive:

The way Evergreen describes a seminar is very idealistic and I think that someone needs to come out and say you know, 'This is a once in a lifetime kind of thing that a perfect seminar happens.' I think that a lot of people get disillusioned because they come in and think, 'Oh this is going to be so great' and it's not all the time. So I really think there needs to be something said about what a lot of work this takes. It takes a lot more work than people think.

Defensiveness in seminar: I find it hard to do any collaborative learning when people are owning their ideas as a part of themselves.

I think it would help if faculty first of all were trained or at least thought of that as an issue because I think certain faculty don't have any idea how to do a seminar. [Also in] seminar [if] you had time to talk a little bit about the dynamics of what's happened in seminar, I think seminars would improve a lot.

In my interviews with students in "Seminar Talk" and the present study, I was continually surprised by the number of students who admitted to having been unprepared for their seminar discussion, usually because they had not finished the reading. It is important to point out that the average number of students we interviewed in each seminar was about five, and that most seminars had over 20 students in them. Despite the small numbers, these students volunteered very damaging information about their commitment to seminar. They may very well have been excusing themselves for not participating more brilliantly, but I also wondered about the acceptability of going to seminar unprepared in the student culture. The goal of seminars is not just to talk, but to contribute to a collaborative process, and that cannot happen without solid preparation.

#### Collaborative Learning

Students answered yes or a qualified yes (sometimes, rarely) that collaborative learning occurs in seminar discussions -- 88% of the 64 total responses. Only three answered no. This is an important finding because the seminar is touted as a tool for collaborative learning in college brochures; it should be effective in achieving its goals. As a probe, we asked students how they knew collaborative learning was occurring.

Responses were diverse, but can be paraphrased as follows:

Everyone is receptive to new ideas or perspectives, and there is a certain harmony and comfort in the group. During the discussion, most people contribute different ideas or perspectives. These ideas are discussed in depth and there is a sense that the group is synthesizing or piecing a puzzle together or even coming to a consensus about the

material. A sense of excitement or intensity pervades the room. Afterwards seminar members can talk about what they learned outside of class and they believe they have encountered new ideas or changed their opinions somewhat.

Mentioned most often is that a lot of different opinions or perspectives are presented by seminar members, but just as important seems to be the quality of the work together. Several students distinguished between an individual learning process and a collaborative one, saying the latter did not happen often.

It's hard for me to articulate things. Someone else will say something I was sort of vaguely thinking about and they will put it in actual words. When that happens for me, then I feel that I'm getting something out of the process personally.

I wouldn't term it collaborative learning. It's more the case for me to say what I think out loud and have people respond to it so that I can decide whether or not I actually think that or whether I think I should think that or whether I can support what I think. It's a place for people to sort through what they really think individually.

Most seemed to believe that unless each seminar member was involved in the discussion true collaboration did not occur.

I think if everyone has in mind that it's supposed to be a group experience then it opens them up more to be listening and responding rather than just being there because they have to.

When you feel that people are communicating to each other, there's a feeling of collaboration there. You really feel like a part of a group -- a sort of harmony when all the people involved are working on it together.

This notion of everyone working together requires that everyone know how to get the floor and maintain it with some skill so that ideas can be connected or used as foundations for other ideas.

## CONCLUSION

Seminars are the heart of our programs and group contracts, and have been since the beginning of the college. When they were introduced, and for some years after the opening of the college, the faculty spent long hours questioning and debating teaching goals, methods, and ideals in seminar discussions (and in other aspects of our teaching). Since those early years, we have continued the tradition of seminars without the accompanying critical appraisal as faculty members engaged in a continued experiment in education. In other words, we have allowed the group discussions about approaches to teaching disappear, and with that disappearance, a sense of collaboration in our teaching has also gone.

One result of this missed opportunity is that faculty new to the college usually believe we are all experienced in facilitating seminars and we know what we're doing. In reality, however, I believe most of us have questions about seminar technique and some of us are struggling with the seminar as a learning tool. For some of us, this struggle is well worth the effort.

We need to begin the dialogue again. My own position is that faculty need to provide explicit goals for seminar discussions and encourage discussion about and recognition of conversational style. Certainly our general goal is to provide a forum for collaborative learning, and equally important, to provide an opportunity for all students to contribute. However, in each

seminar we can indicate specific goals, or ask students to formulate them, and we can emphasize ways of getting the floor in our facilitation.

We can urge students to pay attention to all ideas, even those they might wish to immediately reject, ignore, or belittle. Most importantly, students need to work on finding connections between ideas and creating coherence in the discourse. There is probably no greater measure of respect than seeing one's idea being treated seriously in a discussion through the use of a coherence marker.

The goals of seminar discussion should be very clearly stated -- both the broad goals for any discussion (such as discussing the designated materials, being respectful, and learning critical analysis), and the specific goals for each seminar (such as finding the author's thesis or working on an image in some depth and then relating the group's ideas to program themes and students' own lives).

Scarborough's (1992) report suggests distributing a list of seven levels of interaction and assessing students during each seminar with immediate, written feedback. Using her approach usually means that the faculty sponsor stays out of the discussion and that at least the last 15 minutes of seminar time be used for a discussion of process. The advantage of this approach is that it responds to the perennial student question, "What do you want from me?" It provides structure for students and a means for evaluating their progress. The evaluation procedure is

based on the perception of a peer, the student, and the faculty sponsor, thus allowing the student an opportunity to compare perceptions. This system has been used with considerable success by Scarborough and her colleagues and is included in Appendix C.

The ultimate advantage of explicitly stating goals and discussing whether or not they were met at the end of seminar is that students come to realize that their interaction can further the goals of the seminar if it is appropriate to the goals. This session can reinforce the collaborative nature of the discussion and help students avoid silencing the text or each other.

For the remainder of this report, I will offer suggestions culled from my experience and my interviews with fellow faculty members:

#### Useful strategies to encourage participation:

The most widespread technique: break into small groups either to generate topics for discussion (10-15 minutes) or to begin discussion of specific points once the agenda is set (up to an hour). Sometimes groups are assigned different topics. The groups can be randomly selected, or you might experiment with groups of quiet/talkative students, men/women, usually prepared/usually unprepared. Most are small, three to five students, although I have seen seminars divided into two as a regular feature. Some faculty rove between the groups. A key factor is inviting comments from each group when the large group reconvenes.

To encourage listening, some faculty use fishbowl seminars. Other methods: distribute three pennies to each person, each of which authorizes one turn at talk for the duration of the seminar. Bring a ball of string and require that students request the ball in order to talk, and hold on to the string as it is passed along. Require a certain period of silence between each turn of talk. Use paper slips, bells, other non-verbal devices as indicators of a need for silence or reflection.

Many faculty use student facilitators who meet with the faculty sponsor prior to the seminar. They discuss the agenda



items they would like to discuss, or they prepare background material to present to the seminar. If they are also to be in charge of guiding the discussion, it is important to talk to them about ways of doing that, or modeling ways of doing it.

#### Quiet students.

Some students reported being criticized in their evaluations for not contributing to seminar discussions. Two even mentioned they were not valued members of the group because they were quiet. It may be that creative approaches are needed to include them and invite their responses to the material: students could bring one-page response papers to the seminar which are passed around for the first 20 minutes so several others can read them; students could work orally in pairs on specific objectives, then report back to the group; students could bring in nonverbal responses to the materials such as drawings, mime, musical interpretations, or skits.

In seminars where the goal is verbal participation, an agendaist can be responsible for writing everyone's ideas on the board and prioritizing them during the discussion. After that opportunity, one faculty member reports, they're more involved in the seminar discussions: "It's a good way to nurture and invite the shyer folks into doing something."

Encouraging a particular kind of preparation, such as assigning research outside of class materials to students on a rotating basis is another method used by many faculty members. Finally, a recorder or historian can be appointed who will summarize the discussion for the group at the end of the seminar.

#### Preparation.

The major prerequisite for any seminar discussion is adequate preparation. Students and faculty sponsors must come prepared for the discussion. For students this means reading the materials or attending the event and either taking notes or thinking critically and thoughtfully about its meaning(s) both on a personal level and as it relates to program themes. If students do not seem to be prepared, study groups (which meet outside of class) have been quite successful. These are usually informal groups who begin sorting through and testing ideas prior to the seminar in order to begin more in-depth work when the seminar takes place.

Faculty members should inform themselves as much as possible if the material is not in their field so that they can con-

tribute to the discussion. Faculty seminars are an excellent forum for clarifying the issues, and in one program I am familiar with, the faculty member who suggested the text for the week gave a 20-minute presentation on key concepts and ways the text connected to the program from his point of view.

Writing at the beginning or at the end of seminar in a program notebook is one way to encourage preparation. Another is to require mini-themes due at the beginning of seminar. These either summarize, critique, or raise questions about the materials. Quotes or substantiating evidence are required, and they must be typed on one side of a large note card. They are passed around at the beginning of seminar and provide a basis for discussion. Short quizzes on some materials may be appropriate. And, some faculty require a section in the program notebook with notes from the readings and seminars.

#### Respectful atmosphere.

Students and faculty sponsors need to work together to create a respectful atmosphere for the discussion. Careful attention to group dynamics (experimenting with structuring the seminar, alternating student facilitators, for example) and an articulation of goals are two means to achieve this. If the faculty sponsor's goals are the only goals worthy of consideration, the harmony of the group will suffer. The goals should be understood and agreed upon by the group rather than a collection of individual goals. Going around the seminar circle before and after the discussion to encourage discussion of content or process can provide a useful forum for these discussions.

Some specific strategies which can be useful are paraphrasing a previous speaker to be sure you understand what they have said. Encourage everyone to try the phrase "yes and" instead of "yes but." Help student facilitators learn to ask questions which keep the discussion on track; for example, "Are we still talking about X or have we gotten off track?" "Should we finish our discussion of X before moving to this new area?" Using "we" instead of "you" when talking with the group reinforces the sense of the ensemble.

## APPENDIX A:

### References

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APPENDIX B:  
**STUDENT SURVEY**

1. How would you define seminars for a friend at another college or university?  

PROBE: Would you say anything specific about why we have seminars at Evergreen?
2. Do you have any specific goals in mind when you go into a seminar?  

PROBE: If you think of your last one, did you have a goal in mind for that one?
3. How would you describe a successful seminar?  

PROBE: Which elements would it have?
4. What about an unsuccessful seminar?  

PROBE: What characteristics does it have?
5. Seminars are places for collaborative learning. Do you think that's what's actually going on in your experience?  

PROBE: How do you know if collaborative learning is taking place?
6. Have you noticed if people express themselves differently because of their cultural backgrounds?  

PROBE: Can you describe any characteristics of their comments, such as tone of voice or how often they comment?

What about men and women?
7. Do you play any particular role in seminar?  

PROBE: For instance, some people direct the seminar, some summarize, some ask big questions. . .
8. Do you have any further comments?

## APPENDIX C

### Seven Levels of Interaction in Seminar: Metric & Reflections

Instructors: Scarborough/Green

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

**INTRODUCTION:** The seminar is the heart of any collaborative learning class. To a large degree it is the process of active learning itself, made visible and audible to the entire learning community. It is the seminar that integrates the texts with the readers and the readers with each other. Without a vital seminar, there is little hope that a collaborative learning experience will be as healthy as it could be.

**METRIC;** The following is a seminar metric to help participants talk about, evaluate and consciously improve the vitality of their seminar on an ongoing basis. With it, participants are able to see patterns in interactions and whether or not interactions are likely to result in optimal learning. It's good to keep in mind that optimal learning generally takes place through "engaging," level 5. Levels 6 and 7 are the fruits of 5. It is also good to remember that no seminar will work if the participants have not read the material.

Because of the difficulty and complexity in discussing anyone's motivation to do or not to do anything, the metric is based simply upon the seven levels of interactive behavior (from least to most interactive) observed in seminar participants.

**HOW TO USE IT:** A three-step process to be done after the seminar:

1. The participant scores him/herself. During the first few minutes, s/he may feel that two scores seem more accurate than one, but s/he should score in only one area that subjectively describes most interactions. The reflection is useful for further explanations or comments.

After scoring, the participant writes a reflection about his/her interaction during that specific seminar.

2. The score sheet is passed to a peer (someone on the right or left of the participant) who scores what s/he observed.
3. The score sheet is passed to the instructor who scores what s/he observed and writes a reflection/response to the original participant. S/he then returns the score sheet to the participant.

1. Silent. No response. Of the various reasons for this behavior, two need to be considered for our purposes: Lack of trust in the group and therefore the unwillingness to take a risk and share; or lack of confidence in one's own critical abilities -- a sense of being so overpowered by the material that it is hard to see the forest for the trees.
2. Silencing the text. Personal opinions, experiences and/or memories dominate, without much consideration for the text. This behavior indicates an inability to engage and is often accompanied by complacency or boredom. Possibilities for learning are greatly reduced. Often the participant is judgmental or dismisses the text altogether.
3. Testing the water. Some two or three general comments about the text to let people know s/he has read it. The participant is beginning to get the toes wet.
4. Collecting. Listing many observations and quotes from the text without analyzing them. The participant is still struggling a bit with being overpowered by the material, but what is important is that s/he is struggling with it.
5. Engaging. This signals real reading. In seminar it is usually accompanied by an emotional as well as an intellectual response to the material. At this level, participants are generally enthusiastic. Among the various responses possible: discussing the position and biases of the author; seeking to define terms (both the author's and the discussants'); seeking to make meaning out of the quotes; asking questions; answering questions about the text posed by the group; clarifying each other's positions. This level indicates a strategy of learning.
6. Understanding. At this level, participants are structuring and integrating the material through association with personal experience (here, personal experience illuminates rather than dominates the text) and with other literature. "Understanding" is not a question of categories, which can rob the subject of its uniqueness. Rather, it has to do with making meaningful connections.
7. Discriminating. This level is the level of "critical" appreciation and respect./ The participant has understood the material from whatever perspectives are available and now makes a conscious evaluation or judgment about it, acknowledging difference and inability to understand where appropriate.

Scarborough/Green

Seminar Participation 3

BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON MY PARTICIPATION TODAY

FACILITATOR'S

STUDENT: \_\_\_\_\_

REFLECTION

1.

1.

2.

2.

3.

3.

4.

4.

5.

5.

6.

6.

7.

7.

Participant \_\_\_\_\_

**Self-Evaluation Based on Metric**

Seminar	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7 Discriminating							
6 Understanding							
5 Engaging							
4 Collecting							
3 Testing							
2 Silencing							
1 Silent							

**Peer Evaluation Based on Metric**

Seminar	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7 Discriminating							
6 Understanding							
5 Engaging							
4 Collecting							
3 Testing							
2 Silencing							
1 Silent							

Evaluator

**Instructor Evaluation Based on Metric**

Seminar	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7 Discriminating							
6 Understanding							
5 Engaging							
4 Collecting							
3 Testing							
2 Silencing							
1 Silent							