

# Student-led seminar development and delivery

As we're reaching the end of this term, and next semester's seminars are assessed, I thought I'd draft and circulate some brief reflections drawing on my perceptions of progress and performance so far, with some prescriptions for improvement next term.

**I'd be very keen to receive feedback at this stage from all of you regarding these comments and/or the design, structure and delivery of the module as a whole.**

## 1. Introduction (the preachy bit)

The basic point of student-led seminars, is for you (the leaders) to become the experts, to fulfil the role of the tutors (although we're always here, of course, for your guidance and support at every stage of preparation and delivery of each seminar – incidentally, you should note that this, plus the weekly assessments of seminars, makes running a course based on student-led seminars much more work for tutors than running a module with traditional lectures and/or tutor-led discussions). Becoming the 'expert' for the week requires on your part a very substantial input of work. You'd be irritated if the academics set you irrelevant reading for preparation; inappropriate questions to think about in advance or to answer in class; permitted incorrect or tendentious comments to pass in class discussions without correction or qualification; and weren't able to answer your questions or clarify your understanding of difficult points. Seminar leaders need to be sure they are able to do all these things to the very best of their ability.

This is also fundamentally what the assessment of student-led seminars is about. While teamwork, communication skills, etc. are important, the basic indicator of an effective seminar is the leaders' *intellectual mastery* of the subject. It's important to emphasise that these seminars are not about gloss, spin or bluff – the tutors (and students) can always see through a speaker's presentation skills and evaluate what has real substance and what is just show .... which means, conversely, if you are anxious about your presentation skills, there's no need to worry so long so you know the materials well. The ideal, of course, is great understanding, communicated lucidly and cogently.

## 2. Seminar leaders: designing the agenda (the practical bit)

a) Don't try to do too much in one meeting. Identify one key issue, or cluster of issues, to place at the core of the seminar. Don't worry about omitting primary sources and secondary reading that you don't think relates directly to this defining problematic. (In our preliminary meeting, I'll always check the agenda to make sure that your choice of focus is relevant and correct – so there's no danger of your mistakenly choosing, and then leading the whole group, in the wrong direction.) Throughout the agenda, concentrate on the essential, and ensure that the primary sources presented and subsequent discussions revolve around what you see as the key ideas and issues.

b) Don't set too much viewing and reading – but ensure that the selection you make is *precisely* the best and most relevant material you can find for the particular theme(s) and problem(s) that you wish to explore in the seminar.

c) Give yourself ample time in the meeting to introduce the seminar's core theme(s), for the group to view or read extracts from primary sources in class and to engage in full and productive discussion of the materials – in small groups, with proper feedback to the whole group or in other formats (debates, etc.). Give yourself time to conclude.

d) In order to identify a key issue or set of issues for the week's seminar, and hence to specify the most appropriate core and secondary reading, you must *immerse* yourself in the materials and literature for that seminar. This means reading *everything* you can find about it. In the first semester, seminar leaders should as a minimum *all* have read and viewed *all* set primary texts and core secondary reading. Those responsible for sub-themes should have read, or at least reviewed in detail, *all* relevant secondary materials. In the second semester, you of course need to identify your own literature, which makes your task that much harder, and the amount of preparatory reading you need to do, just in order to select the most relevant materials for the agenda, that much larger – but you have a magnificently full bibliography to support you in this. Only by such extensive reading are you able to extend your own understanding and knowledge in such a way that you can design and deliver the seminar as an expert. Too often in this first semester, it has been clear to me that seminar leaders have included materials on agendas without looking at them first (let alone looking at anything else), with the result that some materials then prove only to be of tangential use in prompting and informing discussion.

### 3. Seminar leaders: the seminar

a) Several shorter interventions are more productive than extended presentations. Try not to read, but to speak from notes and, in any case, be sure to project your voice, to speak *slowly* and clearly. Where you are citing names, dates, statistics, etc. an overhead or powerpoint slide is useful. Don't cram too much text on visual aids.

b) In responding to feedback from the group, don't be afraid to be (politely and constructively) critical or challenging, if you think someone has made a point that you think needs further clarification, qualification or rebuttal. I'll always intervene when I feel something more needs to be said, or a correction needs to be made – but in the first instance it's the seminar leaders' task to do this, and it's the best way of demonstrating to me your full grasp and confident mastery of the topic.

### 4. For those who are *not* leading the seminar

**Do all the reading and viewing set!** As I've said many times, this module is (i) difficult – in terms of the type of primary sources we use, and in its conceptual sophistication relative to most of what you've done before; and (ii) cumulative – in that understanding of each topic relies heavily on your understanding of ideas previously discussed, and your knowledge of sources previously addressed. If you don't do all the reading and viewing for one week's seminar – and this means both the primary and secondary materials – you will find yourself disadvantaged not only for that that seminar, but for all subsequent weeks. This is crucial, and is not something I should really have to say.

In class, participate actively! You will learn best if you contribute your ideas, and receive feedback on them from the seminar leaders (the experts for that week) and/or the tutor. Don't worry if you're not wholly confident about what you say – so long as you've done the reading, and can justify your statement, or ground your question, with reference to what you've read or viewed, even tentative comments will advance the seminar's discussion as a whole, and further everyone's understanding of the material.

**Be ashamed of being ignorant!**

**Don't be ashamed of not understanding or making mistakes**  
(the seminars are designed to help you learn).