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A Guide to the Seminar Method

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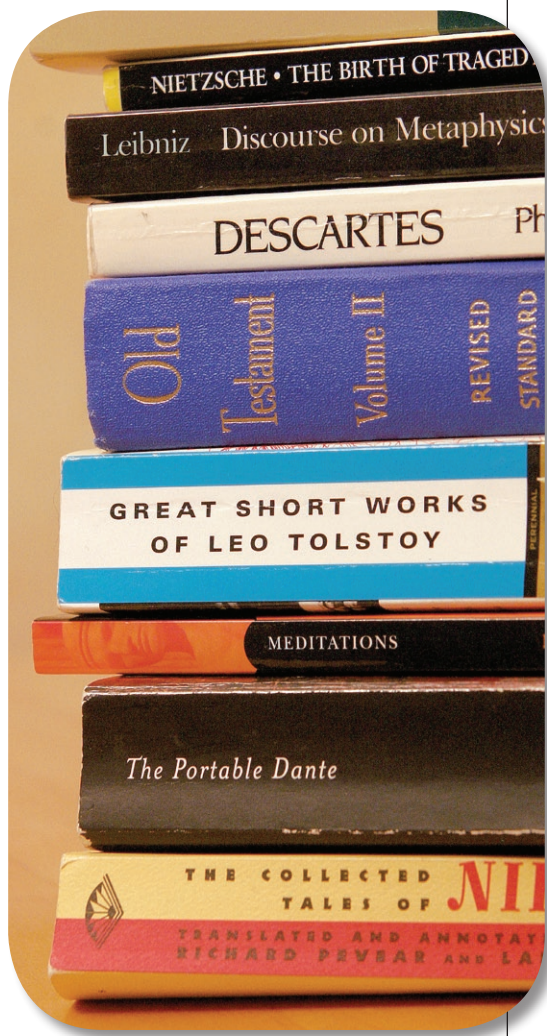
What is unique about what we do?

The seminar method, which is central to the mission of *The Agora Foundation*, is very different from the educational experience of most people. Tutors, who help to guide the discussion, do not lecture about the meaning of the texts; rather they ask probing questions which, after careful discussion, help to illuminate the power of the ideas that arise in the discussion. As one of the seminar participants observed, “the tutors guide the discussion minimally to keep it on track, but the real teachers in the room are the authors of the works themselves.” The reading and discussion of the great books, organized in terms of special themes, is an approach to learning which requires an active role of each participant. The seminar setting emphasizes the collaborative nature of our approach. The search to understand what the text says and what its implications are becomes a shared enterprise. Such active participation is an excellent way for one to claim for oneself an understanding of the great issues that continue to inform our culture.

The great books of the Western tradition, from the ancient Greeks to the present, contain some of the best that has been thought and written about nature, human nature, and the divine. Whether it is a Greek tragedy by Sophocles or Aeschylus, Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, or Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, works such as these invite us to join in a great conversation about topics that transcend the particularities of the time and place in which these books were written. The texts are not the special preserve of any one ethnic or national group; they are part of a patrimony that belongs to all. As Isocrates, the Greek rhetorician, once remarked, what makes one an Athenian is not the blood that runs through one’s veins, but the ideas in one’s mind.

One need not be a specialist in literature or philosophy or science to read and discuss great texts in these areas. *Agora Foundation* attendees have included business people, lawyers, doctors, teachers, students, administrators, artists, and more. There is no reason why a science teacher, for example, ought not to join English teachers in examining a great literary text, or for public and private school teachers to engage with others in discussions about faith and reason. As Aristotle observed, the sign of an educated person is not being an expert in every field, but being able to examine intelligently the work of experts. Teachers who receive this formation, both about the issues in the seminars and the method of teaching, will become more successful in the classroom.

What follows are some principles and guidelines for the effective use of the seminar method in class. As one should expect, good pedagogy requires preparation and practice, but it also requires a careful consideration of the ends that one is trying to bring about in the classroom, and also the means appropriate to those ends.



The Teacher

It may seem obvious who the teacher is in the classroom, but if a teacher has assigned one of the Great Books, or part of such a work, so that the students have read it in advance of class, then, there are really two teachers in the room. The first teacher is the author of the piece assigned. Surely he knows his work better than all others, and it is he who has put together the arguments in the reading, or has fabricated beautiful and moving language that is intended to incline the reader one way or another. The teacher behind the desk is really secondary. Now calling this teacher secondary is not to imply he is unimportant, or unnecessary. But it is to say that his role in the classroom is determined by the kind of teacher he is, that is, a guide to the students in a common effort to uncover the wisdom of the author. (Sometimes this understanding of the role of a teacher leads to the name “tutor,” from the Latin *tuor*: to look over, to care for, to guide.) The tutor has to understand that his role is to help guide a discussion about a great work from the text itself.

If the author is the principal teacher, then the teacher in the classroom must do as much as possible to make that clear to the students. One way to do this is to avoid bringing in the tutor’s own views about the subject under discussion. After all, it is the view from the text that must predominate. Furthermore, one needs to be very careful about bringing in expert opinions on the author’s work, or historical context, or biographical information about the author. Although all such considerations may be helpful, they are not crucial to a first reading of a work. The first approach to a work is aimed at making a good beginning, in which the students are active in their own learning, appeals to authority, historical context, and so on, really cut the students off from the discussion. In general, if the work that is being read and discussed is sufficiently great, then the author himself will provide the needed information to make his views known. On the other hand, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the students to consider and even challenge authoritative pronouncements, so the “pay-off” is minimal, and the drawbacks to bringing in such opinions about a work are considerable.

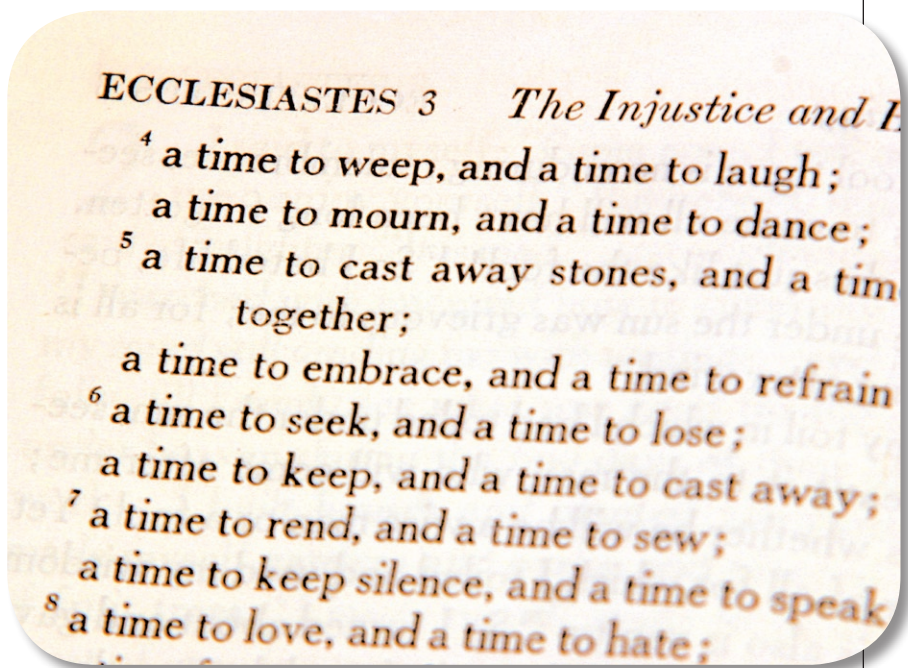


The Method

The discussion of method is closely related to the previous point that the author is the principal teacher. There are many different ways of leading a class. What works in one situation may not be successful in another. The different approaches the teacher can employ in the classroom are determined in large part by the educational goals he hopes to achieve. If the teacher intends to encourage active participation, if he wishes to make his students self-movers in their own education, and if he wishes to help them uncover what the great minds have to offer by reading their works directly, the method employed in class must make that possible. In general, the method of leading a class devoted to uncovering an understanding of a work, in a way that encourages active participation from the students, is called the “seminar method.” The word “seminar” comes from the Latin word for seed, and the name suggest propagation. The seminar is a place in which things are given life: what come to life are ideas. The seminar setting is one in which active participation in a discussion about some text leads to a kind of intellectual life.

As with anything that is not customary, change involves adjustment. If the seminar method is new to the classroom there will be a period at first in which both student and teacher will be getting used to the different expectations for class. The ultimate goal of the seminar is to get the students to take responsibility for the discussion. In order for that to happen, new habits need to be formed. In some cases a discussion might peter out; in that case what should the teacher do? It is easier to note what should not happen.

First, do not be surprised if a discussion does not keep going. Remember that silence is not a bad thing. The tutor need not be tempted to jump into the conversation if he encounters silence. If he does so once, then he will be expected to “rescue” the discussion every time. Rather, the teacher should coax the students into clarifying what has been said, or ask whether everyone is in agreement with what has been suggested, or whether what has been offered is the view found in the text. Also, the teacher should try to avoid constant comments on remarks that the students make. Encourage participants to engage one another. If two things have been offered, it is reasonable to ask whether those views are in agreement or not. If there seems to be no desire to pursue an issue further, instead of offering a further point, or giving an answer to a question on the table, think about questioning what has been said. After some experience with the method, students will get the hang of it, and then the teacher can engage the conversation more by directing it than by actively leading it.



Plan for the Class

Every successful class has a plan that guides the teacher from beginning to end. However, a plan does not have to be so rigid that it stifles spontaneous debate and unexpected lines of inquiry. If the work to be discussed has a thesis that is defended by argumentation, it is crucial that the teacher knows what that thesis is and, generally, how it is defended. The teacher also should be open to amend his view of the thesis, or reconsider the arguments advanced, as the discussion in the classroom unfolds. If the work assigned is a work of fiction, or some text that does not intend to make arguments, it is important that the teacher recognize that, and also know how he is supposed to react to the work. For example, one should be aware whether there is a protagonist who is meant to be admired, or to be despised, or to elicit some other kind of reaction. If there is, one should notice how the author inclines us to feel the way that we do about this character. Further, one should wonder why the author is moving the reader in the way that he is. What is the consequence of feeling about the character one way or another? If the teacher considers the texts that he assigns in these kinds of ways, he can develop a plan to open up the work for his students. A plan consists in four parts: (1) a good way of beginning the class, (2) a way of developing the discussion, (3) a strategy for keeping things on track, and (4) an idea for summarizing at the end of class.

(1) *Opening question*

A seminar class should begin in a way that will immediately encourage student participation. It is natural, then, to begin with a question. This opening question should be neither so difficult that only a few might be confident enough to attempt an answer, nor so easy that an initial answer will seem complete and, therefore, no follow up will be forthcoming. Also, the opening question should not be so obscure that it becomes a “guess what’s on my mind” type question. Nor should it be so simple that it becomes a “yes or no” type question. Finally, a question that has an implied thesis should be avoided. Consider the following example.

Homer’s *Iliad* begins with the description of the wrath of Achilles, and the consequences of his wrath. It is plausible that a teacher might want to begin a discussion of that work with a consideration of Achilles’ wrath. But it would not be a helpful opening question to ask: “Why is Achilles’ anger justified?” This question implies that there is a justification for his anger, and whether or not that is true, it is a debatable point. The form of the question puts a stop to that debate, and involves the class in a discussion of a particular position about his anger. It would be better, then, to ask: “Why is Achilles angry?” or, “What causes Achilles’ wrath?” Questions such as these encourage multiple answers, and these different answers can all be plausible answers. Consequently, there should be a natural evolution of the discussion from the preliminary answers to more in depth considerations of those answers. Notice, too, that if one asks: “Why is Achilles’ angry?” It cannot be answered by “yes” or “no.” But the question is not difficult to understand, so it should prompt any student to think of a response. Furthermore, even if the class comes to a reasonable meeting of the minds about how to answer that question, other questions should naturally arise. So, for example, if one thinks his anger is completely irrational, one might wonder why Zeus seems to find ways to appease Achilles’ anger.

In brief, the opening question requires careful consideration. It should set the tone for the whole discussion, and if it is sufficiently rich, it can carry the conversation a long way. It has to encourage active participation, but also to suggest a return to the text for support of any answer. It should be complex enough to allow for different, reasonable answers, without being so difficult that it shuts down conversation.

(2) After the opening question

The opening question will only carry the conversation so far. At some time or another, the teacher will have to intervene. This intervention is crucial, because it will set the tone for the remainder of the class. It is ideal for the teacher to follow up the initial efforts to answer the opening question with an appeal either to the text or to what has been said by the students. It is best if the teacher can ask how what has been said so far is found in the text. Or, in light of differing views emerging from the discussion, does the author say anything that inclines us to one view or another. Any encouragement to look to the author's words gives additional opportunity to expand on what has been suggested by the students.

(3) Keeping things on track

One of the most effective ways of keeping things going in a seminar discussion is for the teacher to play the role of a "traffic cop." The teacher should note when students are trying to get into the discussion and make way for them. Also, especially with the more reticent student, the teacher should help the student elaborate the point made. For example, it might be helpful if the teacher tries to restate what the student has said, but finally return to that student and ask: "Is this what you are saying?"

Another effective way of keeping the discussion on track is to be alert to disagreements, and even to what seem to be agreements, but the positions are put in a slightly different way. Even the most modest question can be helpful here: "Are you agreeing or disagreeing about such and such?" Furthermore, some may not be at ease about disagreeing, because it might seem to be confrontational or judgmental. If the teacher can keep the attention on the text, agreement and disagreement will be less personal and more objective.

Finally, if the discussion is going to make progress, it is important to note when positions build upon one another. So the teacher might ask in light of what has been said: "What follows?" Or, the teacher might point to a passage in the reading and ask: "How does what we are discussing fit in with this text?" To take another example, one might challenge the students by asking: "If what we are saying is right, why does the author say this?"

(4) Summary

Unlike a good lecture, the seminar sometimes lacks order, it has stops and starts, some things are passed over too quickly, and there can be significant digression. This is to be expected, and, over time these deficiencies become less prominent. It is very helpful, therefore, for the teacher to summarize key points that have been made. It is also helpful to sort out which difficulties discussed are fundamental and which are not so crucial. Finally, if there have been disagreements about some points under discussion, which of these need further consideration, and which can the students agree to disagree about without affecting the basic thesis of the work.

A good summary should not be the occasion for the teacher to insert his own view of the matter, or to disregard the discussion and state the correct view. Although the teacher should have a worked out view about the reading, the challenge in summarizing is to bring out what good things have been produced in the discussion. It might then be helpful for the teacher to give further "food for thought," and if he can do so by pointing out passages in the reading that have been overlooked, his remarks will embellish the discussion, not detract from it.

Texts

In order that the seminar method be successful, the teacher must be careful in the assignments he gives for the students to read and discuss. The best texts will have a degree of complexity, richness, and even ambiguity. The readings must be able to provide in themselves the means for addressing the questions and difficulties that should naturally arise; they should also be able to give sufficient guidance for some sort of resolution. A work that will require the teacher to interject key facts, or necessary information from outside the text, should be avoided. Remember the fundamental point: the author of the work is the principal teacher.

Program of Readings

It is important to keep in mind that, although one can make good progress in understanding the assigned reading, it can seem to the students that they would get farther if someone just told them what the key points are. To give students a real and fuller grasp of the texts they study, it is helpful to develop a program of readings. Such a program, based upon some unifying principle, will allow the students to experience progress in two ways. They will become better readers, and more articulate in expressing their ideas; and they will also come to see rich themes develop over several classes, so that they will realize that they have made intellectual progress.

Readings can be organized in many different ways. Here are a few examples of different reading programs used by *The Agora Foundation*:

Friendship (Aristotle, selections from *Nicomachean Ethics*)

Tyranny & Justice (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*; Aquinas, *On Kingship* and *Summa Theologiae* (selections); Machiavelli, *The Prince*)

Human Suffering (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*; The Bible, *The Book of Job*; Epictetus, *The Handbook*)

Law and Conscience (Sophocles, *Antigone*; Plato, *Apology* and *Crito*; Lincoln, selections)

Morality and Human Action (Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*; Aristotle, *Ethics* (selections); Flannery O'Connor, *The Lame Shall Enter First*)

The Origin for Knowledge (Plato, *Meno*; Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*; Descartes, *Discourse on Method*)

