

# What Makes a Seminar Unique?

John Habel

Department of Psychology

If we could *learn* to seminar...

Race in a “post-racial” society

# Hey, dudes!

Hey, dudes! A seminar is like Facebook, texting, or Twitter except all the peeps are together in one small room talking out loud; yeah right--ya'know, with your actual voice. Also, get this: there is only a few of you and you're all talkin' about one honking' subject--instead of a whole bunch!

# Hey, dudes! (continued)

What makes it HOT--or not--is the teacher and if he or she can keep things jamming' (without being too nasty in shutting down some poor clueless dude). Oh yeah, and we have to do some reading before class in order to have something to talk about. (Ya can't jes' talk about any ol' thing like we're used to.) That kinda sucks but I found out it can actually be pretty cool. So, yeah; that's a seminar. I took one once; it was sweet!

# Propositions About Learning and Teaching

- Just in growing up **we** are taught modes of discourse that don't work well in seminars.
- **We** are taught that ideas are right or wrong. For example, we are taught that there are smart and stupid ways to look at a book or a movie or a lecture.
- **We** are taught to worry about the merits of our contribution relative to the others in the discussion.

# Three Problems We Bring into a Seminar (from Michael Kahn)

1. The acceptance of ideas that challenge these propositions is very hard. For instance, when a white-haired colleague encourages me to look critically at these propositions and tries to show me other ways of thinking about learning and teaching, I might have a difficult time giving up my ideas. I may manage, but it's going to feel like surgery.

## Three Problems We Bring into a Seminar (continued)

2. Many of us have learned to believe that every lonely idea that enters our heads is so rare and so important to how the world sees us that we had better make sure we get full mileage out of it. So a seminar conception that asks us to let our own ideas go if the conversation is going somewhere else or if the current need is to develop someone else's idea, is a tough conception to live up to.

# Three Problems We Bring into a Seminar (continued)

3. It is hard for us to acknowledge learning from each other. It is hard because somehow that makes us seem one-down and, perhaps, inferior.

Remember grade school and the frantic waving of hands when the teacher asked a question?

Remember the competitiveness of graduate school?



# Propositions about Seminar

- A seminar ought not to be an occasion for transmitting large amounts of information and for imparting information not otherwise readily available.
- A seminar ought to be an occasion for teaching application of information, developing problem-solving skills and/or changing attitudes.
- A seminar ought not to be a question-and-answer session, though often it is.

# Propositions about Seminarng (continued)

- Conversation is hard when right/wrong and win/lose are operating. The result is that there isn't as much discussion on most campuses as there might be.
- Right/wrong can be replaced with interest in different views and curiosity about the relationships among those views.
- Win/lose can be replaced with pleasure in the other participants' collegueship.

# If we could *learn* to seminar...

If we could learn to seminar -- just learn it, the way you would learn to play the guitar or speak. . .

- In conversation among students the participation would be wide spread and the teacher would be another participant or in some way a facilitator of the discussion.
- We would introduce a whole new conversational power into our students' lives. That power would not be just for college. They would have it for the rest of their lives.

# How Thinking Works (from Daniel Willingham)

Thinking is when you combine information from the *environment* and from your *long-term memory* in *new* ways. That combination happens in *working memory*.

- holds what you're thinking about
- the part of your mind where you are aware of what is around you

# How Learning Works

- Learning is cumulative: (necessary, but not sufficient)
  - What does “PhD” mean?
  - Consider Homer Simpson
- Learning is transformative:
  - “The best thing for being sad...is to learn something.”
    - White, T. H. (1939). *The once and future king*.
  - “No learner has ever run short of subjects to explore. The pleasures of learning are indeed pleasures.”
    - Hightet, G., *The immortal profession: The joys of teaching and learning* (1976)
- Learning is “situated:” knowledge is “distributed?”

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# How Thinking *Doesn't Work!*

How is education supposed to make me feel smarter? Besides, every time I learn something new, it pushes some old stuff out of my brain. Remember when I took that home winemaking course, and I forgot how to drive?

--Homer Simpson

Learning is “*situated*” and knowledge is  
“*distributed?*”

Topics for groups

Best Practices for:

1. Getting students to *read*
2. Making *writing* assignments
3. Promoting *active participation*
4. Assessing students’ learning, including the role of tests
5. Taking advantage of students’ technology skills

# What We and They Think

The young think their elders are dull. The elders think the young are silly. This is the basis of the mutual misunderstanding of the ages, on which scarcely anything can get done without compulsion. Yet a clever teacher, who can use his sense of humor in such a way as to show the young that not everyone over twenty-five is dead, will at the same time learn enough about his pupils to see that their silliness is only awkwardness, easy to penetrate and dissolve. Both sides will understand each other better, and work together. Togetherness is the essence of teaching.

—Gilbert Highet, *The Art of Teaching*, (1950)



# Resources

- First-Year Seminar Faculty Resource Guide, 2010-2011
- Syllabus Template FYS
- FYS Assessment Report, 2009-2010 <http://www.wcu.edu/27933.asp>
- The Seminar, Michael Kahn: [http://www.sonoma.edu/users/m/mccaffry/libs320A\\_1mmigrant/seminar.kahn.html](http://www.sonoma.edu/users/m/mccaffry/libs320A_1mmigrant/seminar.kahn.html)
- Situated Learning: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situated\\_learning](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situated_learning)
- Willingham, D. T. (2009). *Why don't students like school?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass