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Conversation in Classrooms: Who Are Seminars For?

By Kathleen Cushman

He's saying that my mind is made of *potatoes*?" Lateesha is incredulous. One of 30 students in Nancy Shlack's ninth-grade physical science class at Chicago's Sullivan High School, she flourishes "The Value of Science," an essay by the physicist Richard Feynman, above her head.

On the other side of the large seminar table, Nancy Shlack smiles and waits. She knows a response will not be long in coming, from one or another of her students gathered here to explore this text. Before the 45-minute class is over, Lateesha will not only be using the periodic table of the elements to show a classmate that brains, like potatoes, are partly made of phosphorus. She will have discovered for herself one of science's most fundamental problems: how to find out about things we can't even see.

How do kids come to understand complex questions, to which there may not be one right answer? How can we get them to read a great or provocative work, and then link its meaning with their own experience? Increasingly, cognitive researchers in education agree that the answer lies in *discourse*—the messy process of talking things through. Discourse with others prompts students to think about their own thinking, find support for it

in the work of another, argue out its flaws and ambiguities, and finally integrate a new idea into their own worldviews.

Efforts to bring such discourse into the classroom are as old as Socrates, who believed that carefully posed questions could teach far more than could the mere delivery of answers into the waiting minds of students. (See "Teachers' Questions: Why Do You Ask?" *HEL*, May 1987.) In America, the seminar discussion method has long been part of college preparatory classes in elite private and public schools, especially in the humanities and social sciences. But more researchers and practitioners are arguing that the method is at least as applicable to less advantaged students, to elementary and middle school classes, and in scientific and mathematical contexts.

Some also contend that seminars are even more productive when they are held with students of different ability levels. Higher-performing students who are more comfortable with written texts learn to accept that sometimes there is no one answer with which they can please the authorities as they are used to doing. Less skilled students learn that their candor and rich life experience are assets in an academic discussion. Collaboration

among students forms bonds that help new learning take hold, often without the teacher's intervention.

The Seminar Gurus

Several organizations currently aim at introducing seminar discussions into school curricula. One of the earliest, Junior Great Books, began in the 1960s under the auspices of the Great Books Foundation of Chicago. In 1981 Mortimer Adler launched the Paideia Program to promote classroom discussions based on classic texts. Two professors from St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, have started the Touchstones Project, supplying seminar texts and teaching materials for classes that mix ability levels. Dennis Gray directs a national network called

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Socratic Seminars that coaches teachers in the text-based discussion method. TheodoreSizer's Coalition of Essential Schools urges that teachers organize their classwork around cross-disciplinary "essential questions" that draw students into exploring primary sources. And a group called Philosophy for Children uses a variety of primary and secondary sources to spark classroom discussions of the great ideas that perplex philosophers.

What most of these proponents of seminar discussions have in common is a focus on interpreting text. Text can mean any of a variety of sources (including other media like art or film), though many teachers prefer strict concentration on one written work—either an unedited selection from a Western classic or a more contemporary reading from another culture. Some leaders in the movement, like the

founders of the Touchstones Project, edit the text and provide questions for discussion leaders to draw on.

A School of Seminars

At Sullivan High School, which embraced the Paideia Program eight years ago, the entire faculty and ancillary staff have now been trained to lead seminars. One of Chicago's general high schools that admit students regardless of test scores, Sullivan serves a student population reflecting Chicago's own ethnic mix. About a third of its students are enrolled in an intensive seminar-based magnet program. Every student in the school participates in weekly seminars in English and history classes, monthly seminars in science, and occasional ones in subjects like math and languages. In addition, the school holds quarterly "all-school seminars," monthly before-school enrichment seminars, and frequent special-topic seminars.

Nancy Shlack taught science at Sullivan for eight years in an orderly, didactic way—"consistent with the august nature of the subject matter," she says wryly—before principal Robert Brazil got her and her colleagues to try seminars in 1983. Now she uses unedited texts from Aristotle and Galileo as well as from contemporaries like Feynman and Isaac Asimov in monthly seminars with students at every ability level.

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"The paradox is that we must convince our students of the universality of the laws of nature," she says, "and at the same time encourage them to leave room for doubt and the possibility of reshaping these laws as new informa-

tion becomes available." Lectures and labs can go only so far in this task, Shlack says; by forcing a student to defend and explain his emerging understanding, the seminar provides the necessary third step.

If the questions at the heart of the work have meaning in students' lives, seminar leaders agree, no text is too daunting and no topic too controversial to explore. "The ones that scare off teachers because they seem too hard or too hot are the very ones that interest students most," says Brazil.

For Every Student?

But how can less-skilled students understand texts, such as Shakespeare's plays, that are difficult even for better students? Martin Nystrand of the University of Wisconsin's National Center on Effective Secondary Schools suggests that one good way is to let students see a play first in performance, focusing on its parts only after they have experienced it as a dramatic whole.

Relating text to students' interests and experience, Nystrand argues, also makes them much more likely to remember it in detail and be able to interpret its meaning. In fact, he says, drills to correct the weaknesses of low-achieving students merely backfire—students get bored with reading and writing, because any connection to the ideas that matter to them is put off until mastery has occurred. Nor does it work to "dumb down" text in an effort to make knowledge more accessible.

Even without seeing the play first, less able students can handle Shakespeare's text, as Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon of the University of Chicago demonstrates in her recent book *Turning the Soul: Teaching through Conversation in High School*. She observed a private school English seminar studying *Romeo and Juliet*, and then led a group of special education students in a Chicago public high school in discussing the same work without first seeing it on stage.

No matter what their backgrounds, Haroutunian-Gordon found, when students focus closely on a text and relate it to their own experience, deep and powerful ideas emerge. "*Romeo and Juliet*, after all, is about love and revenge and death," she says. "Events in the lives of these public-school students have allowed powerful encounters with these universal themes." In their first seminar, one girl spoke poignantly of calling the police because her brother had knocked her down and kicked her, then weeping with regret as they took him away. "There is no question," Haroutunian-Gordon argues, "that her experience could allow her access to Shakespeare's world—and that it, in turn, could help her make sense of that experience."

Teachers should ask questions to which they genuinely seek an answer, and students will come to care.

Meeting twice a week for three months to explore the play, the special education students developed many of the skills necessary for a good interpretive discussion. Often beginning with a question posed by the leader about the meaning of the text, students worked to identify a question they cared about resolving. As the conversation proceeded, they found new ideas about the text's meaning, and defended them with evidence from the text. And they used the meaning they found to come to new perspectives on issues in their own lives.

Once schools adopt the discussion approach, advocates say, there is no reason not to incorporate it at every grade level. "In one kindergarten class we had a 40-minute discussion on 'The Three Little Pigs,'" says Gray. "I asked them whether the mother pig did the right thing, expecting her three very different children to go into the world and do the same thing or else get into big trouble."

Seminars can also be a powerful way to start if a school aims to elimi-

nate tracking by ability levels. "The labels 'slow' and 'smart' cease to have meaning very rapidly in the discussion setting," notes Haroutunian-Gordon. "What one soon discovers is that everyone is 'brilliant' some of the time, and no one is that way all of the time."

How to Do It

Teachers who want their students to discuss and interpret text must often learn a whole new way of approaching their subject. They should ask questions because they are genuinely perplexed or in need of more information, not as tools for getting to a predetermined place or for evaluating the students' responses based on a fixed idea of the right answer.

In coaching teachers to lead interpretive discussions, Haroutunian-Gordon urges that they avoid starting a class with "fact" questions, which can be answered by pointing to a particular passage in the text. What works better, she advises, is an interpretive question, for which the text may support several possible answers. Students will come to care about the discussion when the teacher genuinely seeks an answer to that first, basic question, which itself permits a cluster of other questions about one of the main ideas of the work. Later, their conversation will invite evaluative questions, which ask for opinions that draw on personal experience for support.

The basic question may also come from a student, not from the teacher. The seminar format encourages students to practice skills of interpreting text on their own, without appealing to the teacher's authority.

"If students think you're using the seminar as a device to push them in a certain direction, they spot it as the old school game," says Dennis Gray, who has trained some 500 teachers in the San Diego, California, school district to lead Socratic seminars. "This is not just a new form of pedagogy—it's a new way of being, of relating to the text, the curriculum, students, yourself, and other staff."

Just talking things out in classroom discussion is not enough. "A teacher who has a seminar discussion and does not follow it with a writing assignment is a fool," one Sullivan English teacher declares emphatically. Writing about

the ideas raised in class makes students think of more new ideas, which must also use the text for evidence. If teachers take time to focus on ideas, not just syntax, in their comments on student writing, the habit of academic discourse is born.

Trouble Seminars Cause

Introducing seminars "rubs the system the wrong way," Gray says, with regard to everything from scheduling and room arrangements to the use of copying machines and the interruptions of the public address system. Although seminar discussions are workable in a class of 30, for example, they do best in smaller groups, ideally half that number.

In addition, the discussion approach requires considerable time. Seminars take longer than the typical 45-minute class session; a good seminar can get off the ground in that period, leaders say, but the best sessions last up to an hour and a half.

Reading and preparing questions for a particular discussion also take up scarce teacher time. Ideally, teachers should also critique the class discussion afterward, reflecting on which questions worked best and how their own actions affected students' discourse. Gray suggests appointing student observers, especially in larger groups, to monitor and comment on the process itself, providing explicit feedback as students and teachers learn to talk and listen in new ways.

Seminars raise problems of time, training, and expense. But how much does the alternative cost?

Educating teachers in such a fundamental pedagogic shift is expensive, as well. San Diego spends \$100,000 yearly to train 250 of its 6,000 teachers to lead seminars, and anticipates keeping up the effort for the next 20 years. Gray says the 24 instructional hours of his professional development workshops are half what teachers really need; to truly transform their classroom habits will take time, support, and continued coaching.

Assessing the Results

Is the effort worth the cost? One answer, Martin Nystrand suggests, lies in assessing the alternative. After five years and \$8 million invested in a mastery learning reading program, he notes, Chicago "abandoned the effort because students were so busy mastering reading objectives that they had no time for actual reading."

But how can one accurately measure whether greater student achievement results when teachers emphasize discussion? Most current standardized assessments do not specifically test for the kind of critical thinking that seminars aim for, and this is one reason many teachers shy away from interpretive discussion as a regular classroom practice.

Sometimes the only answer lies in providing new standards by which to judge. Along with Sullivan High School's push toward seminars, for instance, came a new graduation requirement that aimed to test whether students were developing more critical habits of mind. Every senior must now successfully participate in a 90-minute exhibition seminar and write an ac-

ceptable three-to-five-page essay discussing the seminar's reading.

New accountability measures like this can also push a school to recognize where it is falling short. When Sullivan discovered that student writing skills were weak, it launched a schoolwide effort to follow up every interpretive class discussion with a written assignment.

Even by many standard indicators of student engagement and achievement, the seminar approach seems to work well. Assessing Chicago's open-enrollment Paideia Program in 1987-88, Trudy Wallace found that participants had better attendance, fewer instances of failure on standard achievement tests, and better critical thinking and writing skills than nonparticipating students.

As state and district assessment practices begin to include more performances and portfolios, teachers may move more willingly toward classroom seminars as ways to develop the kinds of complex thinking skills that show up best in such arenas. Meanwhile, says Dennis Gray, who describes himself as a "recovering

didactoholic," the teachers who lead them will continue to focus not on "right answers," on coverage, and on closure, but on the enlarged understanding of ideas that comes from mining each text as deeply as it can be explored.

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